

He was almost certain that the moment he walked into the airport, he was going to have his bags checked and everything he took from that temple reappropriated by the state, but hey, he might as well give it a try. He'd gotten that far already, so why not go all the way and finish what he started? He was already in for falsifying travel permits and archeology credentials, not to mention the copious amount of lying that went into convincing a handful of rich investors to bankroll an "expedition" that was little more than a way for him to sate his curiosity, so as far as the lynx was concerned, in for a penny, in for a pound. With his entire team waiting on the outside, baking underneath the summer sun, Hyper had been the only one who dared to actually *enter* the temple itself; local superstition ascribed a great deal of unpleasant powers to that place, to say nothing of all the curses it supposedly had, and was more than happy to lay upon any who entered without the proper rituals. Many tried to dissuade him from entering, but the feline didn't particularly care about some random pseudohistorical accounts that were most likely just the result of cocksure explorers not abiding by proper safety protocol. Granted, it wasn't as if he was paying much more attention himself, but the lynx was reasonably sure he could get through the temple complex without ending up squashed against a wall or pierced by long-rusted speartips. Indeed, the deeper he went, the more he came to realize that the whole place was in a *dreadful* state of disrepair; there were entire trap mechanisms that were very likely put in place to keep would-be intruders out, but with no one to maintain them, the centuries of isolation and abandonment in the middle of the jungle had taken their toll, leaving most of the gears and pressure plates completely unusable. Thanking his lucky stars for such a break, Hyper moved further in, the hallways narrowing and the ceiling coming closer to him as his surroundings seemed to shrink the closer he came to what he *assumed* was the center of the temple itself; mercifully, the main sanctum opened up far more widely than even the entrance had, though it, like most of the site, was drenched in darkness from the complete lack of any natural sunlight. There *were* spots on the walls that were clearly designed to take torches or other sources of light, but the lynx had to make do with a flashlight he kept strapped to his belt, giving him a forward-facing cone of illumination that veered wildly from side to side whenever he took a step; on entering the central chamber, however, Hyper figured it'd be best to take it into his hand so he could more thoroughly analyze his surroundings, at which point he couldn't help but grimace at how utterly mundane the whole thing looked. For an abandoned temple in what used to have been the territory of one of the more powerful nations in that region's history, it really was... drab. No gold anywhere, not even as simple foil, no gemstones, nothing but bas reliefs that, while certainly interesting to look at and record for posterity, would only be so to someone who actually gave a damn about the temple's historical value. Hyper, however, was most certainly *not* one of these people, nor was he at all interested in discovering whether or not the "missing dynasty" hypothesis was correct; he was there for the *treasure*, and given the complete lack of any of it, it was all he could do to avoid cursing up a storm. So much time, money and respectability thrown down the drain chasing down rumours and what he assumed to have been trustworthy leads, only for him to end up in the central chamber of some random step pyramid in the middle of the bloody jungle in the ass end of nowhere, swerving a flashlight from side to side

and catching absolutely nothing of interest in the glare. It would've been hilarious if *he* hadn't been the one the joke was made at the expense of, and for a few horrible moments, Hyper genuinely felt like letting out a scream just to get that emotional turmoil bubbling inside of him to calm down for even a second... until he caught a glimmer off the corner of his eye. It was barely there, enough that he almost ignored it, but swinging the flashlight back where it had just been pointed at revealed two small alcoves built into one of the walls, ones that, for once, weren't empty like the rest of the chamber. It was faint, but it was there: the glitter of gold. His eyes wide open, Hyper rushed forward, practically tripping on himself in his overwhelming desire to actually recoup some of the investments made, only to find that both of the items he'd spotted, a pair of golden basins, were sitting on small pressure plates. The trap was simple, and still the lynx couldn't really bring himself to care; every other mechanism in the temple had long-since stopped working, so even if he *was* meant to choose wisely, he could probably afford to just take both of those things and nothing would really happen. In fact, that was exactly what he did: on picking up one basin, the decrepit pressure plate didn't budge even a fraction of an inch, letting him take the second one with absolutely no hassle at all. It was only when he turned around to head to the exit that anything of note happened, with his entire body locking up so unexpectedly that he dropped both basins, which ended up falling on the floor and shattering into dozens of pieces each. What was worse, the lynx couldn't even wail in anguish, given that he had apparently lost control over his own muscles; instead, he was forced to stand there, immobile, feeling as his body temperature rose sharply and a sense of pressure built up inside of his chest, like his lungs were being pumped full of air despite him not even breathing. It was *painful*, so much so that the lynx's main priority at that point was finding a way to be able to scream, that his team might hopefully hear him... but, at the same time, something like that would only confirm their suspicions that the whole place was cursed, leading to them most likely abandoning their expedition leader to his fate to save their own hides. He was going to die there, he was certain of it, doubly so when he managed to look down at himself and noticed that he was actually *bloating* somehow; what he had initially chosen to assumed was just a trick of the light turned out to be very, *very* real once his form bulged out enough that it intruded upon the bright beam protruding from the dropped flashlight, revealing that he was blowing up like a balloon! The sense of pressure refused to abate as well; in fact, it got *worse* over time, which, if his eyes weren't deceiving him, coincided with his bloating taking place even quicker, leaving him with the dreadful realization that... that was it. In a few moments, he was going to pop, an overinflated ball pricked by a needle, and there wasn't a single thing he could do about it. The thought that it might just be an hallucination didn't cross through his mind, because really, what cause would there be for one? He hadn't eaten anything that could've caused it, and the timing was far too coincidental; whatever the curse was, it was *definitely* real, and his idiotic arse had just stumbled onto it despite (what he believed were) his best efforts. At least he could go out smiling, knowing that he *was* right about there being treasure; it was completely ruined and no one would be able to pick it up without turning into an organic balloon, but it *was* there, and he *did* reach it... though, fat lot of good that did him in the end. The pressure kept rising, the size of

