

**THE
SCARAB
HEART**

MICHAEL GALLAGHER

THE SECOND LIZZIE BLAYLOCK ADVENTURE

THE SCARAB HEART

by
Michael Gallagher

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This novel is dedicated to my mother.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Principal Characters, 1885

Principal Characters, 18th Dynasty Egypt

Merit's Family Tree

1. PORT SAID
2. INTO THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS
3. A FAMILY IN TURMOIL
4. THE BOY WHO DIDN'T KNOW HIS OWN NAME
5. THE BURNING FACE OF THE SUN
6. A PLATE OF FIGS
7. THE INTACT TOMB
8. THE MISSING COFFIN
9. KIYA'S REVENGE
10. COFFEE
11. MONSIEUR BURLÓN
12. KARNAK
13. THE IFRITAH
14. THE ELDEST MOST ROYAL PRINCESS
15. MISS OTIS OBJECTS
16. AT THE PLACE OF TRUTH
17. A TRAGEDY IS WHEN PEOPLE DIE...
18. THE MAN FROM THE PROMETHEUS
19. THE SCARAB HEART

20. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A RING

21 THE STONE GARDEN

Author's Note and Interview

Enquire Within About Everything

[PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS, 1885](#)

These links will take you to the first mention or appearance of the character within the novel.

On Edward Peyton's archeological dig in the Valley of the Kings:

[Miss Lizzie Blaylock](#)

[Miss Otis](#), Lizzie's mentor

[Mr Edward Peyton](#), leader of the expedition

[Mr Andrew Cotterell](#), second-in-command

[Miss Helen Buller-Brown](#), team member

[Miss Rose Clements](#), the team's replacement artist

[Monsieur Floërmel Burlón](#), the team's replacement translator

[Mr Wilson Struthers](#), an American lawyer who funds Edward Peyton's dig

[Mrs Dodie Struthers](#), his wife

[Aashiq](#), a fifteen-year-old laborer

[Jabeer](#), an eighteen-year-old laborer

[Little Zafir](#), a nine-year-old laborer

Others:

[Father Lilièvre](#), the dig's former translator who drowned in the Nile

Mr George Barry, Edward Peyton's second cousin—the dig's former artist who was sacked for theft

Mr James Osbourne, Edward Peyton's friend

Monsieur Auray Caro, the local Inspector of Antiquities based in Luxor

Daoud Pasha, the *Mudir* (highest ranking official) in charge of law enforcement in Luxor

Mr Zafir el-Rashid, a cloth merchant from Luxor, who is father to the three laborers

[PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS, 18th DYNASTY EGYPT](#)

These links will take you to the first mention or appearance of the character within the novel.

At Waset (modern-day Luxor—though also known as Thebes for a very brief period), and later at Akhet-Aton (modern-day Tell el-Amarna):

[Pharaoh Amun-ho-tep the Third](#), ruler of Egypt, who is Merit's grandfather

[Queen Ti](#), his wife, who is Merit's grandmother

[Yuya](#), Ti's Egyptian father

[Tuya](#), Ti's Mitanni mother

[Ay](#), Ti's brother, who is both Merit's grandfather and great-uncle

[Prince Amun-ho-tep](#), Ti's first-born son, who becomes Amun-ho-tep the Fourth before changing his name to [Akhen-aton](#); he is Nefretiti's husband and Merit's father

[Prince Tut-mosis](#), Ti's second-born son, who goes into the priesthood

[Nefretiti](#), Ay's daughter and Merit's mother

[Kiya](#), a concubine in the harem, who is Smenkh-ka-re's mother

[Smenkh-ka-re](#), Kiya's son

Merit, Akhen-aton and Nefretiti's first daughter

Meket, their sickly second daughter

Ankhesen, their third daughter

Tut-ankh-aton, who later changes his name to Tut-ankh-amun, the son of Akhen-aton and Kiya; often referred to as little Tut

Others:

Amun, 'the unknown one', sometimes referred to as Amun-Re, the principal sun-god worshiped throughout most of the 18th Dynasty

The Aton, a later rival sun-god, who, strictly speaking, has no character at all. While other gods are depicted as having bodies, the Aton is usually shown as an orb

Tauret, one of the older goddesses of childbirth, who is usually depicted as a hippopotamus. When she dons a lion's head and carries a dagger, however, she becomes a vengeance-seeking fury

Urim-Thummim, the *Ifritah* or guardian of the stone, whose name translates as 'the Light that comes from Generations'

Queen Achmose, who was loved by the god Amun; Merit's distant ancestor

Queen Hat-shep-sut, Achmose's (and allegedly Amun's) daughter, who donned a beard and ruled Egypt as a man; Merit's distant ancestor

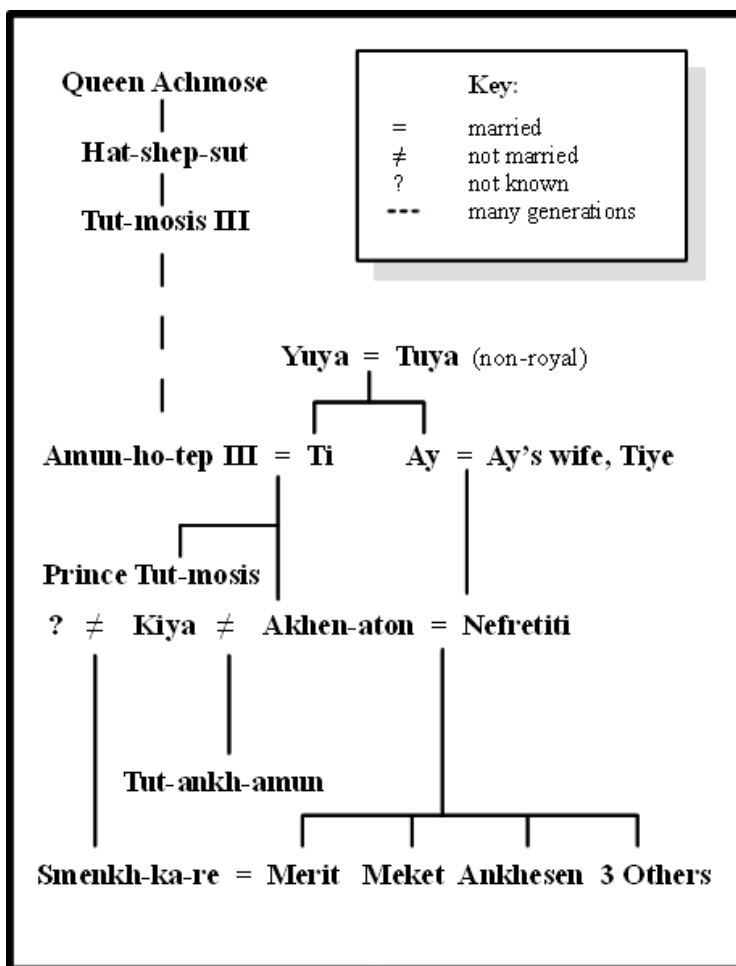
Pharaoh Tut-mosis the Third, Hat-shep-sut's son, who may possibly have murdered his mother to gain the

throne; not to be confused with Prince Tut-mosis. He is yet another of Merit's distant ancestors

Weba-aner, a *kherheb*, or magician, who is the main character in an ancient Egyptian folktale

King Nebka, purportedly one of Egypt's earliest pharaohs, who appears in the same folktale as Weba-aner

MERIT'S FAMILY TREE



ON NAMES AND SPELLINGS

The Ancient Egyptians wrote their texts without vowels; today we insert vowels to make the words more legible. As different authors insert different vowels (and sometimes different consonants), there are a number of equally valid spellings for each name. For example, Amun is sometimes spelled Amen, and the word Aton is often spelled Aten.

The spellings I use in *The Scarab Heart* were chosen to help readers differentiate between the various characters (so I use Amun and Aton rather than the similar-looking Amen and Aten). I also chose to divide most names into their component parts in order to facilitate pronunciation (so Smenkhkare becomes the more manageable Smenkh-ka-re).

— CHAPTER I —
PORT SAID

‘LIZZIE, HAVE YOU had any news of Albert?’

‘Boats drifted slowly out to the starboard side of our ship—small fishing vessels that from the stern of the *Prometheus* looked no bigger than walnut-shells.

‘I got a letter from him a couple of days before we set sail from London.’

Miss Otis smiled. ‘And how is the young man?’

‘He says Mrs Thorne is keeping him busy setting up the orphanage.’

‘And your sister?’

‘He says Mary’s improving all the time thanks to the good food and the clean mountain air.’ I caught the smell of salt on the breeze. ‘*Oh!* Look—’

‘What is it, Lizzie?’

‘A huge fish! *Oh!* And there’s another...leaping right out of the water!’ I steered my blind friend towards the railing and began to describe what I could see. ‘Lord, I think they’ve hooked one: they’re pulling it in now.’ The poor creature was thrashing about wildly as they hauled it

on deck. ‘Why, it’s enormous...it’s almost as big as the boat itself!’

‘Tunny fish,’ the old lady chuckled. ‘A common sight throughout the Mediterranean. Not only do they grow to the size of cows, but their flesh apparently tastes like beef. They’re considered quite a delicacy in these parts.’

‘How strange! Fish that tastes of beef...I don’t think I’d fancy that.’ As I watched, the fish in question grew weaker and weaker until all it could manage was the occasional jerk.

‘Are you worried, Lizzie?’

‘Worried?’

‘About the food they’ll serve us in Egypt.’

‘Not exactly...’

‘Consider this an adventure, my dear. The truth is, you’ll never know what you might enjoy until you try it. I understand that Egyptians use a lot of beans in their cookery. A kind of broad bean. Do you like broad beans?’

‘Oh, yes, of course.’ I was trying to remember whether I’d ever eaten broad beans in my life.

‘Broad beans and onions, and a kind of flat bread. And though they do tend to season their dishes with a host of different spices, I have it on good authority that they only use a pinch or two of each.’ Miss Otis turned her face towards the sea. ‘What’s happening now?’

‘Your spirit-guides still aren’t talking to you, are they?’

‘Charles and Henry? I’m afraid not. After five months of getting to know you, even now they’re so enthralled by

your powers that they ignore me completely.’

‘I’m sorry, Miss Otis.’ Sorrier than she could have imagined, for I’d come to an important decision—a decision she was not going to like. ‘Remind me again where we’re going,’ I said, hoping to steer the conversation around to the subject gradually.

‘To the Valley of the Kings, my dear—to an archaeological dig run by a man called Edward Peyton.’

‘He’s a friend of yours, isn’t he?’

‘In a sense. Our two families have been linked for generations. My father, the judge, was a bosom companion of Edward’s great-grandfather, who, as it happens, was an earl. Actually, the pair of them were inseparable, even though Lord Peyton was an inveterate gambler and drinker who came up before the courts on numerous occasions. Sadly, both men are long since dead, and it’s Edward’s father who now holds the family title.’

‘How did Mr Peyton come to be in Egypt?’

‘Ah...’

‘Miss Otis?’

‘Well, it’s a little delicate. Edward is an eligible bachelor in his early thirties—a very *good-looking* bachelor, or so I’m reliably informed. Unfortunately, being so good-looking, he attracted the attention of a number of rather well-connected, determined young ladies, all of whom competed to trick the poor man into marriage. They even formed a club: the Would-be Wives of Edward Society. Most distasteful! He felt that the only

way to escape their clutches was to quit the country and go abroad. He chanced upon Egypt, fell in love with the place, and decided to buy up the rights to dig in the Valley of the Kings. As we still keep in touch, he was kind enough to invite me to stay for a month or so.'

'Miss Otis, the people at the dig...do they know about me?'

Miss Otis blinked. 'They know you will be accompanying me,' she said carefully.

'That's not what I mean.'

'Lizzie...'

'I don't want them to know about me!'

'Why ever not, child?'

'I've been giving this a lot of thought, Miss Otis, and, well, I've made up my mind. I don't want to use my powers—'

'That's quite understandable,' the old lady interrupted. 'We shall think of this as a nice, relaxing holiday.'

'You're not letting me finish. The fact is, I don't want to use my powers ever again.'

'*What?*' The woman's face turned sharply.

'No, really,' I insisted, biting my lip. 'I hate what I go through when I bring someone back from the dead.'

'But I thought it was becoming easier for you with each materialisation?'

