

# Museum Kittens

The Pharaoh's Curse



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For my readers in St Petersburg – HW

For Alby and Neri – SL



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# Chapter One

“What are they all so excited about?”

Boris whispered to Peter and his sisters. He was peering round the huge, painted mummy case that hid the tunnel down to the cellars, where the museum cats lived.

The Egyptian Gallery was full of museum staff, talking in whispers as they opened up a large packing case and started to unwrap something that had



been inside. The elderly professor who ran the Egyptology department was actually squeaking with delight.

“Is it jewels?” Bianca asked hopefully, pushing the large ginger kitten out of the way so she could see.

“It could be one of those golden masks that the pharaohs had in their tombs,” the small tabby Tasha suggested, slinking further round the mummy case to look. “It must be something very special.”

“Gold...” Bianca purred. “Diamonds too? Maybe pearls?”

“I don’t think so,” said Tasha. “The masks are mostly gold and lapis lazuli – that lovely blue stone. The ancient Egyptians used it a lot.”



“Hmf! Blue stone.” Bianca looked disappointed and her white tail drooped. “Not as nice as diamonds. But I do like gold.”

“*That* doesn’t look like a jewelled golden *anything*,” Peter pointed out. The black kitten had given up trying to see round Boris and crawled underneath him instead. “It’s just ... a bit of paper.”

“Huh? That’s not a treasure!” Bianca said crossly.



“What are you lot looking at?”

All four kittens skittered sideways in surprise as Grandpa Ivan appeared behind them. He was the oldest of the cats, white and long-haired with a great drooping moustache of whiskers, his ears looked chewed and he only had one eye. But he knew everything that was going on in the museum and he was very good at sneaking up on the kittens. “Ah, it’s arrived then!”

“Do you know what it is?” Boris asked. “It doesn’t look very exciting but the museum people are making a lot of fuss about it. They’re putting it in an enormous glass case, look!”

“It’s a temporary loan from a museum on the other side of the country,” Grandpa

Ivan explained. “They’re rebuilding their Egyptian Galleries so they’re lending out their precious exhibits. It’s part of the *Book of the Dead*.”

“The what?” Tasha squeaked.

“The *Book of the Dead*.” Grandpa Ivan chuckled. “It’s a set of ancient magic spells for how to get safely to the afterlife, written out on great long strips of papyrus. That’s paper made of reeds, you know.”



Tasha nodded intelligently and the other kittens tried to look as though they knew what he meant too. All four of them were gazing at the strange piece of paper in fascination. Ancient magic spells!

“The Egyptians used to put copies of it into people’s tombs so the spirits would know what to do. The scrolls were expensive, though, so they were mostly made for royalty and important officials. This one came from the tomb of a pharaoh, Thutmose I, so it’s very grand, with beautiful pictures. This isn’t the whole thing, of course. Only a little bit of the scroll is left. All the tombs were raided by thieves many times – and you can imagine that a long roll of papyrus is quite delicate.”





“Hang on... This is a list of instructions for *ghosts*?” Boris looked shocked.

“Mmmm, not quite. I think they’d only be ghosts if they got it wrong,” Grandpa Ivan said thoughtfully. “Mind you, no one’s quite sure where Thutmose I’s body ended up... He had at least three different coffins. But what’s really special about this bit of papyrus is that no one knows what it means. Most of the *Book of the Dead* has been translated – it’s all written in hieroglyphics, you know. Picture writing. But this part of the book is tricky to read, apparently, and this is the only copy that’s ever been found! I heard the staff talking about it in the café. They’re pretty sure it’s a spell to do with a magical amulet – or it could

be a curse on anyone who steals it...”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Peter muttered, his whiskers shivering. “What if it’s bad luck for it to be here in the museum?”

“There’s no such thing as bad luck!” Tasha gave him a grown-up sort of look. No one was exactly sure how old Peter was. He had been left at the museum as an orphan, so the other kittens liked to think he was the littlest. “Spells and curses are all nonsense. And even if they weren’t, this one is thousands of years old! Its power must have run out by now.”