his bloated form increasing again and again, not so much *growing* as it was *filling*, though with what the lynx couldn't really tell: was it air, keeping him quite literally pressurized? Was he actually becoming fatter, and simply getting buried underneath his heft? Was it a case of his insides being filled with molten gold as punishment for trespassing and thievery, hence why he felt so hot? Perhaps all three, as a triple whammy on the part of whoever built that temple in the first place; Hyper didn't know, didn't *care* to know, because after a certain point, he began realizing that something was missing: the pop. He was supposed to explode, at least given everything he knew about biology; with his body being so immensely inflated, he *should* have gone boom quite a while ago, judging by how much of the ground he could feel underneath him. Instead, however, it felt as if the growth had actually slowed down, only to eventually stop altogether, leaving him stuck as an immense, overgrown ball of whatever it was he was filled with, unable to move, call for help, or even so much as waddle from side to side. Was this the ultimate punishment for trying to take the artifacts? For him to be left there, slowly to starve while stuck thanks to the literal weight of his gluttony and avarice? It was certainly fitting from a thematic perspective, though the lynx had no idea why anyone would go to those lengths just to prove a point to someone who was supposed to be killed anyway... unless he wasn't fated to die? Surely, if the idea was to keep any trespasser from taking the golden basins, then surely the effect wouldn't be delayed to the point where said basins would inevitably end up falling on the ground after whoever stole them got hit by the full power of the curse; surely, if the idea was to keep those things safe, the curse itself would've been placed elsewhere, far away from the idols themselves. Plus, now that things had a chance to simmer down, Hyper didn't feel all that bad, actually; it felt ridiculous to think in those terms, but now that the expansion itself had stopped, he was actually... calm, soothed even, almost as if he weren't a massive ball of inflated lynx unable to move a muscle. It wasn't until several minutes later, when the weight of the silence all around him made Hyper come to the conclusion that he *was* absolutely alone in there and that the whole team had abandoned him, that something changed: his belly rumbled. Or rather, his immense self did so, considering it was hard to tell where his gut ended and everywhere else began; he was a ball, yes, but judging by what he was feeling, it was unlikely he'd be one for much longer, because rather than a second run of inflation, rather than the sensation of being stuffed further, Hyper instead felt himself *shrinking*. He wanted to scream his head off, shouting at the heavens that if they intended to curse him, then they had *failed*, but chose not to do so on the off-chance that this was all part of the plan; either that, or doing so might lead to the heavens hearing him, which would be less than useful if he was, indeed, escaping from the grip of the curse. Fate would not be so kind on him, however, for the lynx was not destined to merely go back to normal; he might've thought so, at least initially, given that his body *was* just flat-out becoming smaller: his arms were no longer buried by an expanded midriff, he could feel his legs wriggling again, and even the vast ocean of fuzz around him began to take on a more recognizable shape, rather than being one huge ball of lynx. But there was something else mixed into it, sensations that he didn't recognize, yet insisted on intruding upon the shrinking process, and it wouldn't be until Hyper saw the ground around him began to fall away from him that he

realized something was definitely off about the whole thing. For a moment, he believed he was bloating again, that time in a more upwards direction, but as his body continued to reshape itself, it became clear that he was actually becoming *taller*; not just that, but his weight was getting *worse* as well, as rather than him shedding all the pounds he gained, they seemed to be shifting around in order to leave him with a more functional form, rather than just a slimmer one. It didn't occur to Hyper that the curse might've not been a curse at all, that what he was going through wasn't a *punishment*, but rather a reward for reaching where others hadn't, for having the courage to do what others did not. Granted, it was somewhat difficult to see it as such when he was stuck staring down at his muzzle elongating until he could *see* it in front of him, to the point where he had to raise his hands to touch it... and promptly felt something long, muscular, and definitely not feline dangling from his face. It took him a bit before he allowed the realization to filter through, at which point he let out a shocked yelp that turned into a trumpeting midway through, courtesy of his brand new trunk! His hands flew wildly from one end of his body to the other after that, taking stock of all the changes his subconscious told him should be there, yet the no-longer-lynx insisted shouldn't exist: the broader and wider ears, the pudgy, bloated gut that nonetheless didn't impair his movement, the fact that instead of paws he now seemed to have a pair of elephant's feet, not to mention his tail having grown spindly with a tiny tuft of hair at the end. Before he even knew it, the transformation had wrapped up, no matter how many times he begged whoever would listen for it to turn back around. Hyper didn't have access to a mirror, but he hardly needed one with how sensitive his body still was; he could feel every inch of it, raw and new, reformed and reshaped into whatever form that temple's god possessed... either that, or as some long-forgotten practical joke on the part of whoever left those damn basins there to begin with. Rushing over to the broken artifacts didn't do anything either; even *if* putting them back would fix the transformation, they had been left shattered so thoroughly that it would take more than just superglue to return them to pristine condition.

He was stuck as an elephant, at least for the foreseeable future. And as he looked to the side, at the tiny little entrance leading into the corridors and the outside world, Hyper gulped.

It was going to be a long way out.