'Easier, perhaps, but no less painful. I may not have to stab myself to become a 'bridge' any longer, but I still get that awful feeling that I'm drowning.' My mind went back

to the fish I'd seen thrashing about on the boat. 'To be honest, Miss Otis, I'm fed up with the whole thing. I hate being stared at in the street. And I can't bear being thought of as a freak.'

'A *freak*?' The old lady looked hurt. 'But what about the people who come to you for help? Do they count for nothing?'

I stared miserably at the deck.

'Lizzie Blaylock, you have been given a gift—*God* has given you a gift and it's your Christian duty to use it. There are many out there in distress, whose loved ones have passed over and who are desperate for the kind of comfort that only you can provide.'

'But what about me?' I argued. 'What about what I need? Every time I help somebody, it feels as if I'm going to die.'

Miss Otis's cheeks flushed pink. 'Can you truly tell me that you've given this matter its proper consideration?'

'I think so.'

'I see. Then I suppose there's no point in discussing it further.'

'Miss Otis, you're annoyed—'

'Annoyed...no. Disappointed, yes. Extremely so. What a terrible waste of talent! Powers like yours expect to be used! Who knows what will happen if you choose to ignore them?' Fingering her brow, she turned away and set off along the deck, tapping and waving her cane around more than was strictly necessary.

‘Miss Otis, where are you going?’

‘To my cabin—no, no...please don’t bother to assist me; I can manage perfectly well. We shall be in port soon and I need to rest. Perhaps you’ll be good enough to wake me when the *Prometheus* is about to dock?’

‘Yes...yes, of course,’ I promised as I watched her go, all the while feeling as though I’d somehow betrayed her.

‘Excuse me,’ came a voice at my shoulder, ‘I’m afraid I couldn’t help overhearing. My name is Rose—Rose Clements. Do I take it that you are *the* Lizzie Blaylock, the girl I read about in the newspapers a few months back?’

As much as I would have loved to, I could hardly deny what the woman had heard.

‘Please,’ Miss Clements begged, ‘you must forgive me; it’s just that I noticed your name on the Purser’s list and I couldn’t help wondering if you were *she*...’

‘I’d rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind.’

‘Lord, I don’t blame you! I bet you get every Tom, Dick and Harry pestering you for messages from their dead Uncle William, wondering where the old boy stashed the family silver! Horrendous!’ Miss Clements fluttered her long, thick eyelashes at me and broke into a smile. ‘I am, however, curious to know why you’re travelling to Egypt,’ she continued. ‘There aren’t many women who would be prepared to put up with the rigours of such a journey—’

‘Oh! But I adore Egypt—or, at least, the thought of

Egypt, since I haven't been there yet.'

'Well, now, isn't that interesting! So do I! You may find this hard to believe, but the truth is I'm going out there to work on an archaeological dig! As I'm to be married in ten months time, I wanted to try my hand at something different while I still have my independence. You know, even in this day and age, you'd be hard-pressed to find *anything* more different than a stint at archaeology!'

Miss Clements laughed and, to my surprise, I found myself laughing too.

'Where will you be stationed?' I asked.

'In the Valley of the Kings itself! Can you believe it? *Soooo* romantic!'

'The Valley of the Kings?'

'Yes! Why? Is that on your itinerary too?'

'No, strangely enough, that's where we're headed as well.'

'What? To Edward Peyton's dig? You and your aunt? Well, fancy that!'

'Miss Otis? Oh, she's not my aunt.'

'I do beg your pardon. I didn't mean to pry.'

'No, it's all right, really. Miss Otis is a friend of Mr Peyton's, so we've been invited out for a short holiday. And what about you, Miss Clements? What will you be doing there?'

'It's Rose! Please, call me Rose!'

'Rose...'

The woman smiled. ‘Oh, I expect I shall have to muck in with all the chores; but actually I’ve been taken on as their resident artist—you know the drill: they get me to make detailed drawings of the various artefacts they find. It’s nice to think that my many years of art training will finally serve some purpose, tedious though they were. There’s nothing worse than attempting to sketch from life while an ogre of a drawing master creeps up on you from behind and makes corrections with his horrid, stubby pencil! Life is too short for that, don’t you agree?’

I had to laugh. ‘I wouldn’t know,’ I said. ‘We barely had enough money to keep me in school until I was thirteen—’

The woman’s eyebrows rose. ‘*Genteel* poverty, I take it?’

‘One-step-from-the-workhouse poverty, more like!’

‘No! I don’t believe it for a second! If you’ll forgive me for saying, Miss Blaylock—’

‘Lizzie. I want you to call me Lizzie.’

‘Well, Lizzie, it strikes me that you’re one thoroughly charming, well brought-up young lady. And I’m not simply going by appearances. It’s your sense of confidence; your excellent manners...these things simply don’t add up to a notion of poverty—’

‘That was probably my mother’s doing,’ I mumbled, feeling annoyed that we’d somehow stumbled on to the worst subject possible. My mother—the woman who had walked out on me six years earlier.

‘Married down, did she?’ asked Rose. ‘Married for love, as they say? Well, good for her! I think everyone should marry for love, don’t you? Lizzie? Lizzie? Are you all right?’

Being forced to think about my mother was making me feel faint, though thankfully I knew that it wasn’t one of my fits coming on—there was no smell of pears. I reached out and grabbed the railing to try and steady myself, but lost my balance as the ship suddenly lurched. Amazingly, I didn’t topple. Strong arms caught me and held me tight.

‘There,’ I heard a voice say, ‘I’ve got you.’

I looked up. Gazing down at me with the clearest, kindest eyes was a young man in his late twenties. He had sandy-blond hair and a neatly trimmed moustache.

‘My friend seems to have been overcome by a little *mal de mer*,’ Rose explained as he carried me to one of the nearby benches.

‘Seasickness can affect us all,’ he replied gallantly. ‘Would you like me to go and hunt out the Purser? Your friend may require medical attention.’

‘No, I’ll be fine,’ I insisted. ‘Just sitting here, I’m beginning to feel better already.’

‘Are you sure?’ He peered down at me with concern.

‘I’m positive. Really.’

Tipping his hat to us both, he began to move on.

‘*Phew!*’ whistled Rose. ‘I wish I’d had the presence of mind to faint!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Didn’t you see? He was gorgeous!’

‘Rose! I thought you said you were engaged to be married!’

Rose’s eyes lit up with pure naughtiness and she flashed me another of her winning smiles.

‘I did,’ she admitted at last. ‘But let’s just keep that little fact between ourselves, shall we? We’re both modern women and, though we may be travelling to an antique land, our affairs are still our own, do you not think? This is 1885, after all!’

I blushed. I was only fourteen, yet she’d called me a woman!

In the distance I heard the cry of gulls. The passengers who’d gathered at the ship’s prow were beginning to point.

‘Rose, it’s clear that you know who I am. Will you promise me something?’

‘Anything, Lizzie.’

‘When we get to the dig, please don’t tell anyone about me.’

‘Of course I won’t, if that’s what you want.’

‘Promise?’

‘God’s honour. Look!—it seems that we’re arriving. Would you like me to escort you to your cabin?’

‘No, I’m fine now. I can manage.’

‘Then I’ll see you on the dock.’

‘Yes, on the dock—and Rose...it was *really* nice meeting you.’

‘Likewise, I’m sure.’

As the woman moved away I suddenly realised something—something that had been rankling with me all the time we’d been talking. Rose Clements didn’t wear a ring. Not even a simple, plain band. And that, I thought, for a woman who was engaged to be married, was distinctly odd.

*

Port Said is actually a new town, built only twenty-six years ago for the sole purpose of housing the men who were to work on the Suez Canal. As every schoolchild in England can tell you, ‘*the Suez Canal is that great feat of engineering, a man-made waterway that links the Mediterranean with the Red Sea*’. What they probably won’t know is how Britain got hold of it—simply by buying it up at a knock-down price when Egypt’s ruler, the *Khedive* Ismail, couldn’t meet the interest payments on its construction. The deal was so dodgy, I’m surprised my father didn’t have a hand in it.

Even though the work was now finished, the town of Port Said remained. These days it served as the main seaport for Cairo—even though Cairo was a hundred miles away to the south.

The docks at Port Said are a little strange. Ships as large as ours are too big to moor up at the quayside. They have to drop anchor out in the canal, then passengers are either taken ashore by boat, or, as happened in our case,

someone sends out a pontoon—a kind of floating bridge, made up of lots of little segments arranged end-to-end. Miss Otis said that she thought it was the Romans who had invented pontoons. ‘Probably as some kind of torture,’ I mumbled, hoping the damned thing wasn’t about to capsize around us and send us all to our watery graves.

As long as I live I’ll never forget my first impressions of Egypt. To start with, it was much hotter than I’d expected. We’d arrived in the middle of October, yet the temperature was like the hottest summer’s day back in England. This was a bit unfortunate as most of my fellow passengers were still wearing their coats from the voyage. I was also surprised to see how clean and bright everything looked—extraordinarily bright—and there was a smell to the place: an ancient smell that was powdery and as dry as a bone. And sand! Everything, from the tops of the orange-tiled roofs to the silvery pavements below, seemed to be covered in a fine layer of sand.

Having had our passports checked, Miss Otis, Miss Clements and I took our luggage and struggled out on to the boulevard that stretched the entire length of the harbour. Dark-skinned boys in long white robes lunged at us from all sides, tugging at our sleeves and shouting phrases in English that they’d clearly learned by heart, some of which were so obscene they had me blushing scarlet!

Just as I was wondering if I would ever be able to look

Rose in the eye again, a man hurried over and shooed the little hooligans away. He was an Englishman of about my father's age, with gingery-blond hair, watery-grey eyes and skin that was brick-red from the sun. He wore a crumpled, buff-coloured suit, with a belt fastened around the outside of his jacket that only served to emphasize his growing paunch. On his head he sported an old, battered hat, its rim already ringed with a dark band of sweat. If this was Mr Peyton, I'd have to say that he wasn't good looking in the least.

'Oh, my God! It's true...it's perfectly true!' he cried, staring at Miss Otis open-mouthed. 'You really *are* blind. Lord have mercy, I thought they were pulling my leg...'

Miss Otis rounded on him in an instant, her lips puckering as sourly as if she'd been sucking on a lemon.

'This one's clearly the girl companion,' he continued, ignoring her and then dismissing me, 'so who in God's name are *you*?'

'I—I'm Rose Clements,' Rose spluttered. 'And you are Mr Peyton, I presume?'

'Certainly not! The name's Cotterell. Andrew Cotterell. Second-in-command.'

Rose took a deep breath and attempted to win him over with one of her smiles. 'Well, Mr Cotterell, I'm your new artist.'

'Artist! *Hmmph*! So you're Mr Barry's replacement?' He eyed her up and down as if she were some badly butchered joint of meat. 'Well, considering the short

notice, I suppose we have to be grateful for whatever we get.’

‘Quite,’ said Rose, at a loss to know how else to respond.

It was Miss Otis who broke the embarrassing silence, though her voice was decidedly chilly. ‘As you have already observed, Mr Cotterell, I am Miss Otis. I was under the impression that Mr Peyton would be meeting us here today. Am I to understand that he’s been delayed?’

‘Not at all; he’s not coming.’

‘*Not coming?*’

‘No, there was a message waiting for us when we got here. It seems we’ve had a few problems at the site, so Edward and the others went on ahead to try and straighten things out. But don’t go bothering that fluffy little brain of yours; *I* will be escorting you.’

‘*Fluffy* little brain—?’

For someone whose own tone of voice left a lot to be desired, he seemed quick to find fault in others. He placed his hands on his hips and leaned forward until his forehead was almost touching hers.

‘*Saints preserve us from touchy women!* Always rushing to take offence where none was intended! I warn you now, madam: we have a long journey ahead of us, and I will thank you to keep whatever female sensitivities you may have to yourself!’

‘*Why, you ill-mannered, impudent, oafish, little—*’

‘And now she’s getting hysterical.’

‘How long a journey?’ Rose butted in quickly, in an effort to save the situation.

Oh, fourteen or fifteen days, provided we get a fair wind behind us.’

‘Fair wind? Then we’ll be travelling by *ship*?’ she gasped.

‘Not a ship exactly,’ our horrid escort informed her. ‘*Felucca*. Native sailboat. Up the main canal as far as Ismailiya, and then a side canal till we hit Cairo. After that it’s straight on down the Nile. So, if you women are ready?’