“Or it’s spent years and years getting worse and worse,” Boris growled, and Peter nodded at him, round-eyed.

Tasha sighed. Really, the other kittens were all so superstitious. She knew there was absolutely nothing to be worried about.



On the other side of the gallery, someone else was eyeing up the new exhibit too. Four rats were peeking out of a hole in the skirting board. It was a very small hole and they had to keep elbowing each other out of the way.

“What do you think it is?”

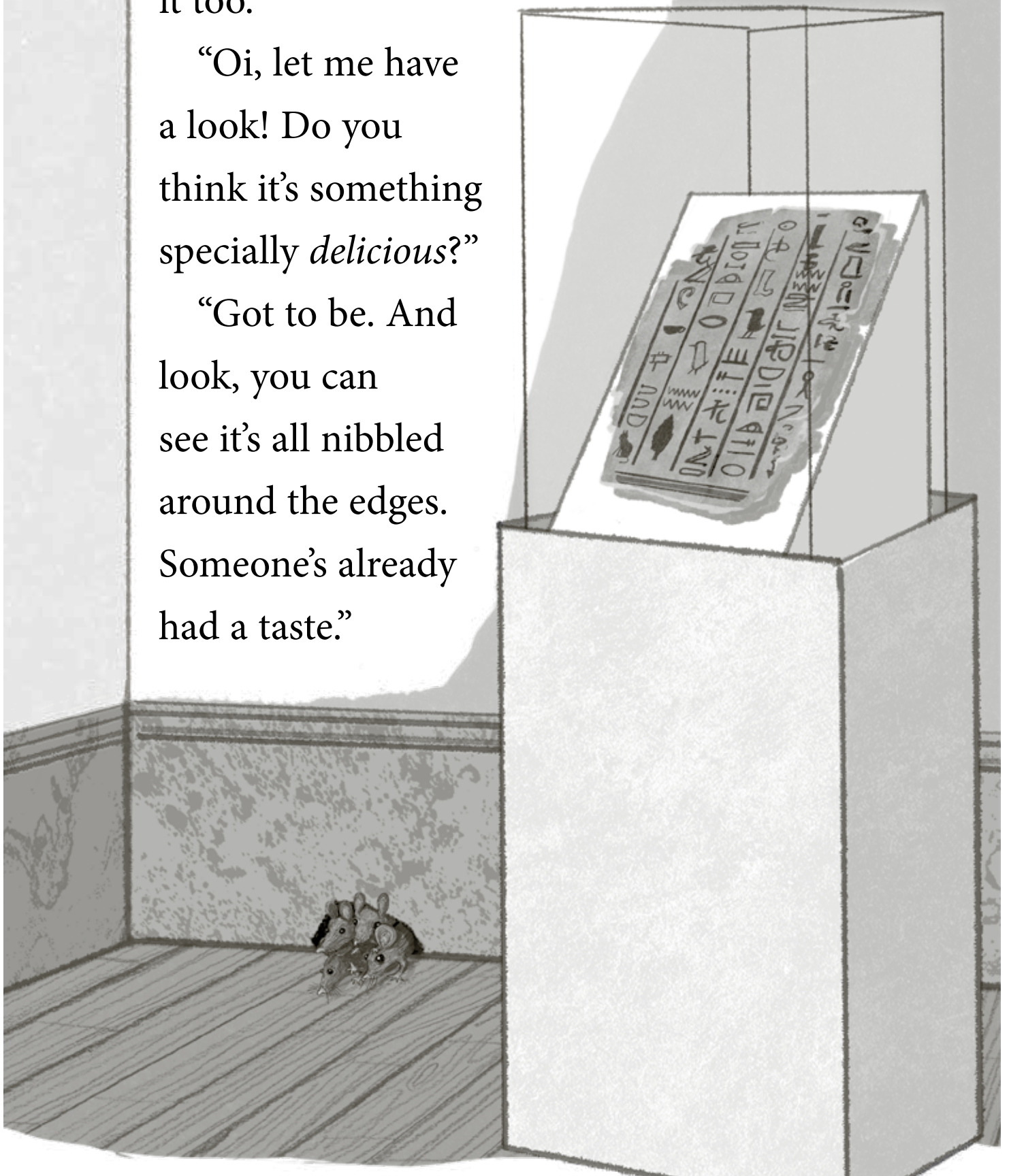
“Dunno, but it’s got to be something good. Look at that case! Look how thick the glass is!”

