

CHAPTER FOUR

The street was busy as I trotted down it. It was the time of day when people left their homes to chat and share news. Just wait till they heard mine! That would give them something to talk about. I looked out for the men of my family. I was bursting to tell everyone what I'd found. But I wanted Grandfather to hear it first.

I jumped down off the donkey's back and led it through the courtyard to the pen. Then I ran back into the courtyard.

Father and Grandfather were leaning back against the wall, eyes closed, under the awning of palm leaves Hassan and I had made in the spring. Mother was sweeping the courtyard. Hassan was bent over the pot he was moulding, cursing the lump of clay in his hands.

Just wait till they knew! How astonished they were

going to be. Father would be so proud of me. And Grandfather... Grandfather would say he'd always known.

"I found the step," I said into his ear. "The step that leads to the tomb," I added, just so he knew what I was talking about, even though none of us knew that for sure yet.

Next to him Father opened one eye. "What did you say?" he said. He gave Grandfather a gentle push. "Wake up," he said. "Ali has something to tell us." Grandfather opened his eyes and smiled at me, as if he already knew.

Father shifted up so I could sit between them, and I poured out all that had happened that day.

They listened quietly throughout, nodding their heads every so often. When I'd finished Grandfather whispered: "I knew you'd bring them luck! And one day you will see inside the tomb itself!"

I asked him how he could be so sure.

"Because it is written, little goat," he said.

Grandfather often talked like this – as if he could see into the future. Maybe he was right. Maybe I

would see inside the tomb!

He got up and hobbled out of the courtyard into the street. "Come!" he said. "I must share the news with my friends."

"And I will tell mine," said Father. He laid a hand on my head. "I am proud of you, Ali," he said. I felt happy. It wasn't often Father told me that he was proud of me. Mother smiled at me and put down her broom. "It is a good day for the village," she said.

Hassan merely grunted, before throwing down the lump of reddish clay and picking up another. Hassan was never pleased about anything I did.

I ran outside. Grandfather was sitting on a bench next to some of the old men of the village. He beckoned to me. "Here he is. Now we will let Ali tell us what he found, just as he told it to me."

In my village, you can't keep a secret for long! Soon I was surrounded by a jostling crowd, all eagerly asking me questions.

"They might have found the entrance to the tomb. Aiee! After all these years, too!"

I found it hard to get to sleep that night. Tomorrow

we'd find out. If only the night would hurry up and end. If only the moon would go down and the sun come up!

"Lie still and let me sleep, Ali!" Hassan grumbled, turning away from me. "Some of us have to work you know."

"I work, too!" I protested.

Hassan snorted. "You call that work! Fetching water and sitting around waiting for a tomb to be discovered. Make sure you get your share of the treasure when it is!" He laughed, but I didn't think it was funny. I huddled as far away from him as I could.

Soon I heard a gentle snore. Hassan was asleep. I lay there, gazing out at the stars. Somewhere, on the other side of the mountain, lay the boy-king. But how long would it be before we found him?

CHAPTER FIVE



“Goal!” shouted Ahmed. I looked down to see the ball dribble between my feet. Salim had found an ancient waterskin in the rubbish yesterday and had sewn it

into a ball. We’d used big stones to mark where the goalposts were. One or two of the basket boys who weren’t needed had come over to play too.

“You weren’t even looking!” Ahmed complained, running over to fetch the ball from me.

I kicked it over to him, and went to sit down near the dig. I wiped my forehead with a corner of my turban. We’d been kicking the ball around for ages. It was too hot to play now.

The sun beat down fiercely. My donkey huddled miserably by my side.

I’d just found a dung beetle and was searching for another to race it when I heard the men talking excitedly. I leapt to my feet and ran up to see what they’d found. One of the diggers made room for me. “It’s a sunken staircase all right,” he said. “The kind that leads to important tombs. You can see all the upper edges of it clearly now. Soon we’ll find out where it goes. Ha!” He lifted his pick and swung it at the rock.

I asked him how he could be so sure. “Why, lad, I’ve been digging in the Valley for years. I know an ancient

stairway when I see it!”

And it would lead us to Tutankhamun’s tomb. I knew it, we all did, though no one said it aloud.