Miss Otis coughed. ‘Mr Cotterell? I believe you’ve forgotten something.’

‘Forgotten something? I very much doubt it!’

‘Our luggage. Our trunks are *this* way.’

— CHAPTER 2 —
*INTO THE VALLEY OF THE
KINGS*

OUR JOURNEY ACTUALLY took us seventeen days and, thanks to Mr Cotterell's long, broody silences, the trip was really quite enjoyable. I spent many happy hours gazing out from under the canvas awning at all the strange and wonderful sights: pyramids and palm trees, villages and farmland. It almost felt like I was travelling back in time.

Sometimes we were overtaken by much larger boats—steam-cruisers full of tourists; on one occasion I'm sure I even glimpsed a train speeding along a lonely stretch of shore. These things made me wonder why we hadn't gone a quicker way. Perhaps steamer-passage was expensive, or maybe the railway didn't extend as far as Luxor—both were perfectly good explanations. But then, as the days wore on, I began to see the real reason.

Every evening when we tied up, it was always at a site of particular interest to Mr Cotterell: the sparkling white

pyramid at Maidum, for example, or the historic town of Beni Suef. Some of these places, like the ruined city at Tell el-Amarna, were proper archaeological digs. Amazingly, the French team based there seemed truly happy to see the horrid man; more amazing still, they genuinely appeared to welcome his suggestions regarding their work. I got the impression that—however rude he might have been as a person—Andrew Cotterell was someone who was highly thought of in his field.

The journey might have only taken sixteen days, but, on what should have been our final morning, the wind dropped and it soon became clear that we were making no headway. Because we were battling against the current, the *felucca*'s captain decided to moor up until the breeze picked up again. I wasn't worried. I would have gladly spent the rest of my life on that marvellous river.

That little stopover meant that, when dusk came, we were forced to tie up again for the night—even though, according to Mr Cotterell, we had less than five miles to go.

'Five miles!' groaned Rose as we sat around our campfire watching the *felucca*'s crew prepare the evening meal of *fuul*—stewed beans. 'Why, if I didn't have my trunk, I swear I'd walk it!'

'Look on the bright side,' Miss Otis pointed out. 'At least we'll arrive refreshed in the morning.'

'Refreshed? Haven't you noticed that the further south we get, the hotter it becomes? And one more night of

eating those filthy beans, then struggling to get to sleep aboard a boat that refuses to keep still—all the while being mauled by garrisons of killer ants and mosquitoes—well! How could anybody be expected to wake refreshed?’ Rose held her hand to her chest and fluttered her eyelids playfully. ‘Lord,’ she said, ‘let’s just hope it’s all worth it!’

Mr Cotterell gave her a sour look and got to his feet. We watched as he headed off towards the reeds where our boat was moored. He was carrying his shotgun.

‘Miss Otis, are you enjoying yourself?’ I asked. Things had been awkward between us, but I still cared about the old lady.

‘Do you know, Lizzie, I think that I am. I’m so terribly grateful for all your wonderful descriptions. It’s really made this trip come alive for me, hearing what you have to say.’

‘I’m sure your guides would have done a much better job,’ I whispered so Rose wouldn’t hear.

‘No, I doubt that very much,’ she whispered back. ‘I feel I’m getting to see Egypt through young eyes, and Charles and Henry could never have done that.’

‘Miss Otis, I’m sorry if you think that I’ve let you down.’

‘You haven’t let me down. I realise that we have our differences at the moment, but I just want you to know that I value the time you spend with me.’

Suddenly there came a noise: *Ker-tchok...baa-ROOM!*

Miss Otis jumped. So did I. I looked about and spotted Andrew Cotterell returning from the riverbank, his shotgun slung across his shoulder and his mouth set in a grim line.

‘Mr Cotterell, if you’re going to fire that God-awful thing, the least you could do is give us some warning!’ cried Rose.

‘I thought I saw someone lurking by the boat,’ he muttered. ‘Must have been a crocodile.’

‘A crocodile?’

‘Oh, you needn’t worry, Miss Clements. They don’t tend to bother you unless you bother them first...generally speaking.’

‘*How* generally speaking?’ asked Rose, pulling a face.

*

We set sail again at sunrise. I sat at the front of the boat, basking in the sunlight. Barely an hour had gone by when I heard the strangest sound—the jingly, tinkling music of an operetta tune—and one that I actually recognised! When I looked up, I saw that we were rapidly approaching a landing stage on the right-hand bank of the river, and there, tied to the dock, was one of the weirdest sights I’d ever seen. A house—exactly like a gingerbread house with windows made of barley sugar—floating on the water!

The man on its deck was practically naked: all he wore was a baggy pair of linen shorts. He was lounging in a

deck chair with his feet up, dangling a makeshift fishing line over the rail. The plinky-plonk music I could hear was coming from a large wooden music box at his side. He seemed to be watching the far shore, where a thin line of tourists from one of the cruise ships were picking their way across the rubble to the ruins of some sort of temple.

‘Oh, no! Not Wilson Struthers!’ wailed Mr Cotterell as he caught sight of the naked man too. Quick as a flash, he scooted back under the awning and hid himself behind a swathe of canvas.

The man on the houseboat stood up and waved. ‘Ahoy there!’ he shouted as the *felucca*’s crew steered us gently in to dock.

‘Ahoy, yourself!’ cried Rose, waving back.

‘Well, who do we have here?’ The thick, friendly twang was unmistakably American.

‘I’m Rose Clements and this is my friend Lizzie Blaylock.’

‘Nice to meet you Rose! Nice to meet you Lizzie! I’m Wilson—Wilson Struthers.’

‘Isn’t that *Three Little Maids From School*?’ I called out, although I was beginning to feel slightly queasy at the sight of all his grey chest-hair.

‘Why, it sure is!’ the man responded with gusto. ‘It’s one of the latest discs for my old music box here. I take it you’re acquainted with the song, young lady?’

‘It’s from *The Mikado*. I saw the show at the Savoy a few months back.’

‘The Savoy Theatre in London?’ He pronounced the word “theatre” as “thee-ay-ter”. ‘Well, well; looks like we’ve landed ourselves a lady of culture! I’ve just got to tell Dodie about this! She’ll be thrilled to meet you, I’m sure.’

As soon as Mr Struthers—Wilson—disappeared to summon Dodie (whoever she might have been), Andrew Cotterell came flying out from his hiding place, dragging Miss Otis with him. He hoisted my friend ashore then ran off to see to the unloading of our trunks. Rose and I clambered on to the dock just in time to witness the still half-naked Mr Struthers coaxing a smiling, nodding woman down the gangplank. It was like watching someone lead an elderly, beloved sheep to its slaughter.

‘Lizzie! Rose! This here is my wife, Dodie.’

I was rather surprised that a person of Mr Struthers’s age would introduce himself or his wife by their Christian names. Even though my former employer had insisted on using them, such familiarity was extremely uncommon. Perhaps the heat and the bright Egyptian sunshine made people behave a bit less formally than they would in their own countries.

‘Hello,’ said Dodie, smiling nervously. Like her husband, she too had a broad American accent. Her head, which seemed a little big for her body, tottered dangerously at the top of a very long neck.

‘Dear Christ, not her as well!’ I heard Andrew Cotterell mutter as he pretended to supervise the men who were

doing all the work.

‘I’m Lizzie,’ I said, shaking the woman’s hand. ‘This is Rose Clements...and this is my friend Miss Otis.’

‘Welcome to our little home away from home,’ she replied, nodding vaguely at the houseboat behind her. I noticed the name on the side: *Antigone*.

‘*Anti-gone*?’ I said, trying to make sense of the word.

‘Oh, my!’ gasped Dodie. ‘You say it the way that Frenchman says it.’

‘It’s pronounced ‘An-tig-on-ee’,’ said Rose, smiling.

‘Well, now, that’s just what I thought,’ Mr Struthers agreed. ‘If my memory serves me right, Antigone was some high-falutin’ Greek princess from some old play or other—one that we were forced to study at school.’

‘But I’m positive Burlón called our boat ‘*Anti-gone*’,’ bleated Dodie. ‘Surely he ought to know, what with him being the new translator and all? He told me it means ‘instead of corners’.’ She frowned. ‘Or was it ‘*up against a tight corner*’...?’

I glanced at the houseboat, which seemed to be made of nothing but corners. Perhaps she’d been closer with her second guess.

‘Strangely enough, as regards the pronunciation, you’re both correct,’ Miss Otis explained. ‘It simply depends whether you’re speaking English or French.’

‘Really?’ Dodie looked slightly confused.

‘Honey-pie, where are your manners?’ her husband prompted her. ‘I bet these ladies are mighty thirsty after

their long journey. Why don't you go and rustle up a jug of lemonade while I give them the grand tour?'

'*Lemonade?*' muttered Dodie under her breath. 'How the heck do you make lemonade?'

'No time,' came a shout from the stern of the *felucca*. It was Andrew Cotterell again. Having organised the luggage, he was now about to try and organise us. 'I have to get these women to the camp,' he said gruffly. 'Edward will be expecting them.'

For an instant Dodie looked relieved. But then Mr Struthers called back, 'Of course there's time! Do you expect these lovely ladies here to trek the four miles to camp on donkeys in this heat, when they could stop a while and take a nice cool glass of lemonade with Dodie and me? I ask you! Why, I can run them across in the buggy later. Hell, we'll probably get there before you do. What do you ladies say to lemonade?'

'Lemonade sounds good,' said Rose.

'*Oh,*' said Dodie.

*

Wilson's buggy turned out to be nothing more than a plain old donkey-cart, which, as you might know, isn't what they call 'sprung': there's nothing to cushion you from every stone and pothole in the road. Even so, it was a relief not to have to ride an actual donkey, as Mr Cotterell had intended we do. All three of us—Rose, Miss Otis and I—were terribly grateful for that!

The road from the pier proved to be the trickiest part of the trip since it was mostly made up of loose sand. But then the going got better and the trail turned into a hard, stony track that followed the Nile for a mile or two, passing through long, scrubby stretches of green. I kept trying to warn Miss Otis if I saw a stone in our path, but in the end I gave up. There were just too many of them.

At last we headed inland, beginning our slow climb into the hills. Suddenly the green fields fell away almost as if a dividing line had been drawn in the dirt, leaving only rock. Overhead, flocks of squawking birds circled the skies.

‘What are they?’ I asked, secretly hoping they weren’t vultures.

‘Kites,’ Mr Struthers replied, busily egging the poor donkey on. I put my hand to my eyes and squinted. His so-called kites looked horribly like large, hungry hawks to me.

We were quite high up now. Every so often Rose would turn to me and whisper something in my ear—usually something about the tiny groups of Egyptian boys that we encountered at the side of the road.

One time she said, ‘Those robes they’re wearing are called *djellabahs*,’ which of course is a perfectly respectable thing to say. But then she went and spoiled it by adding, ‘What wouldn’t I give to see some hot-blooded Englishman reclining on his baronial sofa wearing nothing but one of those!’ I caught Wilson Struthers glancing at

her strangely and I quickly looked away.

Eventually the road widened and a circle of canvas tents came into view. They were pitched between the craggy cliff-face on the right and a slightly gentler slope on the left. At the back of the camp there was a central hill with a trail leading off on either side.

Mr Struthers saw me looking. ‘Those two trails meet up around the back of that hill,’ he explained, ‘then a bit further on they split up again. Used to be a watercourse, but it dried up thousands of years ago. Now, don’t you go fretting none. This place ain’t so prodigiously big that you can get yourself lost in it.’

‘Wilson, you’ll excuse me for asking,’ said Rose, ‘but what do you do exactly?’

Wilson Struthers chuckled. ‘Why, I’m just a simple American lawyer, Rose. Me and Dodie, we like to spend our winters here. Follow the sun; that’s my advice.’

‘So you’re not part of the actual team?’

‘Oh, I like to help out from time to time. Archaeology kind of fascinates me. Always has.’

Rose Clements pursed her lips. ‘You’re not telling me the entire truth, are you, Wilson? I watched you with that dreadful man Cotterell. He gave in to you just the *teensiest* bit too easily when you offered to drive us here.’

I saw the twinkle in Wilson’s eye as he lifted Miss Otis down from the passenger seat. ‘Truth is,’ he said, ‘I help to finance this little dig. Edward Peyton’s a good man. In the three years he’s been exploring this site he hasn’t

uncovered anything major, but he still comes up with the odd trinket or two. Some say the valley's been dug dry, but Edward assures me there are still a few of these ancient kings yet to be accounted for. Maybe he's right. Myself, I don't really care—just as long as I see some return for my investment.'

