

That night at the supper table, I told a lie.

'Easier than the last one,' I said, when Dad asked how the spelling test had gone today at school.

He'd caught me off guard. I was so busy thinking about hotels and Professor Hanawati, I'd forgotten the day I should've had.

'Go on, then, tell me, what was the hardest word in the test?' Dad asked.

I said the first thing that came into my head: *'Reincarnation.'*

'Did you get full marks?'

'Umm ... no.'

'Which words did you get wrong? Because they're the ones you ought to be practising, you know.' It was typical Dad, wanting me to be cleverer, faster, better, and I did try, but tonight it was exhausting. I got up from the table and started clearing the dishes.

'Lilian,' he said sharply. 'I'm talking to you.'

'Oh, leave her be. She's worried about her grandad,' Mum chided.

I was, in ways they couldn't imagine.

'Well, she'd better not be slipping behind. I'll be on to her teachers if she is.' Dad shook out the paper.

Once he'd disappeared behind it, Mum leaned towards me, whispering: 'I'm proud of you, Lil. You've got your grandad's spirit – far more than I ever did. There's more to the world than spelling tests, he'd say – and he's right.'

Dear Mum: she was trying to be kind, but it felt like a nudge in the ribs, reminding me of my promise to Grandad. I smiled stiffly; I couldn't tell her about the jar or the curse, could I? I wasn't even meant to have gone to the hospital in the first place.

Times like this I wondered what it would be like to have someone my age to talk to – to share private, secret stuff that wasn't for grown-ups' ears. Like Tulip did, I bet, with her two brothers, the lucky devil.

After supper was cleared and a pot of tea made, Mum and Dad settled by the stove. Every evening it was the same. We'd sit quietly, rarely speaking, though often I'd glance up and notice how sad they looked. Dad, I supposed, might be thinking about the war. As for Mum, I didn't know. Sometimes she'd have tears in

her eyes. Other times, she'd rest a hand on her stomach and sigh.

Tonight, though, I couldn't sit quietly, not with Professor Hanawati's letter at Grandad's, just waiting to be read.

'Has Nefertiti been fed yet?' I asked. 'I'll go if you like.'

I knew full well how hard it was to coax my parents out of their chairs once they'd settled down. And it was just the sort of little job they'd count on me to do.

'Good girl,' Mum said. 'Don't be long.'

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A short time later, I was heading down Grandad's side alley. This time I'd brought a torch, but still felt wary as I turned the corner. On the doorstep were two bottles of milk and one of cream, and Nefertiti crouched between them. The second she saw me, she stood up purring.

'Glad to see you're happier tonight, miss,' I said, crouching down to scratch her chin. She was probably hungry, I supposed.

But when the door unlocked easily enough, I began

to wonder if something was already shifting. Now I knew about the curse, and what I had to do to break it, maybe it was a sign I was on the right track.

It felt odd to go inside with no Grandad there to greet me. The hallway was so familiar: the crooked lampshade he'd never bothered to straighten, the coat stand, the stairs, the passageway leading to the shop. It made me come over all upset.

Though being in the shop itself felt better – a comfort, even. The room was so full of Grandad, it was like he was here with me. The shelves on every wall were crammed with books, plates, carvings, more boxes. Even the alarming bits – the strange face masks, the stuffed animals with glass-bead eyes – were all reasons why I loved coming to visit.

In the bay window was Grandad's desk, messy as ever. I flicked through coal bills, newspaper clippings – a fair few of which, I noticed, were to do with Egypt and, more specifically, Mr Carter.

Moving a heap of notebooks aside, I found a half-eaten corned-beef sandwich. A quick sniff confirmed it'd been there for some time – longer than Grandad had been sick. He was like me where food was concerned: it'd take something really shocking to put him off what he was eating.



What looked to be Dr Hanawati's letter was underneath the sandwich. It wasn't a short one, either, but a good five or six pages long, and covered in stale breadcrumbs. The paper was tissue-thin, and a lovely, unusual blue colour. I scanned it for a signature, which – oddly – was at the bottom of the very first page. Like most people's it was a squiggle, but I was able to recognise the 'H' at the start of the name and the 'ti' at the end, to know this was what I was looking for.

I sat down in the nearest chair. It felt strange to be about to read a dead man's letter. A bit eerie. A bit sad. But, I was intrigued to hear what he had to say.