“Definitely special. See all the fuss they’re making. And did you spot those

horrible cats over there? Behind the mummy? They've got their eyes on it too."

"Oi, let me have a look! Do you think it's something specially *delicious*?"

"Got to be. And look, you can see it's all nibbled around the edges. Someone's already had a taste."



The rat leader nodded. “Well, there we are,” he said, looking round at them all. “We can’t let those mangy cats have it then, can we? We’d better start making a plan...”



News of the special new exhibit in the Egyptian Gallery began to spread around the museum. And so did rumours about the curse.

The lorry that had brought the old artefacts to the museum had got two flat tyres and suffered a mysterious engine failure on the way, the café staff muttered.


Then the day after the papyrus arrived, one of the guards slipped over in the gallery and banged his head on



the display case. He said he didn't know how he'd done it – he was fine one minute and on the floor the next. All the water pipes started to make strange whistling noises and there were eerie shrieking sounds whenever anyone flushed the loo in the washrooms by the Egyptian Gallery.

The day after that, a school trip came to visit and one of the children was sick all over the floor. The cleaners said there was *definitely* a curse.

“I told you,” Peter whispered to Tasha as they sat watching the others practise hunting one evening after the museum had closed. “That papyrus is bad news. The pharaoh doesn't like it being here! Grandpa Ivan said no one knows where



Thutmose I's mummy ended up and I bet his ghost's furious! Something really awful's going to happen to the museum!"

"No, it isn't," Tasha said, rolling her eyes. "Is it my turn yet?" she added, twitching her tail. But Boris was already creeping forwards in a hunting crouch.

"Very good," Grandpa Ivan growled. "And wait ... wait and watch... Don't spring... I said *don't* spring, you ginger oaf!"

Boris tumbled head over heels and landed with a meaty thump. Then he glared at the others. Bianca was smirking, and he could tell Tasha and Peter were trying not to laugh. Peter's black muzzle was all wrinkled up with the strain of holding it in.



“Are you all right, dear?” their mother Smoke murmured, nudging him gently.

“Yes,” Boris muttered as he stood up. Why did being the biggest and strongest of the kittens always mean that he was

the clumsiest too? They were all supposed to be practising their ratting skills so they could grow up to be museum guard cats, like their mother and their grandfather and all their aunts and uncles. Boris knew that one of these days he was going to be a mighty hunter. He just needed to grow into his paws first.

“Have a rest, Boris,” Smoke said.

“Tasha, you try. Imagine a great grey rat, sneaking along the edge of the wall. You spot him...”

Tasha tensed up, her ears pricking and her tail beginning to swish from side to side. Boris watched her slinking towards the imaginary rat and sighed. She looked so ... *professional*. At the moment, it seemed that the only way *he'd* ever catch a

rat would be if he fell on top of it.

Perhaps it was because he'd eaten so much supper, Boris thought sadly to himself. He *was* quite full – maybe that's why he was so clumsy. He wished they didn't have to have lessons in the evenings but Smoke and Grandpa Ivan wanted them to practise hunting in the galleries where they would be real guard cats one day. So that meant they had to wait until the visitors had left.

Tasha prowled across the room, trying to imagine a rat, all sharp teeth and beady black eyes. Hunting imaginary rats was one thing but the thought of facing off against a fully grown rat was terrifying. Boris said he'd seen rats that were twice her size.



“Keep low!” her mother called, and Tasha crouched down even further, paws trembling with the effort.



“Nicely done, nicely done,” Grandpa Ivan purred. “Very good form there, small grey stripey one.”

“She’s Tasha.” Smoke let out a sigh.

“I know perfectly well who she is. Now, back, back, as fast as you can!”

Tasha whirled round and shot across the gallery, claws scritchng on the slippery floor. She just managed to skid to a stop before she crashed into the other kittens.