'So how does it work?' asked Rose, offering Mr Struthers her hand in the hope of being lifted down too—not that she wasn't quite capable of getting down by herself. 'Do you get a proportion of the loot at the end of the season? How does one go about divvying-up a mummy, anyway?'

'Lord, Rose! Don't even think such a thing! Mummies aren't that common, especially in this neck of the woods. Why, nobody's ever found a mummy here in the valley—plenty of ransacked tombs, of course—but mummies?—*no!* They're as rare as hen's teeth and considerably more valuable.' He swung her gently to the ground. 'Besides, the law's quite clear on this point. If Edward were to find a tomb that's still intact, then all the goods become the property of the state, especially the mummies. It's only if he finds a tomb that's already been rifled through that a different rule applies. That's when the Egyptian Antiquities Service looks at what he's found and takes half of it—usually the best pieces—leaving Edward the rest. He's then at liberty to sell his share to the various museums around the world—legally, above-board.'

'What do you mean 'rifled through'?' asked Rose.

‘Robbed. And I don’t mean recently. Every tomb that’s ever been excavated here has shown some sign of being looted in the past. Tomb robbing is an age-old profession. Whole villages used to make their living at it. Still do, occasionally.’

‘It still goes on?’

‘Why, sure. That’s what all this fuss is about—’

‘What fuss?’

‘Well, it seems that a whole bunch of Egyptian artefacts turned up for sale on the European *antika* market over the summer. The head of the Antiquities Service in Cairo is up in arms about it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the *antika* market’s only meant to deal in artefacts with a provenance—things that have been found legally and have been through the half-and-half selection process.’

‘So?’

‘Well, these things *hadn’t* been through that process. It seems that our local inspector, Auray Caro, never laid eyes on them.’

‘Well, maybe they weren’t from around here? Maybe they came from somewhere else?’

‘That’s the problem. All the pieces were eighteenth dynasty. The only tombs they could have come from—in fact the only royal tombs that were ever built during the eighteenth dynasty—are either here in the Valley of the Kings, or back down the river a pace at a little site called

Tell el-Amarna.’

‘Oh,’ said Rose, ‘we stopped there a night...we stayed at the French team’s camp. I suppose they’re equally under suspicion, then?’

Wilson Struthers drew his breath. ‘As a matter of fact, no. They claim they haven’t investigated the area where they think there may be tombs.’

‘But you suspect they’re lying?’ prompted Rose.

‘Perhaps. Though others would point to the fact that the Egyptian Antiquities Service is run almost exclusively by Frenchmen who might be a little—well—protective of their own. It’s an historical thing. Though the British took it over back in 1882, in the three intervening years not a lot has changed.’

‘If it’s the *Egyptian* Antiquities Service, why don’t the Egyptians run it?’ I asked.

Mr Struthers shrugged. ‘Good question! I wish I knew.’

Miss Otis shook her head slowly. ‘Mr Struthers, are these the ‘problems’ to which Mr Cotterell was referring when he met us, do you think?’

‘Reckon so. You see, the thing is, these artefacts really might have come from here. We get a certain amount of pilfering in the valley—just as they do from any site. We try to keep our eye on it, but it’s devilishly difficult. We’re working out in the open air, where anyone can walk in on us—and believe me they do! Ever since that gent Thomas Cook started running those cruises out of Cairo, we get hordes of tourists poking their noses in all

the time. I suppose it's hardly surprising, seeing as it only takes a couple of days to get here by steamer.'

Rose's mouth dropped open. 'A couple of days? A couple of *days*?' she screamed.

'Well, four or five, maybe. I was kind of exaggerating...'

'Do you mean to tell me that that rat, Cotterell, dragged us here the long way?'

'Didn't you notice how we always moored up for the night somewhere that Mr Cotterell wanted to be?' I pointed out. 'Think of Maidum and Beni Suef...el-Amarna and Akhmim.'

Rose's face hardened. 'Oh, wait till I get my hands around his greasy little neck!'

'Count yourself lucky that you missed the fireworks, Rose,' said Wilson. 'Edward got quite a grilling from Inspector Caro, I can tell you—why, the man even threatened to revoke his license to dig.'

'Speaking of Mr Peyton, have you any idea where he might be?' inquired Miss Otis.

'Edward? Oh, off on one of his little walks, I guess. Ever since he arrived, he's begun taking these hour-long constitutionals, one in the morning, another in the evening, regular as clockwork. Some kind of health regimen, he says. Me, I think it's a bit strange...I mean, who'd want to go traipsing about in this heat? You'll find a lot of archaeologists are like that—*odd*—different—know what I mean?'

That was rich, coming from a half-naked American, who spent a good part of the year living in a gingerbread house on the Nile!

‘And when might we expect him back?’ Miss Otis pried further.

Mr Struthers glanced at his pocket-watch then looked up at the hilltop on the left. ‘He sets off about nine and it’s almost ten now. Look! There he is...darting along the track...’

The man on the ridge was waving; a moment later he was scrambling down the rocky slope to join us.

I liked Edward Peyton from the moment I set eyes on him. He had a big, beaming smile that made me feel immediately welcome, and although he was kitted-out in much the same way as Andrew Cotterell, his clothes managed to fit him. I even liked his moustache. It reminded me of the one the man on board the *Prometheus* had had: smart, neatly trimmed, and not bushy at all.

Rose didn’t waste a second before turning on the charm. No sooner had the introductions been made than she was busy batting her eyelashes at him.

‘So what do I call you,’ she flirted shamelessly, ‘Lord Peyton or the Earl Peyton?’

‘Just plain Edward will do,’ the man replied, grinning at her like a love-struck puppy. ‘It’s my father who’s the Earl. I don’t get to inherit the title until the old chap dies and, unlike the sons of some other earls I know, I don’t even have a courtesy title. My family doesn’t run to such

things. We're just not grand enough, I'm afraid.'

Rose Clements laughed—a wonderful, musical laugh like the tinkling of bells—as if what she'd just heard was the funniest joke in the world. Edward Peyton laughed too, as if all of his troubles had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders.

'I suppose the first order of business is to get you settled in,' Mr Peyton said at last. 'I fear, Miss Otis, that you'll find the conditions in camp rather basic.'

'Please, Mr Peyton, I'm sure I shall be perfectly comfortable.'

'Well, now,' said Wilson, 'I was kind of thinking that maybe Miss Otis would be better off staying aboard the *Antigone* with Dodie and me.'

Miss Otis smiled. 'That's very kind of you, Mr Struthers, and I shall bear your generous offer in mind; but if you have no objection I would prefer to remain in camp—to savour in full this once-in-a-lifetime experience.'

'Just you remember: you're always welcome at ours.'

Edward Peyton grinned at Rose and offered her his arm. 'Ladies, let me show you to your tents, and then I'll see if I can find where Andrew's put your luggage.'

'Lead the way,' said Rose.

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After a lot of discussion, it was decided that Miss Otis should have a tent to herself on the western side of the

camp, directly below the line of tall cliffs, as that side of the valley was meant to be cooler in the evenings. Rose and I ended up sharing a tent, roughly the same size but on the other side of the camp, below the gentler ridge of hills to the east. After much to-ing and fro-ing to sort out everyone's unpacking, Mr Peyton took us on a short tour of the site.

What a disappointment! I'd expected tombs, but there weren't any. All I saw were a couple of shallow troughs in the ground. And as for treasure—well! Nothing but a few broken pots!

Thankfully the disastrous tour was followed by a really good lunch in the mess-tent, where we met some of the others on the team. Miss Otis said she was tired, so, having finished eating, I walked her back to her quarters. I was glad to see how little help she required. She was already starting to find her own way around. When I returned to the mess-tent, Edward Peyton was showing Rose the types of drawings that he needed her to do. Rose appeared to study them with interest, leaning forward to examine a particular detail whenever he did. I soon realised that she was only doing this in order to get physically closer to Mr Peyton, not that he seemed to object.

I wandered down to the front of the tent where a table had been set out with some of the newer finds. Stripped of all their dust and soil, these bits of clay looked even plainer than the ones I'd seen that morning. I picked up

one of the pieces and juggled it in my palm. I was just about to put it back, when—*slap!*—a bunch of fleshy fingers struck me across the knuckles. It didn't really hurt; it was just the shock of it happening that startled me. When I looked up, I saw the twisted, pouting face of Miss Helen Buller-Brown, the only other woman on the team apart from Rose.

‘Don't touch!’ she hissed. ‘These potsherds are thousands of years old!’ She grabbed my wrist and dug the fragment from my fingers. I heard it crack as her hand closed around it. ‘Now look what you've done, you stupid girl!’

I felt my ears burning. Breaking free of her grip, I scuttled from the tent. I saw her glaring at me as I slunk away.

Desperate to shake off the feeling of embarrassment, I went and snatched my sun hat from my trunk and stalked off to explore the site on my own. As I followed the path around the central hill, I noticed a rough, stony track winding up to the ridge above. I was fairly certain that this was the path that Edward Peyton had used. If I climbed to the top, I was sure to get an excellent view of the valley—and probably even a glimpse of the Nile.

The slope was much steeper than it looked. A quarter of the way up, I stopped to rest. I sat myself down on a small, rocky hillock and gazed across at the long line of cliffs opposite, trying to pick out Miss Otis's tent. The sun beat down on my skin.

I must have dozed off for a moment (but only a moment, because my eyelids seemed to snap open even before I'd shut them) and, when I came to, I heard a new sound: the trill of somebody whistling.

— CHAPTER 3 —
A FAMILY IN TURMOIL

I TRACED THE mournful melody to a seven-foot-square pit just a few yards off the main track. It must have been at least six feet deep; deep enough to stumble into and break your neck—or to stand in fully upright and still remain hidden—something I only discovered when I peered over the edge.

There, at the bottom, stood an Egyptian girl—though, when I say girl, she was actually a good three years older than me—humming to herself as she swept the floor with a hand-broom. As I hadn't encountered any girls on my earlier tour of the site, this came as welcome surprise and, to my delight, it seemed that she'd uncovered a rather important find. In one corner alone I spotted at least forty pottery bowls in perfect condition. She'd also laid aside several wreaths of dried flowers (which I knew from my trips to the British Museum were what they call 'flower collars': necklaces made from tiny glass rods and beads or, as these ones were, from real flowers and leaves, though the small, dainty buds were now as fragile as

tissue-paper).

‘Oh!’ said the girl, looking up with a start. ‘Did the *Ifritah* send you?’

‘Sorry?’ I replied, unable to make out whether she was even speaking English.

‘The *Ifritah*? Did she send you?’

‘Send me? No, I’m here with my friend Miss Otis. We’re guests of Mr Peyton’s.’

The girl frowned. She seemed to be having just as much trouble understanding me as I was her. I repeated my reply, louder this time, but she merely shook her head.

‘Do you come from across the Great Green?’ she asked, trying a different tack.

At first I thought I’d misheard her. ‘The great green?’ Then it suddenly dawned on me. ‘Oh! You mean the Mediterranean! Yes. I’ve come all the way from England—a long way away. My name is Lizzie.’

‘*Lit-si*?’ The girl screwed up her face as if the two syllables had just made a peculiar taste in her mouth. She tilted her head back and pursed her lips. ‘Are you the one who will return the scarab heart?’

‘The scarab heart?’ I stared at her blankly.

The poor thing took one look at my puzzled face and burst into tears. ‘Oh, please, please don’t cry,’ I begged, searching the pit’s walls for a way down. Since there wasn’t a ladder, I imagined there’d be steps or some kind of footholds carved in the sides—not that I could see any. In the end, I had no choice but to sit on the edge and lower

myself over. It was quite a drop.

‘Oh,’ she wailed as she tried to catch me, ‘I thought you might be the one.’

‘The person who’ll return this scarab heart thingummy? What made you think it was me?’

The girl blinked at me glumly. ‘The *Ifritah* was most insistent. The one to return the scarab heart would come from across the Great Green.’

‘Just a minute...who or what’s an *Ifritah*, and what on earth is a scarab heart?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘Go on...’

‘No, it’s a *very* long story.’

‘I’m listening...’