Dear Ezra, it began,

*You will know how hard it is for me to admit to being wrong, but I must tell you, your instincts regarding the Egyptian canopic jar were right all along: it does, I fear, carry a terrible curse. We should have left it in Egypt where it belongs. The death of a young boy just days after he discovered it in that queer little rock-face tomb was no accident. Nor should we have argued and fought over the jar. We were good chums, Ezra, but we let the jar breed bad feeling between us. It poisoned our friendship,*

*I'm sad to say.*

*Many years ago you told me never to darken your door again, and I respected your wish. Now I find I must communicate with you. I have important, terrible news. Neither of us knew there was anything inside the jar, did we? Yet recently I've discovered it holds a secret.*

*Let me explain. For years the jar stayed packed away in my attic, all but forgotten. Last month, something changed. For some unknown reason, the jar began to play on my mind, and when I retrieved it from the attic, I heard a rattling sound, indicating an object was inside. It struck me as strange that neither you nor I had heard such a sound when we brought the jar home all that time ago, in such unhappy circumstances.*

*On removing the lid – which took considerable effort – I found a papyrus scroll, rolled up tightly, folded and tied with a leather thong. There was also something stuffed into the base of the jar – a scrap of old linen, probably – that I couldn't dislodge.*

*It was the scroll that captivated my interest, and so I set about trying to translate it. The writing was hard to decipher. It wasn't the hieroglyphs I would have expected to see on an important document,*

but the informal demotic Egyptian of a personal account. I spent hours – days! – at my desk, poring over this discovery. As finds go it was almost as exciting as our first sighting of the jar itself – remember that, Ezra? How we swooned when we saw it on that market stall! We could not believe Mr Carter had dismissed it as an ‘insignificant’ piece. How stupid he would feel now if he could read this translation. When you see whose name appears at the very start of the account, you will understand my elation.

Yet I have to warn you, my excitement was short-lived. On commencing the translation, I was overcome with a terrible feeling of dread; I can’t describe it more eloquently than that. These past couple of weeks I’ve suffered nightmares, headaches, fevers. The doctor says it is nervous exhaustion but I know it is something more sinister, Ezra, something linked to the jar. Of course, no one believes me. My own dear wife looks at me across the dinner table each night as if I were insane. I assure you, I am not.

The jar is back in its box. I cannot bear to look at it or even have it in my study with me any more. Every day I live in fear of some nameless terror. The curse is upon me. Much more of this and I will

have to rid myself of the jar, for my safety and well-being. Perhaps I might return it to you, who always understood its power better than me?

Meanwhile, I send you what of the scroll I have translated so far: there is more to come but my progress is proving slower with what remains. You will be interested to read it, I know, and can, I hope, be of help.

Your old friend,  
Selim Hanawati

I sat with my head in my hands. The letter was a lot to digest. How uncanny that Professor Hanawati had guessed something awful was going to happen to him. It made me more scared for Grandad, too, because the letter confirmed that the curse really did exist. So why, after all these years, had it started up again? And what was wrapped in linen, in the bottom of the jar? There was no mention of the hotel Grandad spoke about, either.

The remaining sheets of paper in my hand were the translation, I guessed. Grandad was right, the writing was tiny and cramped, so much so I had to move closer to the lamp to read it properly.



## Thebes, Ancient Egypt

MARCH, 1323 BC

*I, Lysandra, have been trusted to scribe the final days of our king, Tutankhamun. Be warned, this is not the official account: mine is about the boy who didn't want to be pharaoh, who was at his happiest pelting my brother with pomegranates.*

I stopped. Read the first lines again.

This was about Tutankhamun? *The* Tutankhamun, who Howard Carter was so desperate to find, whose name was in the news almost every day now?

Just in case I'd got it wrong, I held the paper directly underneath the light. No, the name was there, all right. Though I couldn't believe what I was reading...

*There's a saying amongst our people: 'Let your face shine,' because no one wants to live an unhappy life here on earth, and then be stuck with it forever in the afterlife. So when I see Kyky limping towards our house with a face like an old goat's, I sense trouble is on the way.*

*'Shall I call Maya?' I ask him.*

*Maya is my older brother and Kyky's dearest*

*friend. Only a short stretch of courtyard separates our house from the steps to the royal palace where Kyky lives. That's not his proper name: Maya made it up when he was little. He's been Kyky to our family ever since.*

*My brother is taller than any of us nowadays. He has long legs as thin as a stork's but is strong and healthy and happy: all the things Kyky isn't. But Kyky is also King Tutankhamun of Egypt. Often, I think he hates this role. It weighs him down, bores him. He'd rather idle his days away with Maya, climbing trees, hunting rodents. Neither has yet seen seventeen summers – they are still young and prone to silliness. Our mother pretends not to see it but I know she doesn't approve. She sews and tuts, sews and tuts, which will be her lot for eternity if she's not careful.*

*Kyky leans on his walking stick, a little out of breath. 'Call him in a moment, Lysandra,' he replies. 'First, I need to talk to you.'*

*This takes me by surprise. When people visit me, they come to share their dreams. My grandfather was the first in our family with a gift for dream reading. Now the honour has been passed to me. A person's dreams tell you their hopes and fears, the road they*

will follow into the afterlife. The skill is to listen. To hold each part of what they say in your hands.