Step after step was being dug up now. Excited messages were whispered up them from boy to boy.

“How many have they found now?”

“Four.”

“No, you’re wrong, it’s five.”

Soon they’d dug up a lot more than that.

About halfway down, the staircase became a passage, roofed in by the rocky hillock where Ramesses had his tomb.

“It’s high enough for me to walk under, and as wide as this,” one of the men said, as I poured out water. He stretched out his arms on each side to show me.

But how long would it be before they reached the bottom? The sun was beginning to sink behind the mountain, spilling gold across the Valley. It wouldn’t be long before it set. Even the top steps were bathed in shadow now. Mr Carter had come up once or twice to gaze anxiously at the sky. Soon it would be too dark for the men to work. It felt like a race against time.

Ahmed and Salim appeared out of the shadows to sit beside me. “Have they got to the bottom yet?”

I shook my head.

“How many have they dug up now?”

I shrugged. I’d given up trying to count them. “Let’s go and see,” Ahmed said. We got up to look once more. It was very dark down there now. We couldn’t see the bottom.

“Ugh!” said Salim peering down. “I wouldn’t want to go down there.”

“Might be met by King Tutankhamun himself!” said Ahmed as we climbed back up the pit.

“Or his mummy,” said Salim. He fell backwards on to the sand and crossed his arms on his chest.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“He’s Tutankhamun’s mummy,” said Ahmed.

Salim rolled his eyes and opened his mouth. “I am the voice of the dead king,” he said. “You must obey me!”

Ahmed giggled, but I felt uncomfortable. “Don’t talk like that,” I said. “You’ll bring us bad luck.”

“He’s dead, Ali. It doesn’t matter!” said Salim,

sitting up and shaking sand off himself.

I was silent, but I didn't like it. There was something about this place, something that I couldn't quite explain, but I felt almost as if Tutankhamun could hear us!

On the steps the boys had begun to fidget. The baskets by their feet were empty. "They must have reached the bottom," I said. Ahmed went to the top of the steps to peer down them again. Suddenly he jumped back.

"What was that?" he said, nervously.

"Stop fooling around," I said. I'd had enough of their stupid jokes.

"I really did hear something," he protested.

"It's only someone digging," said a boy on one of the lower steps.

"Didn't sound like that to me," said Ahmed.

The boys looked uneasily at each other. "Spirits," one said nervously. "They've woken the *afarit*."

"I told you, it's just them digging," the boy on the step said again. Only now he didn't look so sure.

"But they've stopped working," another pointed out.

We looked at each other. He'd only said what we were all thinking. I just wished he hadn't.

"They've found the tomb," said Salim, going to look down, too. "I can see a light down there. It's him – he's coming for us..." He ran back to us, rolling his eyes and clutching Ahmed in mock terror.

"Don't be an idiot!" Ahmed said nervously, shaking him off.

"Go and see if you don't believe me."

"No fear! You can!"

"All right!" Salim marched back to the dig. On the steps the boys were frozen, like statues. I saw Salim's face change.

"It's him," he shouted, eyes wide with terror. "I can see him." He leapt back, nearly knocking me over.

As one, we turned and fled, tumbling over each other in our haste to escape. It was their fault, I thought. They shouldn't make jokes about the dead.



We were still running when I heard a voice bawl: “Oi! Where do you think you’re off to?” We skidded to a halt and turned round sheepishly. One of the diggers was standing at the top of the steps. “Scared you, did I?” He grinned. “Thought I was Tutankhamun, did you?”

His eye fell on me. “You, you’re the water carrier, aren’t you? Any water left in those jars?”

I nodded.

“Then fill up this flask and get down here quick!”

What had he said? I swallowed. The man thrust an empty thermos flask into my hands. They were trembling as I tipped water into it. I was eager to know what they’d found, only I didn’t want to go down those steps. Not now. It was like being asked to walk into an open mouth.

“Say hallo to Tutankhamun for me,” Salim grinned. Why did he have to say that?

The man shone a torch down the steps so I could see, but I reached out a hand for the wall. The steps were steep and I didn’t want to slip. Stones skidded under my bare feet. My heart was swinging inside me like a hammer. I knew it was silly to be scared. I was used to tombs, after all I slept in one, but this was different. We were the first people to walk down these steps for thousands of years. And it wasn’t just that, it was what lay beyond them. I cursed Salim – it was his fault for putting ideas in my head.