‘Well, there are those who believe that my family is descended from gods,’ she said, immediately causing me to bite my lip. ‘Now, I have no idea if that’s true or not, but there’s a very good chance that it might be. They claim that the great god Amun fell head-over-heels in love with one of my ancestors, the Queen Achmose—’

‘What? This queen, she was your ancestor?’

‘Yes. And in return for Amun’s love, she bore him a daughter, the strange and wondrous princess Hat-shep-sut. Amun must have adored his human daughter, for when she married and her husband died prematurely, the god came to her in a dream, telling her to put on a false beard and go rule Egypt as a man.’

‘And these were your *ancestors*?’ I repeated,

wondering if I was still having problems with her accent.

‘My ancestors, yes. Under Amun’s watchful eye, Hat-shep-sut set about making Egypt rich. Her armies proved unstoppable. Year in, year out, they never lost a battle. It was the same with her descendants. Each successive pharaoh added to Egypt’s wealth, so by the time my grandfather, Amun-ho-tep the Third, came to power a hundred and twenty-five years later, Egypt was the richest, most powerful nation in the world.’

‘Your *grandfather*?’ I screeched.

‘Oh, now you are making fun of me!’

‘I’m sorry, it’s just that all of this sounds so ridiculous.’

The young woman looked as if she was about to burst into tears again. She stared at the ground for a minute, then picked up her hand-broom and went back to her sweeping.

I stole a sneaky glance about at the four bare walls. There were chisel marks where the pit had been carved from the bedrock, but nothing that would act as footholds. Considering that we were both stuck here till someone came and got us out, I thought it best to try and make peace with her.

‘Please,’ I said, ‘I really didn’t mean to offend. Won’t you go on with your story?’

‘Why? So you can mock me?’

‘I won’t mock you, I promise. You have my word on that. I won’t say a thing.’

I heard her mutter something that sounded like, ‘*Can*

she really be the one?’

‘Please...I promise I’ll keep quiet.’

‘Oh, very well.’ Reluctantly she set her broom aside and sat back down. ‘Where was I?’

‘You were talking about your grandfather...the pharaoh.’

‘So I was,’ she said, still eyeing me with suspicion. ‘Well, when it came time for him to choose a queen, instead of taking a half-sister or the daughter of a foreign king, Amun-ho-tep the Third broke with tradition and married a commoner, a woman of quite humble beginnings, whose name was Ti.

‘Ti stood barely five feet tall, yet she was a striking woman nevertheless. Long, delicate fingers adorned long, delicate hands. Eyes the size of saucers blinked out at you from behind strangely translucent lashes. And her hair! Beneath her wig her hair was the curious colour of bleached straw—quite unlike any Egyptian hair, believe me. For although Ti’s father, Yuya, was Egyptian through and through, her mother, Tuya, was most definitely not.

‘Ti’s mother hailed from the Mitanni people, an ancient race skilled in the ways of medicines and magic, who dwelt far beyond the mountainous regions of our northern-most borders in a land reputed to be older than Egypt itself.

‘Naturally, rumours were rife that both Ti and her mother were sorceresses who had cast a spell over Amun-ho-tep. In my own mind, though, I have no doubt that my

grandfather chose to marry my grandmother purely out of love.

‘As the preparations got underway for the wedding, Ti’s mother and father left their home in Akh-mim and came to live with their daughter in the royal palace. And with them came Ti’s younger brother Ay and his wife.

‘Ay was quite the opposite of Ti in almost every respect. Though mixed-race like his sister, he loathed to think of himself as being anything but the perfect Egyptian. There were some in the palace who would secretly laugh about this, and would take great pleasure seeing him squirm every time his Mitanni-born mother walked into the room. The fact was he was ashamed of her—and in the lead-up to the wedding, where life was one endless string of receptions attended by some of the most powerful people in the world, her presence served as a constant reminder of his true pedigree.

‘When at last the wedding-day arrived, the ceremony was breathtaking. What a glorious spectacle to behold, unrivalled in living memory! Hundreds and hundreds of horns blaring out their welcoming fanfare! Thousands of priests singing prayers! Tens of thousands of well-wishers bowing and scraping before an endless parade of dignitaries from every far-flung corner of the earth! While the feasting carried on into the night, Amun-ho-tep smuggled his new bride away to his bedchamber where he kissed her tenderly.

“‘What is it that you require of me, my Lord,” asked Ti,

smiling up at her husband.

““You know what I want; I want you to give me a son.”

‘Well, the weeks passed and before long Ti became aware that she was carrying a new life inside her. As Egypt’s grain stores swelled with the summer harvest, the queen’s belly was swelling with child. My grandfather was overjoyed. He decreed that his love for her be carved in stone throughout the land. And, in the fullness of time, Ti gave birth to a son, a boy whom they named Amun-hotep after his father. Those were days full of promise. Our great and noble dynasty seemed set to continue for ever.’

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Not only was the girl a bit touched, she was clearly not much of a storyteller. For all her fancy talk of being descended from gods, the only thing that had happened so far was her grandfather had married and fathered a son. That was hardly a big deal; I could name at least a dozen young men from Waterloo who’d done exactly the same—though not necessarily in the same order! If she was going to make up a tale, the least she could do was make it a whopper.

‘Something must have happened,’ I said, hoping to goodness that it had.

‘It did. Things began to go wrong.’

‘Wrong?’

‘On the very morning that the baby prince was to be presented to the priests of Amun, a nursery maid came to

his room only to find him lying motionless in his cot. Leaning forward to feel the child's forehead, she noticed a scorpion struggling out from under the bed sheets. Its tail poised and flexing, it dropped to the floor and raced to the window. The young girl screamed, which brought everybody in the palace running. Ti was the first to arrive. As people gasped in horror, the queen bent down and examined her son's lifeless body. Immediately she ordered everyone from the room, her distraught husband included.

'Minutes ticked by as they waited outside the door. Eventually one of the women threw back her head and began to wail. She produced such a haunting cry, a quivering, pitiful note right from the back of her throat, that, one by one, the rest of the women were moved to join in too.

'At once, the door of the room flew open and there stood Ti, her son struggling and screaming in her arms. There was no doubt about it. The boy was alive, his lungs creating enough racket for two healthy babies.

"What in the name of Horus are you doing?" she cried. "Would you have my son dead before his time? Be about your business, all of you! This is an important day and I'm relying on each of you to see to it that nothing goes wrong! Nothing! Do you hear?"

'When the procession finally set off for the temple, it was an unusually subdued affair. At the front of everyone's minds burned the image of the still, lifeless

baby they had witnessed lying in its cot. For some reason Tuya seemed furious with her daughter; Ti, for her part, pointedly ignored her mother's fiery glances. Far from being a joyous occasion, the atmosphere was so thick you could have cut it with a knife.

'No sooner had the boy been presented at the altar when the temple was filled with a savage, howling wind. Sand flew into the eyes of royals and priests alike as they fell to their knees trembling.

"The child is dead!" the god's voice boomed above the maelstrom. "The limbs may move, but the soul is gone! How dare you present me with this *thing*, Pharaoh?"

'My grandfather quailed. "Amun, greatest of all gods! Hear me, I beseech you! This is my first-born whom I have named in your honour—"

"I have given you *everything* and in return you bring me a dead child? End this sacrilege at once! Take a dagger to the boy, I command you!"

'And, with that, a fearsome blade fell from the eye of the storm, landing perilously close to where Pharaoh himself was kneeling. Blindly he picked it up.

"Stop!" cried the queen. "If my son is to die, he will die by my hand alone!" So saying, she rushed forward and plucked the child from the priests' grasp.

'Clutching him to her bosom, she braved the wind and struggled towards her bewildered husband. Bending down, she wrenched the dagger from his hand and plunged it deep into her son's heart.

‘Immediately the wind died away. Stunned courtiers glanced about in amazement as a sweet, heady fragrance took its place. Cassia bark and cinnamon, sandalwood and golden myrrh; all the scented woods from the land of Punt seemed to mingle in the air.

“‘What in Osiris’s name is that?’” gasped Ti’s father.

“‘You old fool!’” growled his Mitanni wife. “Do you not recognise the scent of your own god?”

‘Suddenly Ti was surrounded by priests—all vying to take the young prince’s body for burial. But the queen refused, holding him firmly to her breast.

“‘Since Amun does not want my son, you shall not have him either. I will see to his body myself. It shall be returned to the elements from whence it came, in the ancient tradition of my mother’s people.’”

‘That evening in the palace as Pharaoh wept, Ti shuffled listlessly about the courtyard building a funeral pyre. Her parents, meanwhile, were making hasty preparations for a long journey north, a perilous trek through enemy territory to Tuya’s homeland.

‘The two of them set out in the dead of night, and with them went a baby boy whose heart was very much alive and beating. Only one person saw them go: the one man who was not fooled by the queen’s trickery—her brother, Ay. Cup in hand, he stood watching from the shadows, savouring every last drop of Pharaoh’s wine.’

‘Ti brought the boy back to life—a second time?’

‘I’m not sure that her son was dead to begin with,’ the girl replied coolly, ‘*either* time. Just remember: the difference between dead and dying may be measured in a single breath. Did nobody ever tell you that?’

‘I can’t say they have...so what happened next?’

‘Well, two years passed and the seasons rolled by: *Akhet*, when the floods arrive, painting the Nile red with silt from the distant mountains of Ethiopia; *Peret*, when the waters recede, leaving the soil rich and fertile and ready for planting; *Shemu*, when the Nile is green, and the ears of wheat bulge with the promise of a fine harvest.

‘Egypt prospered and, as a mark of respect for Amun’s great bounty, Pharaoh ordered a second temple to be built, a mile-and-a-half’s distance from the first. In order to watch over its construction, Amun-ho-tep had a temporary summer palace erected on the far side of the river. Much of this building work he entrusted to Ay, who excelled at dealing with the day-to-day problems that it brought, even though the man’s behaviour was becoming increasingly odd.

‘For quite some time, Ay had been using his new-found wealth to buy up whole libraries of old *papyri*. While this is not strange in itself—for people who read will always read—what is odd is that he’d taken to wearing bizarre, old-fashioned garments based on drawings he had found in those texts. He even started carrying a coiled-snake *caduceus* with him wherever he went—’

‘A *caduceus*?’ I asked. ‘What’s that?’

‘Oh, you know...one of those long wooden staffs fitted with a bronze head-piece,’ the girl explained, ‘like the ones priests carry. Attired in this peculiar manner he was often found at the water’s edge, sailing toy boats or modelling figures out of clay. When questioned, he would claim that he was simply indulging in traditional Egyptian pastimes, the kinds of activities that people had pursued for centuries. “The kinds of activities that *children* have pursued for centuries,” his friends would snigger the minute his back was turned. Even so, Ay’s judgements always proved sound and, under his direction, the new temple came on rapidly.

‘Then, one day, Amun-ho-tep summoned his brother-in-law to his chambers and explained how he wanted to surprise his wife with a brand new pleasure lake—to be built as swiftly as possible regardless of the cost.

“It may not be that straightforward,” replied Ay.

““Why ever not?” asked Pharaoh, surprised at such a hesitant response.

“If I do this thing for you, I shall expect a boon.”

“A boon?”

“I would like the right to buy up land.”

“But of course you can buy land!” laughed the king.

“Why, you can buy any land you want.”

“I don’t think you quite understand...I wish to purchase a plot in the Place of Truth.”

“The Place of Truth? The Royal Valley?” Pharaoh was

astounded. “But only kings may be buried there!”

““Well,” replied Ay sheepishly, “I’ve always had a notion that *I’d* like to be buried there. My father too; I want him to have his own plot.”

‘Pharaoh thought about this for a moment. It was an unusual request but not an entirely unreasonable one, for although Ay was a commoner, he was also the queen’s brother.

““And this is your...price?” he asked.

““That—and a fair wage. After all, if I’m going to *buy* the land, I’ll need to earn the money for it, won’t I?”

““Oh! Oh-ho!” cried Amun-ho-tep, realising that Ay would end up working for nothing more than a tiny scrap of rock. “Then we have a deal?”

““We have a deal!”

‘Ay employed a hundred and fifty thousand men (though where he managed to find them all was anyone’s guess) and, within a fortnight, Ti had her very own pleasure lake complete with long-billed ibises, water-lilies and darting golden carp. Tucked away at the side of the summer palace, barely a stone’s throw from the Nile itself, the lake was even deep enough to accommodate her royal barge. In return for her husband’s devotion, Ti gave Pharaoh the thing which he craved the most: she bore him another son.