'A dream is like a melon,' I tell people. 'It's not until you cut open the skin that you find the sweet truth inside.'

As I'm only young – four summers behind my brother – I'm still learning the skill. I'm quieter than him too – a watcher, my mother calls me. She says it's why the gift came to me.

Today, Kyky looks pale. I hope we're not in for another bout of illness. The fever leaves him weaker every time, and I know I'm not alone in noticing it. There are those at the palace who watch Kyky – every limp, every sweat, every meal left untouched. No one watches more than his godfather, Ay, whom Kyky leans on like a son to a wise father. He does little without Ay's approval, and in my view, spends far too much time seeking it. I don't trust Ay. He has the eyes of a hungry wolf watching a weakening lamb.

'Come inside,' I say to Kyky.

There's no sun; the wind off the river is too brisk for sitting outside. So Kyky follows me in to where the stove is hot because my mother is baking. She sees us coming, bows and scuttles off, tucking the basket of already-baked bread under her arm.

'Please, sit,' I say, gesturing to the cushions on the floor. Kyky shakes his head. He's glancing nervously towards the doorway, expecting Maya to appear. I don't sit either. 'Bad dreams?'

'Terrible dreams!' he hisses. 'For the last few nights it's been the same. I'm chasing someone and though I run and run, I can't reach them.'

There's a fresh insect bite on his left cheek. He should have a net covering his bed. I wonder why his servant whose job it is to tend to these things isn't being more careful. The fevers that come with such a bite are dangerous. So too are the coughs that plague him every winter.

'Are you sick?' I ask, because this sounds like a fever dream. I hear plenty of them and they usually mean very little.

'No, Lysandra. For once I'm not.'

I'm more interested now. 'And how does it end, this dream of yours?'

'I reach a dead end – a wall, a locked door, a ravine – it changes every time.' He shivers slightly. 'Behind me, I hear animals growling. Scorpions run across my feet.'

I mull over what he's told me, a coldness in my veins; I need to hear more of this dream.



'The person you're chasing – do you see them?' I ask.  
'I don't get a good look – oh!' He stops, startled, as  
Maya strides into the room.

My brother, wrapped in a blanket against the chill,  
looks more bony-limbed than ever.

'Not trying to charm my sister, are you?' he asks,  
giving Kyky a playful nudge.

He's being ridiculous: Kyky has a wife – Queen  
Ankhesenamun – chosen for him by the men of his  
inner circle. She's very beautiful, with amber eyes and  
trailing black hair, though she's almost as old as our  
mother – which, people say, is why her babies don't  
tend to live.

'Go and jump in the river,' I tell Maya, scowling.  
My brother grins: 'That's an idea! Coming, Kyky?'

Once they've gone to get up to whatever mischief  
takes their fancy, I let out the long, worried breath I've  
been holding in. This dream of Kyky's troubles me.

The sun stays hidden for days on end. Everything is  
cold – the ground we walk on, the water we bathe in, the  
linen we wear. Kyky's father was a wayward pharaoh  
who had favourites among the gods. It brought chaos to  
our country and people are saying the god Amun is still  
offended, which is why the sun refuses to shine.

'I've never known a winter so miserable or so dark,'  
Mother says. She keeps our oil lamps lit all day so she  
can see well enough to sew.

I'm struggling to concentrate on my scribing work.  
All morning I make mistakes on the papyrus. Mother  
scolds me: 'Whatever's the matter, Lysandra? Come,  
sit closer to the light.'

But my mind keeps wandering back to Kyky's  
dream. A dead end means something – or someone – is  
blocking his journey through this life and on to the next.  
It's a bad omen. So too are the scorpions, which conjure  
up all things poisonous. I can't explain to Mother that  
the darkness isn't in the room but in my head.

We're saved by Maya, who rushes in from outside,  
bringing the cold air with him.

'I have news!' he says. 'The king's decided to hold a  
feast day for Amun tomorrow, to win back his favour!'

'Ay has decided it, you mean,' I mutter. Yet despite  
my mood, I'm glad. I've missed the sun.

'What can we do to help?' Mother asks,  
ever practical.

'Your flatbread, Mother. Kyky is requesting it.'  
Maya turns to me. 'You can help Roti with the horses.  
There's going to be chariot racing. For once Kyky's dear  
godfather is letting him have his way.'

*Chariot racing is one of Kyky's favourite sports. It's also dangerous, noisy, smelly and both thrilling and terrifying to watch.*

*'He's not taking part, is he?' I ask. The thought makes me anxious.*

*Maya laughs. 'Don't look so worried! It's a feast day, not a funeral.'*

*I pray my joyful brother is right.*