“Hmmm. Yes. Well done.” Grandpa nodded regally and Tasha glowed. She wasn’t used to being told she was good

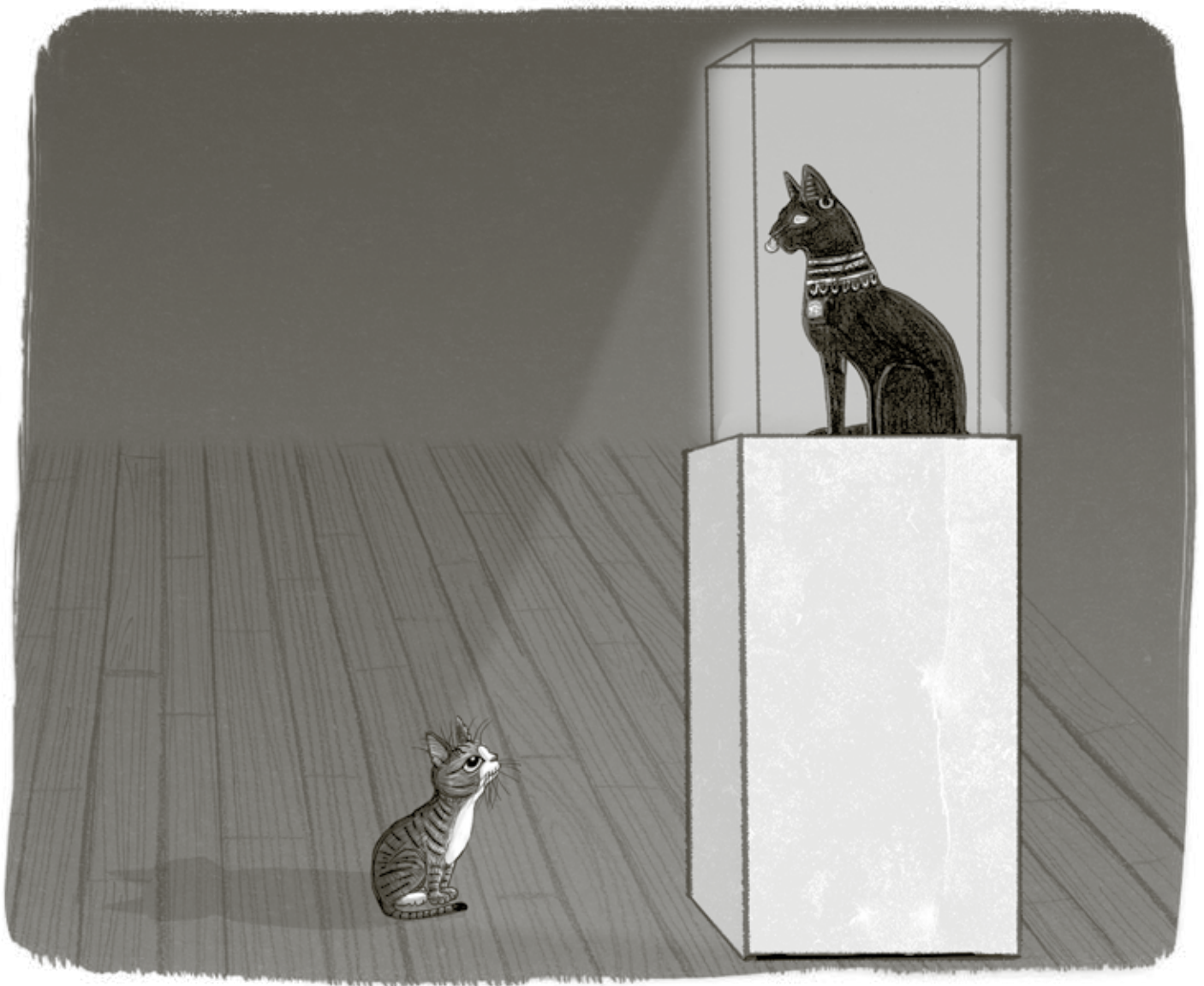
at things – she usually got told off for daydreaming during their hunting lessons. It was hard not to daydream when they were surrounded by so many beautiful things.