‘They called this boy Tut-mosis and, much to everyone’s relief, when he was presented at the temple, the god smiled down.

‘This was not the only happy event to befall the royal household. Less than a week later, Ay and his wife were also blessed with a child—though in their case the baby was a girl. Everybody who set eyes on her said she was even more beautiful than the dawn.

“‘Wouldn’t it be funny,” murmured Ay to himself as he stood over his daughter’s cot gazing down at the infant.

“‘Wouldn’t what be funny?” asked his wife.

“‘You know...if. If. IF!”

‘They named the girl Nefretiti, which means “The Beautiful One Has Come”, and in Ay’s mind, the future of Egypt was assured.

‘The years flew by. Pharaoh took up hunting as a sport and made many trips to Egypt’s southern territories to hunt lions. Tut-mosis grew to be a sinewy and handsome youth: strong, broad-shouldered and loved by his people. Nefretiti lived up to her name and blossomed into an extremely beautiful young woman. And as for Ay, well, when he wasn’t conspiring to have the two children spend as much time together as possible, he continued to buy up plots of land in the Place of Truth. By the time his daughter turned fourteen, he had acquired four such plots, three of them in the main valley and one in a valley further to the west.

‘Again, things began to go wrong. Not long after my grandfather returned from one of his hunting trips with a bad case of toothache, Prince Tut-mosis came down with a life-threatening fever. Ti rushed to his bedside and once

again ordered everyone from the room. But this time when she emerged she was a broken woman; her beloved son had been wrenched from her grasp. Later that same day, even before the prince's body could be delivered to the priests for embalming, the infection in Pharaoh's tooth began to spread. What had started in his gums moved rapidly to his throat, and from there to other parts of his body. Quite soon, the king who had once hunted lions couldn't move a muscle without screaming in pain. Ti tried every way she knew to effect a cure, but it was hopeless.

‘A week and a day later, Amun-ho-tep the Third was dead too. And terrible thing had come to pass: Egypt was without a ruler...’

— CHAPTER 4 —
*THE BOY WHO DIDN'T KNOW
HIS OWN NAME*

‘LIZZIE! LIZZIE! WAKE up!’

I struggled to open my eyes. I could just about make out the hazy outline of Rose Clements coming towards me down the hill.

‘W-what? What is it, Rose? What’s the matter?’

‘Darling girl, trust me: even if you *are* wearing that hat, it’s not safe to sleep out in the sun—especially at this time of day. People keep to their tents after lunch. It’s far too hot to do anything else.’

My eyes began to focus. ‘But I haven’t been asleep. I’ve just been having a lovely talk...with this girl. She was telling me a story.’

This was clearly not true. There was no girl; there wasn’t even a pit. I was still sitting with my back pressed against the rocky hillock.

‘I think you’ve been dreaming, Lizzie. Here, why don’t you let me walk you back to camp? It’s probably best if

you stay in the shade for the rest of the day.’

‘But it wasn’t a dream, Rose...or it certainly didn’t feel like one.’

My companion hunted through the large canvas bag that hung from her shoulder and pulled out a pink silk parasol. ‘Here. We can use this,’ she said, pushing up its spines.

As we started back to the camp together, I noticed that she seemed particularly pleased with herself.

‘What have you been up to?’ I asked, watching her cat-like face.

Rose gave a guilty little flutter. ‘Me? Why, I’ve been working on a drawing. Would you care to see it?’

She took out her sketchbook, flipped through it, and then passed it to me.

‘What do you think?’ she asked, leaning her head to one side.

‘It’s very good.’

It really was. She’d drawn a leopard—a leopard carved from stone, its eye-sockets set with emeralds. It looked perfectly lifelike, right down to the cut of the gems.

‘Edward approves of it,’ she told me with a grin. ‘I was afraid he mightn’t.’

‘You like him, don’t you?’ I asked.

Rose made an unnecessary fuss of putting the sketchpad back in her bag, but I knew that she’d heard me even though she didn’t answer.

‘And he likes you, too, doesn’t he?’ I persisted.

‘Let’s just say that we respect each other,’ she said at last.

‘Mr Peyton’s awfully attractive, isn’t he?’

‘Lizzie Blaylock! I hope you’re not trying to tell me that you’re after him too?’

I felt myself blushing.

‘Oh, damn!’ said Rose as we both heard the sound of rapidly approaching voices. ‘It’s that dreadful man, Cotterell. Do you mind if I leave you here?’

‘No, I’m fine, really; you go.’

‘Remember, try to stay in the shade.’ She turned and flittered back up the path.

A second later, Andrew Cotterell came lumbering around the corner with a tall, wiry man at his side. The newcomer was dressed in black frocked robes and a wide-brimmed hat, which lent him a decidedly priestly air. I was certain I hadn’t seen him on my earlier tour of the site, nor had I met him in the mess-tent at lunch. I heard a sharp intake of breath as he came to a halt in front of me.

‘*Ah*,’ he said with a strong French accent, ‘but this must be Monsieur Peyton’s young guest—Mademoiselle Eliza Blaylock, I presume. I am Monsieur Burlón—Monsieur Ploërmel Burlón—at your service. It is a rare delight to meet you, mademoiselle.’

He leaned forward and kissed my hand, all the while peering up at me through his wire-framed spectacles. I felt like a bug scrutinised by a very hungry bird.

Amazingly, it was Andrew Cotterell who came to my

rescue. ‘Monsieur Burlón,’ he snapped, ‘have you forgotten the inscription I asked you to translate—?’

‘Forgive me,’ said the Frenchman, still studying my face. ‘Duty calls.’

I was glad to see him go. There was something rather creepy about the way he’d kept holding my hand for so long.

I went back to my tent, but it was so hot and stuffy that I took myself off to the mess-tent, which was bigger and considerably cooler.

In the wide, open space out in front, three boys were gathered in a circle, laughing and chatting as they cleaned dirt off some of the less important finds. The two younger ones were busy scrubbing pottery fragments in a large tin pail. Both were dressed in *djellabahs*, the long white robes that most Egyptian men seem to wear. The third, who looked to be about eighteen, wore nothing but a loincloth. He stood slightly apart from his friends, shovelling spadefuls of sand into a large, circular sieve. After shaking his sieve out, he’d stop to examine what was left in the mesh. Mostly he just got stones. There was a big pile of them next to the tent. His task complete, he’d kick away the sand that had landed on his feet and start again.

I walked over to the boys who were washing the pottery and attempted to introduce myself. ‘Hello, I’m Lizzie Blaylock. And what are your names?’ I asked.

The older of the two looked up at me and gulped.

‘My name is...my name is...Aashiq Abd er-Rassoul,’

he spluttered. His young friend simply gawked at me in amazement.

‘He is mistaken,’ came a shout from the eighteen-year-old, who had dropped his sieve and was racing to put himself between me and his friends. ‘His brain was damaged at birth,’ he hissed, slapping the older one about the head, ‘and now he does not even remember his own name. He is Aashiq el-Rashid, and I am his brother, Jabeer. The youngest is little Zafir, named after our father, Zafir el-Rashid, who is a most respected cloth merchant in Luxor.’

I looked at their three anxious faces and tried to figure out how I’d managed to upset them all, for clearly they were all upset—and, in Jabeer’s case, angry too. Maybe girls weren’t allowed to speak to boys in this culture—perhaps it was something as simple as that.

‘Jabeer! Aashiq! Get back to work!’

All four of us turned at once as the squat, shapeless figure of Helen Buller-Brown—the woman who’d smacked me on the hand—appeared in the doorway of the mess-tent.

‘Miss Blaylock—a word.’

‘Yes, Miss Buller-Brown?’ I eyed the twelve-foot span that separated us with some relief.

‘Miss Blaylock, what I have to say to you is private, but if you would prefer we carry out our conversation in front of the workmen, then so be it. Just don’t blame me if you find yourself extremely embarrassed by what is said.’

Cursing, I went and joined her in the doorway. She didn't speak until I was standing right next to her, and even then she refused to look me in the eye. She kept her gaze on Jabeer instead.

'Miss Blaylock, you and your friend Miss Otis are guests of Mr Peyton, and, as such, I am obliged to welcome you to this dig. But I think it only fair to warn you that I myself do not approve of the presence of women on archaeological sites; they always prove an unnecessary distraction in my experience.'

'Yes, Miss Buller-Brown?'

'*You* are an unnecessary distraction. And in order to keep this dig running smoothly, I must insist that you limit your conversations with Mr Peyton and other members of the team to mealtimes only.'

'Very well, Miss Buller-Brown.'

'As for protecting your good reputation, however... well! It would be best if you stayed away from the local boys altogether. Safer for them, too. The last thing they need is some young hussy throwing herself at them in an abandoned fashion.'

My mouth grew harder. 'I see, Miss Buller-Brown.'

Aashiq, who was scrubbing away at the pot fragments for all he was worth, glanced up and smiled shyly. Jabeer, who was still raking through the stones in his sieve, looked across at me and scowled. I prayed they hadn't heard.

'I hope that I've made myself clear,' said Miss Buller-

Brown in a whisper.

‘Perfectly clear.’

‘Miss! Miss! You must come see!’ It was Jabeer. He was holding something in his hand. I saw it sparkle in the sun as he raised it in the air.

Cautiously I followed the woman over and succeeded in getting a look at what the lad had found. It was a silver ring etched with a line of symbols: a shepherd’s crook, a rectangle with some tiny nails sticking out the top, a thing that might have been a bell—

‘Give me that!’ shrieked Miss Buller-Brown, snatching it from his fingers. For a second Jabeer looked so angry I thought he was going to hit her—not that she seemed to realise this; she was too busy gloating over the prize she’d taken. I noticed Aashiq shaking his head in warning while the little one covered his eyes with his hands.

I tried to stifle a giggle, but it didn’t work.

‘What’s the matter?’ demanded Miss Buller-Brown as she turned to face me, still unaware that anything was amiss. ‘Are you feeling ill, Miss Blaylock?’

‘Oh, not any more, though thank you for asking. I feel much better now, in fact.’

I walked away, sniggering to myself, knowing that she was watching my every step.

*

‘Hello, Lizzie. How are you getting on?’ Mr Peyton had set up a trestle table at the foot of the hills, not far from

the spot where I'd had the strange dream. 'I'm trying to untangle this flower collar. Late eighteenth dynasty. See these rather bulky drop-pendants? They're meant to be—'

'I've seen flower collars before,' I said, cutting him short. 'In the British Museum.' *And in my dream*, I thought to myself, although in my dream they'd been made from real flowers.

'Have you now?' Edward Peyton's voice brightened. 'I see I shall have to look to my laurels or you'll soon be after my job!'

'Mr Peyton, what are those stakes in the ground with numbers on them? I've seen them all over the place.' I pointed to a dirty wooden stake a little further along the hill.

'They mark the tombs—or the ones that we know of at least. Fifty years ago a man named Wilkinson went around with a pot of paint and marked them all up in the order they were discovered—or as near as damn it.'

'But I don't see any tombs...only those stakes.'

'At the end of each season we fill in the entrances... helps stop looting.'

'Oh.' I watched as Mr Peyton teased apart a layer of hollow glass rods. 'Have you ever found a tomb?' I asked.

'No, not yet; but I never give up hope. Even now I've got a couple of distinct possibilities up my sleeve. Andrew Cotterell's investigating one of them as we speak.'

'How do you go about finding tombs?'

Edward Peyton looked up from his work. 'I follow the

Belzoni method,' he said, smiling.

'The Belzoni method?'

'Yes, named after Signor Giovanni Belzoni, a circus strongman. He came to the valley nearly seventy years ago when only a handful of tombs had been unearthed. He was keen to discover a tomb for himself, so he set about studying the terrain, taking note of any unusual features: the play of dark and light in the structure of the soil, the slightest hint of a depression in the ground—anything that might indicate an entrance that had long since been covered over. He was remarkably successful. Within only a couple of days he'd discovered several new tombs.'

'Several?'

'Several—the most famous being that of Seti the First, which is the one you were pointing at.'

For a famous tomb, it didn't look particularly special. The only thing to distinguish it from all the others was the marker with the number '17' painted on it.

'If Belzoni'd only had the good sense to stop there,' Mr Peyton went on, 'he might still be remembered fondly to this day.'

'Why? What happened to him?'

Edward Peyton tugged at the brim of his hat and wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand.