On the twelfth step I stopped. Mr Carter was crouching on it, his back to me. In front of him was what looked like a door. Only the upper part of it was visible. A heap of rubble hid the rest. Carter wasn’t

bothering about that now, and I wouldn't if I were him either. I'd want to know what was behind it.

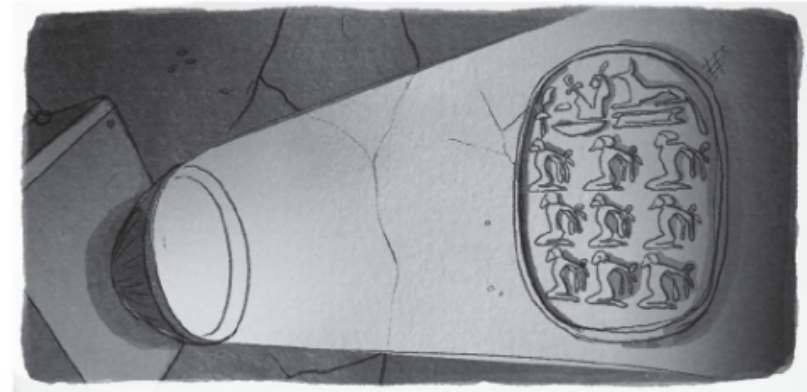
"Have you got the water, lad?" he said.

I nodded.

"Give it to me."

I handed him the flask. He swallowed a mouthful, then put it down and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "That's better," he said. I saw a small hammer and a chisel on the step next to him.

He flashed his torch up at the door. My eyes followed the beam as it travelled slowly across it. I could see curious things stamped on the plaster. One of them, the oddest of all, was a man with the head of a jackal. Under his foot cowered nine people, bound like prisoners. I drew in a deep breath. What did it mean? Mr Carter swung round to me and smiled.



"That, my boy, is the seal of the Royal Necropolis. It tells me that this might be the tomb of a very important person."

It seemed that Mr Carter didn't dare say the name Tutankhamun. He'd been disappointed too often.

"Of course, it may mean nothing..." he said to himself. "There should be other seals." I heard him sigh.

To me it seemed very small for the entrance to a royal tomb. Of course, the door would probably be a lot bigger once all the rubble had been cleared away. They'd find more steps too, leading deeper and

deeper...

Carter handed me the torch. "Do you see that small hole in the corner, under the wooden lintel?"

I nodded.

"I'd like you to shine the torch on it. And hold it steady."

He picked up the chisel and began to chip away at the hole. The plaster was loose and came away easily. I began to feel excited. Soon the hole would be big enough to look through.

Maybe he'd let me look through it, too. I might be one of the first people to see what was inside the tomb!

"Give me that torch. Quick!"

Carter grabbed the torch from me and inserted it through the hole. "Aha!"

What could he see? My mind began to reel. Gold. Heaps of it. Maybe even the coffin of Tutankhamun himself!

Carter withdrew the torch. "Good!" he said. "Very good!" It was then I saw what was on the other side. Nothing. Nothing but rocks and blocks of stone, from

floor to ceiling. My mind spun in disbelief. Had Carter seen something I hadn't? How could finding a tunnel blocked up with rubble be good news? He gave me the torch to hold again, and I watched as he filled in the hole.

He caught a glimpse of my face. "Don't look so downcast, lad, there's a tomb there, all right, behind that rock. We'll find it one day. Of course," he added, "we don't know yet whose tomb it is. The evidence should be here somewhere..."

He put on his spectacles and flashed the torch slowly over the door again. Something was missing. Something that would tell him for sure that this was Tutankhamun's tomb. He sighed and stood up. "Come on, lad. It's late." He bounded up the steps, and I stumbled up behind him. I still couldn't understand why that heap of rubble behind the door made him so sure he'd found the tomb.

As I got to the top I saw Mr Carter go over and speak to the foreman. The foreman nodded and beckoned to the men. Broad grins spread over their faces. They picked up their tools. A minute later