Peter prowled across the gallery to take his turn, and Tasha sat down and started to lick her paws and swipe them across her ears. Then she looked sideways at the tall plinth towering over them all.

The bronze statue of Bastet, the cat goddess, was one of her favourite museum treasures. It was more than two and a half thousand years old but the cat goddess looked just like so many cats that Tasha knew. On her best, tidiest days, Tasha hoped that she looked a little like the statue too.

She had read the sign on the plinth and she knew that Bastet was the Egyptian goddess of a great many things – secrets and songs and protection and happiness. But mostly cats.

“Thank you,” Tasha whispered to the statue. “Did you help? I’m not usually very good at lessons.”



The bronze cat stared silently ahead and her gold earrings glittered in the dim light. Tasha wished that she wasn't in a glass case. The cat was old and precious and delicate, Tasha knew that, but it would be so wonderful to nuzzle up against her, just once. Tasha couldn't help feeling that Bastet's hard bronze skin would melt to soft tabby-brown fur and she'd nudge back.

"You see, look at that, Boris," Tasha heard Grandpa Ivan say sternly. "Perfect hunting from little-black-kitten-I-can-never-remember-the-name-of. Practice! Practice, that's all it takes! Learn to control your paws!"

"Yes, Grandpa," Boris muttered, and Tasha gently brushed whiskers with him.

She didn't think Boris had been that bad.

"I'm always falling over my paws," she whispered to him.

"I've never been so hopeless before." Boris heaved a sigh. "I reckon it's that horrible bit of paper." He glared at the papyrus in its glass case. "It's cursed all right."

"No, it isn't!" Tasha hissed, but then her whiskers twitched worriedly.

Something was wrong, she could feel it. Peter was marching proudly towards them across the gallery – but then his ears began to flatten back and the fur stiffened up all along his spine.

There was a strange creaking noise and somehow Peter's shining black fur seemed to turn grey all at once. Tasha looked up