'The man was impatient. Rather than digging out the entrances with shovels, he devised a quicker way. He built himself a battering ram. You can imagine the kind of damage that caused. That's the part of his method I don't

subscribe to.'

'Mr Peyton?'

'Yes, Lizzie?'

'What's a scarab?'

'A scarab? It's a kind of beetle—a dung beetle, to be precise.'

'I thought it might be some kind of amulet or charm.'

Again Edward Peyton stopped what he was doing. 'You know, you're quite right. The ancient Egyptians used to make amulets that represented beetles because to them the dung beetle was sacred. If you ever get to see a real one at work, you'll notice that it spends most of its time rolling small balls of dung from one place to another. The ancient Egyptians likened this to the sun being pushed across the sky—'

'Mr Peyton, if a scarab's a beetle—what's a scarab heart?'

'A scarab heart?' Edward Peyton squinted into the distance and scratched his temple. 'I have no idea. I'm not even sure that beetles have hearts. Why do you ask?'

'No reason. It's not important.' I brushed a fly away from my nose.

'You know, Lizzie—' Edward Peyton broke off mid-sentence, his eyes suddenly fixed high on the ridge behind us. There was no warning, only a muffled kind of pounding. Before I could make any sense of the sound, Mr Peyton had grabbed me by the waist and hurled me to one side with all the strength he could muster.

Kerotch-tch-tch!

What I saw as I hit the ground was a two-foot boulder crashing into the table from above, shattering it into matchwood before my eyes. I glanced up. There, at the top of the hill, I glimpsed a flash of white. Mr Peyton, having leapt clear himself, was also staring.

‘What did you see, Lizzie?’

‘I thought I saw one of the workmen...in white robes... a *djellabah*...’

‘Are you sure?’

‘No. It happened so quickly. It might have been anything.’

‘Hmm.’ Edward Peyton got to his feet and made his way over to the boulder. ‘I suppose this rock might have come away naturally,’ he said, touching the surface with his fingers. ‘They don’t get much rain in these parts, but when they do, it can be torrential. Perhaps a passing storm loosened the soil, and it was just a matter of time before this thing came tumbling down.’ His face looked grim. ‘Or perhaps it had help.’

‘Somebody sent it down on purpose, you mean?’

‘We’ve had such an awful run of bad luck on this site, Lizzie, that sometimes I wonder if there isn’t an unseen hand at work, guiding it all.’ He massaged his forehead. ‘The awful thing is, I can’t help thinking that my cousin George might be responsible...and yet how could he be? As far as I’m aware he’s holed-up somewhere back in England.’

‘Your cousin?’

‘George Barry. My second cousin, really—Great Aunt Mary’s grandson. He was the artist on this dig—until we both fell out.’

‘What happened?’

‘He wanted to keep some little trinket he’d found...as a memento for his sweetheart in London...without letting Auray Caro assess it first.’

‘Auray Caro?’

‘Our local Inspector of Antiquities. George was scared that Caro would claim it for himself. I told George that he had to present it, and considered the matter settled. Then, last year, a chance remark made me realise that George *had* taken the brooch, and that Inspector Caro was entirely unaware of its existence.

‘Secretly, I began tracing back through my cousin’s catalog of drawings. After some discreet questioning, I discovered that a quarter of our finds had never reached the inspector’s table.

‘What was I to do? I gave my cousin his marching orders, naturally, even though he can’t have been responsible for the majority of the thefts—’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Well, he would hardly have drawn my attention to a tiny snippet of a brooch if he was stealing large quantities of artifacts, would he? Besides, the thieving didn’t stop once he’d gone. But it’s only *after* his dismissal that the accidents started.’

‘Accidents?’

‘The very week my cousin left, there was a fire. I think everyone realised who’d set it. No one was hurt, thank goodness, but most of our food stocks were ruined. If it hadn’t been so near the end of the season, we would have been forced to pack up and go home.’ Edward Peyton frowned. ‘Perhaps that’s what we should have done. Maybe then Father Lilièvre would still be alive today.’

‘Father Lilièvre?’

‘Our hieroglyphs expert. One evening, not long after the fire, the good Father took himself off to the river to bathe. We found his body two days later, a little north of here, caught up in the reeds. We couldn’t tell for certain what had happened, but from the gash on his forehead we assumed he’d come a cropper on the rocks—though surely George couldn’t have been responsible for that?’

I saw Edward Peyton looking at me with a look I thought I recognised. *You can bring him back. Just for a short while. We can ask him questions. Find out exactly what happened. You can bring him back...*

‘Lizzie, are you all right?’

‘I don’t want to do it, Mr Peyton. I’ve made my mind up and I’m sticking to it! It hurts when I do the thing I do.’

‘The thing you do?’

I suddenly realised he hadn’t a clue what I was talking about.

‘I’m sorry,’ I apologised, blushing with embarrassment.

‘I don’t know why I said that. I think I may have caught too much sun today.’

‘Oh dear! I feel responsible; I expect I ought to have warned you.’

‘No, no. I’m fine now. Please, won’t you go on with what you were saying?’

‘Well, after Father Lilièvre’s death, it was one crisis after another. Half the local workmen walked out—they’re a superstitious bunch, and when they heard about the drowning, they refused to come back. Then Bully—Miss Buller-Brown—fractured her wrist. Even when the season was over and I got back to England, there seemed to be no end to it. My father suffered a stroke and needed round-the-clock nursing. Despite the fire, I wrote to Cousin George to let him know, but he didn’t reply. As his only living relatives, you might think we would warrant an ounce of his concern—but no! He clearly hadn’t forgiven me for dismissing him. I had hoped this new season would herald a fresh start, but instead I had Caro calling me to account about the stolen artifacts. And now this...’

I glanced at the boulder and realised just how close to death we had both come.

‘Lizzie, will you do me a favor? Please don’t tell anybody what happened here today. I’m rather worried that we’ll lose the rest of our workmen.’

‘You saved my life,’ I said. ‘It’s the least I can do.’

I brooded over the various things I'd learned as I tramped back to camp. *An unseen hand at work, guiding it all*, Mr Peyton had said...but whose?

Suddenly I caught sight of something that made me stop and think—both then, and again much later. It was the eighteen-year-old, Jabeer, skulking around the tents where I'd first laid eyes on the creepy new translator, Monsieur Burlón.

The boy's back was now quite red from the sun and his shoulders had started to peel. Although I only got a quick look at him from behind and couldn't see his hands, I knew for certain what he was doing. He was counting money. People who aren't used to money count it slowly and carefully; it's a thing I've seen my father do often enough. I moved on, knowing that if I stayed any longer, I'd be trying to work out how much it was.

It was close on six when Rose joined me in our tent.

'Quick,' she said, 'grab your hat. We're going for a walk.'

'A walk?'

'Come on,' she insisted, pulling me off my cot-bed. 'A walk before supper will do us good.'

We stepped out of the tent into the evening light. Irritating little flies buzzed aimlessly about the guy-ropes. In the distance there was a man making his way out of camp.

'Let's walk a bit faster,' she suggested.

'Isn't that Mr Peyton up ahead? Are we trying to catch

him up?’

‘I thought we might join him for his evening constitutional,’ Rose replied, puffing with exertion.

‘But you don’t need me along for that, do you? Won’t I just be in the way?’

‘Darling girl, if you and I happen to be out for a stroll together, and we run into Edward by chance—well, it won’t look so obvious, will it? Now, do hurry! He’s getting away!’

We had almost reached the top of the ridge, taking the same path that I’d taken earlier, when Rose called out loudly enough to make Mr Peyton stop and look back.

‘Edward!’

‘Oh! Rose! Off for a walk?’

‘Why, yes. Lizzie and I were sitting in our tent, bored out of our minds, when Lizzie here suggested that we go for a little tootle...to get to know the neighbourhood.’

How Rose had the gall not to blush, I’ll never know. Our ‘tootle’ up the hill had left her gasping for breath. Strangely, this seemed to be having the desired effect on Mr Peyton. His eyes were shining brightly and he too appeared to have trouble breathing.

‘Perhaps after dinner, Rose, I could show you the Nile from the cliffs above Deir el-Bahri...Hat-shep-sut’s temple...it’s wonderful by moonlight...if you’d like to, that is.’

‘Oh, Edward, I’d love it.’

‘Good. Then you ladies enjoy your walk. And try not to

be late for dinner. The best cuts of lamb are always dished up first.’ And with that he was gone, bounding south along the track.

‘How did he do that?’ hissed Rose. ‘How did he manage to get rid of us so—so—*tactfully*? No...no...I’m being stupid—the real question is *why*? Why should he even want to?’

*

Rose didn’t stay angry with Mr Peyton for very long. That evening she joined him for her moonlit walk along the cliffs. As for me, after settling Miss Otis down for the night, I went back to my tent alone. I don’t know what time Rose returned, however, because I was already asleep. Asleep and dreaming.

— CHAPTER 5 —
*THE BURNING FACE OF THE
SUN*

‘YOU!’ SAID THE girl, looking up from the bottom of her pit. ‘You returned.’

‘You’re not real,’ I announced, somewhat smugly. ‘You’re just part of my dream.’

‘Is that so?’ she replied, treating me to a very annoying kind of smile. ‘And here I thought you were part of *my* dream. Well? Aren’t you coming down? You’ll soon find it gets chilly out there at night.’

As much as I hated to admit it, she was right. I was dressed only in my night-gown, and though the night was warm, all the warmth came directly from the ground. I could feel it on the soles of my feet, just as I could feel the sharp little pebbles that were strewn across the path. The girl’s pit was lit by a flaming torch made from a bundle of tar-coated bulrushes, and I could smell the burning bitumen and sense the heat from the flame on my face. It all seemed too real to be a dream.

‘What are you waiting for?’ she asked. ‘Jump down—I’ll catch you.’

‘In for a penny, in for a pound,’ I muttered as I lowered myself over the side. I felt her arms embrace me, taking the brunt of my fall. She laughed as I straightened up.

‘What did you say about...*money*?’

‘Oh—nothing. It’s just a saying where I come from. It means...well...it means that I’m taking a gamble—that I’ll probably end up doing something I’ll wish that I hadn’t.’

‘You speak so strangely!’

‘*I* speak strangely?’

‘Yes, of course you do. Your accent, for one thing. And the fact you use such odd words. Yet I seem to understand you.’

‘I’m glad about that!’ I huffed.

‘When you disappeared, I thought you’d gone for good. I didn’t expect you to come back.’

‘Well, I’m here now.’

‘So it seems. But, tell me, why did you come?’

‘I suppose I wanted to know what happened next,’ I confessed.

‘Next?’

‘With your story.’

The girl studied me with her piercing eyes. ‘You really want to know?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then humour me: where did I get to exactly?’

I had to think. ‘Well, both Pharaoh and his son were dead, and Egypt was without a ruler.’

Slowly she began to smile. ‘Sit down,’ she said. ‘You’d better make yourself comfortable.’

*

‘Naturally enough, Ti was beside herself with worry. Not only had she lost her child and her husband, but now, with no apparent heir to the throne, it seemed that the long, successful dynasty into which she had married had finally run its course. All the kind but pointless words of condolence she received could not hide the simple truth that Egypt without a ruler was as useless as a snake without a head. In fact, only one person from the whole court came forward with any kind of practical suggestion. It was a young woman from the harem whose name was Kiya.

“I know it is not my place to tell Her Majesty her business,” she said, blushing, “but I thought, seeing as you’re not...not...” The woman had intended to use the word “*Egyptian*” but realised just in time how rude this would sound.

“Go on,” Ti encouraged her, knowing full well what she had meant.

“Well, I thought perhaps you hadn’t heard the legend.”

“What legend?”

‘Kiya described how the god Amun had come to Queen Achmose and given her a child—Hat-shep-sut, the girl

who'd gone on to rule Egypt as a man. If Amun had done this once, might he not be persuaded to do it again?

'As disbelieving as Ti was, she was also desperate. She had reached the point where she was prepared to try anything. So, bottling up all the bad feelings she'd ever harboured towards Amun, she took herself off to the temple to pray. Every morning she prayed, and every evening she returned home and waited.

'Then, early one evening, as the sun sank low behind the western hills, it appeared that her prayers were about to be answered. All at once the most beautiful perfume came wafting in through the palace windows. The smell was incredible: cassia bark and cinnamon, sandalwood and golden myrrh; all the fragrances of the land of Punt were carried along on that breeze. Everybody stopped what they were doing to marvel at the wondrous scent.

'It was a smell that the queen remembered well: *the smell of Amun*. Immediately she went to her chambers to prepare for his arrival. She bathed her skin with precious oils and dressed herself in pure-white linen. She poured tiny thimblefuls of sweet-smelling *kyphie* into each of her oil lamps and scattered the bed sheets with a mixture of blue lotus petals and wild cornflowers. When everything was finally to her satisfaction, she positioned herself on the bed and waited for the god to come.

'Hours passed and still Amun did not appear. Eventually Ti fell asleep, but not before the night had fled and the only scent left in her room was that of her own

sweet *kyphie*.’

*

‘Amun didn’t come?’ I gazed at the girl’s face in the torchlight. We were both sitting now, our backs slumped comfortably against the side of the pit. With its corners blending seamlessly into the shadows, the space felt larger at night.

‘He didn’t come,’ she replied, watching me solemnly. ‘At least, he didn’t come to her. Now, hush...’

*

“‘The dynasty is over,” declared Ay, addressing his sister with a speech he had rehearsed for days, “and Egypt needs a ruler. I could be that ruler. Support my claim to the throne and I shall see to it that you will never want for anything again.”

““No,” said Ti, tracing a pattern across the table with her finger.

““No?”

‘The queen’s hand wavered for an instant and then came to a halt. “Have no fear, brother; the dynasty is secure. The matter will be resolved by the next full moon.”

““The next full moon? In less than four weeks time?” Ay toyed with the words while his brain struggled to make sense of them. “Oh, no! Surely not! You can’t be

thinking of bringing your first-born back from our mother's people?"

'The queen sat bolt upright, her big eyes suddenly alert.

"Is there anything that happens in this palace that you *don't* know about?"

'Ay stared at her accusingly. "Then it's true?"

"Why shouldn't I bring my boy back?' she snapped. 'Is he not still a prince of Egypt? Is he not the fruit of Amun-ho-tep's own loins?"

"When you damaged the boy's heart, sister, you damaged his mind! Everybody knows that consciousness resides in the heart!"

"Egyptians may *know* that—but not the Mitanni!"

"Amun will never stand for it!" screamed Ay. "He will strike him down! He will no doubt strike us all down! Oh! We are doomed! We are all doomed!"

"Amun be damned!" hissed the queen. "Since Amun has abandoned us, we must make our own destinies now!"

"Sister, I beg you to reconsider."

"Too late! I sent for the boy a fortnight ago; the messenger will have reached him even as we speak. Besides, I think he and Nefretiti might make a rather handsome couple—"

"Nefretiti? You expect my daughter to marry your soul-dead son? I will not allow it!"

"I wonder what your daughter will have to say about *that?*"

‘And so it was that Prince Amun-ho-tep set out from the land of the Mitanni for the country of his birth. Had the young prince traveled alone, things might have turned out very differently. But he didn’t travel alone. Unfortunately he had a companion.

‘His companion for the trip was *the Aton*: the burning face of the sun. Every morning when he rose, his companion rose too; every evening, when he bedded-down at some lonely waterhole, the fiery orb would bed-down in the hills beside him. The sun rode with him by day and crept into his dreams at night, whispering its secrets and giving birth to ideas. Now ideas can be surprisingly dangerous things, and by the time Prince Amun-ho-tep reached his native city of Waset, his oddly-shaped head was fairly brimming with the very worst ideas imaginable.

‘Queen Ti was delighted to see her son, naturally, but the cold fact remained that they were perfect strangers to each other. When they talked, they spoke only of Yuya and Tuya, the one topic of conversation which they both shared. When they’d exhausted that subject completely, they were reduced to dining together in silence.

‘Finally the queen could bear it no longer: truths needed to be told. So one evening she blurted out the whole dreadful story: how he had been stung by a scorpion in his crib, then brought back from the very brink of death; how Amun had refused to acknowledge his existence and had called for his slaughter, and how it had been her own hand

that had wielded the knife; how she'd revived him again only to send him away for his own safety.

‘With his eyes half-closed and his long, bulbous head cocked impertinently to one side, the prince listened carefully to all this. When she had finished her harrowing tale, he merely smiled at her and said, “So tell me, Mother, how long do I have to wait before I’m to be crowned Pharaoh?”’

‘The bluntness of the question took Ti’s breath away.

“Three weeks,” she stammered, “and I have arranged for you to take my brother’s daughter for your wife.”

““Why?””

““Because your uncle believes that *he* should rule Egypt. But if you make his daughter your queen and give her a taste of power, he’d have to risk breaking her heart if he wished to seize the throne. Do you understand?””

““Is the girl pretty?” snorted the pharaoh-to-be.’

*

‘Amun-ho-tep the Fourth was crowned Pharaoh of Egypt (much to the dismay of the priests of Amun) and, yes, he did indeed marry his cousin, Nefretiti, who was by then the most beautiful woman in the land. A year passed and she bore him a child. That child was me...’

‘*You?*’ I cried, unable to stop myself.

The girl looked up at me and smiled. ‘Why, yes. My mother named me Merit, which means ‘Beloved’, but my father tacked the word *Aton* on to the end, which means

‘Burning Face of the Sun’, so I became Merit-aton, ‘Beloved of the Burning Face of the Sun’. Now, such a name may sound reasonable, but, I can assure you, it is not.’

‘Why not? I think it sounds wonderful!’

‘Let me explain. I might have been called Merit-amun or Merit-re, both of which mean ‘Beloved of the god Amun’. There’s nothing unusual about that. Amun is a god with a mind and a body, and an actual personality to match. But the Aton has none of these. His name simply describes what the sun looks like in the sky. My father might as well have called me ‘Beloved of a Tall Tree’, or ‘Beloved of a Square Table’; it would have meant much the same thing.

‘You have to understand, my father was not a sane man. It wasn’t just the way his body looked, with his arms so spindly and his legs like great tree-trunks; no, something had gone wrong at his very core. Perhaps it happened when my grandmother’s knife pierced his heart. Or maybe Ti was able to fix his body, but not his fractured mind. Who knows?

‘Whatever the case, every time my mother bore my father a child, it was always a girl, and he always chose a ridiculous name for her. After me came Meket-aton, and after her, Ankhesen-pa-aton. Always that stupid obsession with the Burning Face of the Sun...’

*

‘When my mother became pregnant for the third time (with my sister Ankhesen), my father demanded to be present when the midwife burned the laurel sticks, a ceremony to determine the sex of the child. What would happen is this: the green wood would crackle and snap in the flames, sending up sparks for a boy or wisps of gray smoke for a girl. Of course, my father saw the smoke and flew into a temper.

“‘Why do you never give me a son?’” he screamed, hurtling round the room and knocking over all the furniture in his path. His tantrum was so noisy that a youngster who was playing in the courtyard below heard the commotion and burst out crying.

‘Pharaoh ran to the window. “Whose child is that?” he demanded as he stared down at the boy in amazement. “I’ve never seen him before! Why, he can’t be much older than Merit...”

‘Nefretiti dragged herself to the window to look. Down in the courtyard, the boy’s mother had arrived and was trying to lure him away with offerings of sweetmeats and dates—not that the boy was having any of it. He swatted at her coaxing hands the way that peasants swat at flies.

“‘I’ve never seen him, either,” my mother observed. “Perhaps he’s your father’s?”

“‘No,” came a voice from behind them in the doorway. “He is not your father’s.”

‘Amun-ho-tep glanced round and saw Ti standing there. “Mother! Come to find out what all the fuss is about?

Whose is he, Mother? Surely he can't be Tut-mosis's?"

"It is better that you don't ask such questions," Ti replied sternly.

"At least tell me his name."

"Forget the child! He is no concern of yours."

"I said tell me his name! Come on, Mother—you know I'll find out one way or another."

"His name is Smenkh-ka-re," my grandmother sighed.

"And the mother's name?"

"Kiya! The mother's name is Kiya."

"Kiya? Was she one of my father's wives?"

"She was his concubine—from his harem—so, yes; if you must put it that way, I suppose she was."

"Ah. So she's my wife now. Kiya and Smenkh-ka-re. Smenkh-ka-re and Kiya. I must try to remember these names..."

Nefretiti sniffed loudly and brushed her hand lightly across her collarbone. "She's certainly not much to look at," she noted as she fingered the blue lapis amulet that always adorned her throat. "To my mind, she's extraordinarily plain. Why would you bother with her, my Lord, when you have me?"

'Pharaoh said nothing. He merely gazed down at the boy.'

*

'If you think my father's domestic temper-tantrums were bad, they were nothing compared to the chaos he created

in public. His first proper act as Pharaoh was to set up his very own cult—in direct opposition to the priests of Amun—dedicated to the Burning Face of the Sun, of course.

‘But when the priests saw that his new temples were quite modest affairs that didn’t even boast roofs, they sat back and laughed; and most of the city’s population laughed with them. A few free-standing walls, a bunch of columns dotted about in the sweltering sun, a statue or two of my father (looking every bit as strange as he did in real life)—no wonder people laughed; these buildings were jokes, not temples.

‘They soon stopped laughing, though, when my father decreed that the whole of Egypt had to convert to his cult. That was a terrifying time. One of my first real memories is the sight of the palace staff going about their duties under a cloud of fear. At the age of four, I didn’t have a word to describe what they were afraid of. I do now. It’s *bloodshed*. They were afraid that the people would rise up and slaughter us all in our beds.

‘As mad as my father undoubtedly was, I’m glad to say that he still had a sense of self-preservation. Refusing to withdraw his decree, he took the one option that was left to him. He did what any common criminal would have done: he changed his name and ran away to another city—and it probably saved our lives.

‘The name he adopted was Akhen-aton, “The Burning Face of the Sun Is Happy With Me”; a particularly rotten choice, given the nature of the circumstances. But the city

he ran off to, now, that was a different matter. That was truly inspired.

‘The site he chose was a barren bit of rock on the east bank of the Nile, as far from civilization as you could possibly get (unless you count Hatnub, the one neighbouring settlement, where hardened criminals toiled away quarrying blocks of alabaster for their sins). He called this site Akhet-Aton, which I know sounds insanely like his own new-found name, but for the first and only time in his life, my father was being poetic. It meant: ‘The Horizon of the Burning Face of the Sun’. It had long, low-lying hills at the back, and every morning when the sun rose behind them, it actually formed a living picture of our symbol for the word “horizon”.

‘My father made a public vow that once his new city was complete he would never set foot outside its boundaries again. For a while, this gave us all a bit of breathing space, but it also put the pressure on Ay to make sure its construction went as swiftly as possible—before everybody’s patience with us ran out.

‘It was a mammoth task and nobody knew quite how he would manage it. He needed thousands of architects, stone-masons, and brick-layers, as well as a multitude of plasterers, painters, and tile-makers. And then there were the support teams, the people who serviced the makeshift camps: the armies of women who baked the daily bread and stewed pots of beans from dawn to dusk; the quartermasters who meted out supplies of sunscreen and

bedding; the potters who churned out enough disposable cups and plates to last a small country a lifetime; the brewers who concocted the thick, dirty beer that heralded the end of each working day.

‘It was a miracle. In the time that it takes to raise a crop of wheat, Ay managed to raise an entire city from the desert sand.

‘When the day finally came for us to leave Waset, some of the city folk came with us: younger people, in the main, who were not so well-off, or those who were anxious to carve out a new life for themselves. Everybody else in the capital stayed put. I expect they were glad to see us go.

‘I remember the relief we all shared as our barges finally moored up at our new home. Ay was on the dock waiting to greet us, itching to show us around. Everything about his incredible city seemed exciting and new, and, for the first time in months, I began to feel safe.

‘There appeared to be only one fly in the ointment: the arrival of Kiya and her son Smenkh-ka-re by a later boat.

“‘Why did you invite that woman here?’” my mother demanded sullenly.

“‘And whatever possessed you to bring her son?’” wailed Ti.

‘My father just smiled innocently at them both and walked away.

‘Secretly I was glad that Smenkh-ka-re had come. Unbeknownst to anyone—not even my nursemaids—he and I had become the best of playmates during those

troubled times in Waset. My sister Meket was always too ill to play and Ankhesen was still a toddler. So having Smenkh-ka-re there meant that I had guaranteed company whenever I was able to escape my carer's watchful gaze. For me, at least, life at Akhet-Aton was shaping up to be really quite tolerable.'

*

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