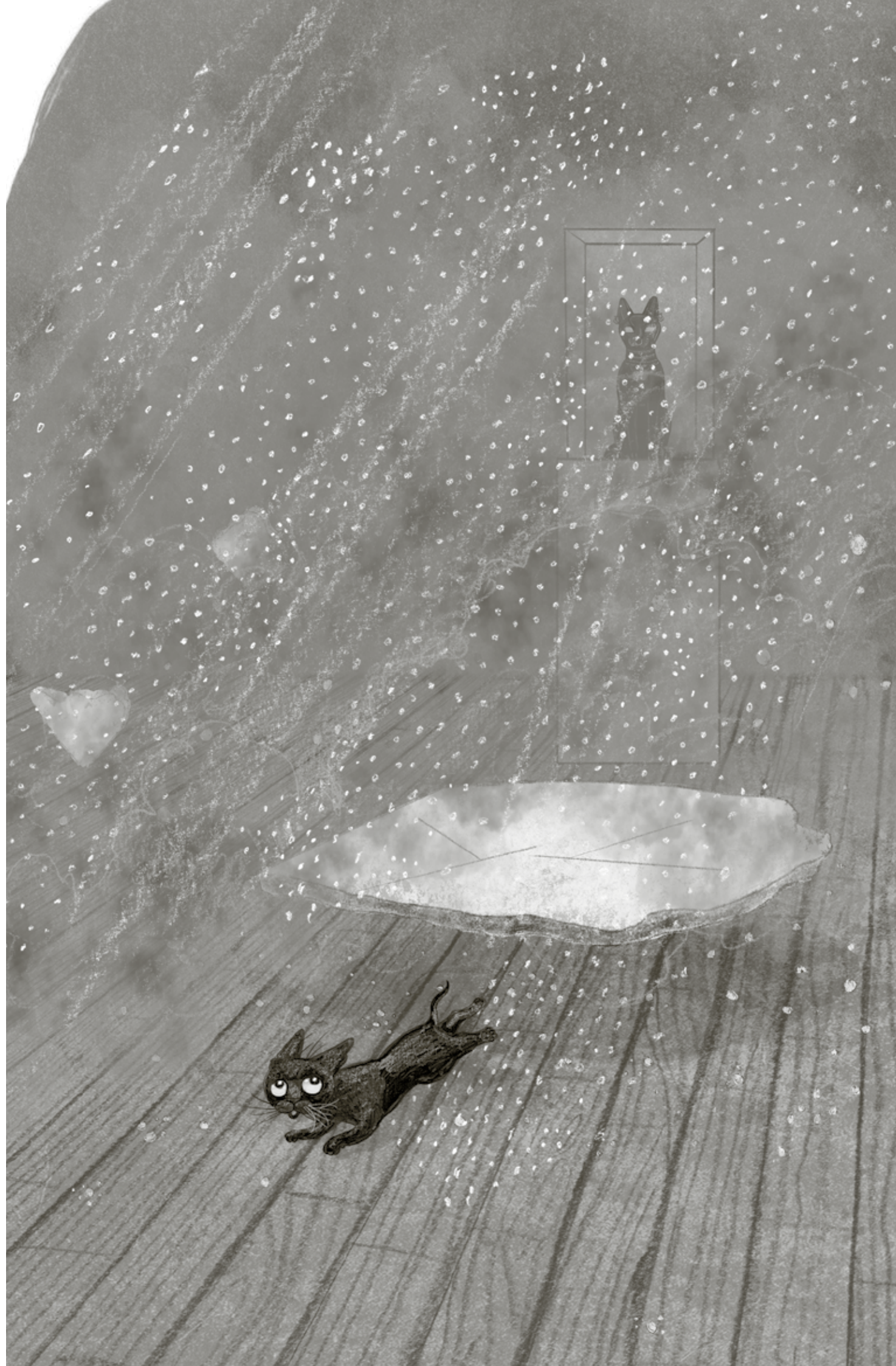


slowly towards the ceiling and saw a great dark crack spread across the white plaster, branching out like the rivers on the maps she'd studied in the Map Room. Dust shimmered down like a waterfall.

“Run!” Boris yowled, and Peter scrambled out of the way just as the middle of the ceiling collapsed. Huge chunks of plaster crashed to the floor, right where he'd been standing.








“Peter!” Tasha mewed, nuzzling anxiously at him. And then she looked back at the gallery and whispered, “The treasures! Bastet’s statue! The mummy cases! The papyrus!”

“All of you, out of here,” Smoke hissed, herding the kittens to the safety of the doorway. They scurried along in front of her, glancing back at the scene of devastation, but it was hard to see anything through the haze of dust.

“Are you all right?” Boris asked Peter worriedly as Bianca tried to groom the dust out of his black fur. He was a small, skinny grey kitten instead of a small, skinny black kitten now.

“There’s no point licking him,” Grandpa Ivan told her. “What he needs is a bath.”



Peter stared at Grandpa in horror but the old white cat was already thinking about more important things. “Where’s that caretaker when we want him?” he muttered. “Lazy so-and-so. He should have come running... Ah...”

Grandpa Ivan’s whiskers bristled and the kittens looked round to see the Old Man hurrying through the Roman Room. He was carrying a radio, gabbling into it as he ran. He stopped in the doorway, staring at the pile of plaster with eyes as round as marbles.

“About time,” Smoke muttered. “On your way, kittens. We don’t want the Old Man thinking we’ve got anything to do with this.”

“He already does,” Peter whispered back.



“Look. He’s glaring at us.”

The three other kittens peered round and saw that Peter was right. The elderly caretaker was eyeing the cats suspiciously.

“How can he think we’ve broken the ceiling?” Boris asked indignantly. Then he scowled at Tasha and the others, who were looking at each other meaningfully.

“That’s not fair! I’ve *never* broken a ceiling. It was only a smallish sort of dinosaur. And we put it all back together before anyone noticed!”



Holly Webb started out as a children's book editor and wrote her first series for the publisher she worked for. She has been writing ever since, with over one hundred books to her name. Holly lives in Berkshire, with her husband and three children. Holly's pet cats are always nosying around when she is trying to type on her laptop.

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