

CHAPTER EIGHT

I groped for the wall, feeling rough stone under my fingers, and shuffled slowly forwards. It was even darker and hotter in the passage than I'd expected. It seemed to be getting deeper, too. Sweat streamed down my back. Now I knew what it felt like to be buried alive. Sharp stones bit into my feet. Voices bounced back along the passage towards me, and the beam of a torch flashed up ahead. I must be getting near the end. Relieved, I hurried towards it. Too fast.

My foot skidded on a loose stone. I flung out a hand, grappling wildly at the air as my feet slid from under me. I twisted my body over to the side so I wouldn't hit my head as I fell. Pain shot up me as I thumped to the ground.



I'd just managed to get up on to my knees when a light flashed full on me. I cowered like a rat, caught in its beam.

"Who's there?" a voice said.

They'd taken me for a tomb robber. I was for it now.

"Get up!" the voice said.

I got up slowly, feeling bruised all down one side. A row of startled faces stared at me. Beyond them I caught a glimpse of a door, almost exactly like the one that had been at the bottom of the steps.

"Why, it's our water carrier!" exclaimed Mr Carter. He lowered the torch a little. "What are you doing here, lad?" His voice was stern. I quaked, I had no right to be there. Over by the wall I saw the foremen, fury blazing in their eyes.

Then I remembered the flask. There was only one thing to do. I bowed and held it out so they could see it. "I... er... I brought water for the Effendi. One of the gracious Effendi left his flask behind. I thought he might be thirsty."

I saw Carter turn to the others.

A burst of laughter echoed down the passage.

"Bring it here, lad," Carter said. I began to walk slowly towards him. But before I could reach him, a bony hand shot out and grabbed the flask from me.

"Give me that!" the foreman hissed. "Now – I don't know how you got in, but you can go out the same way."

"Wait!" Carter said. "We need candles. Send the lad for them."

Before anyone could say anything to change his mind, I was hurtling back down the passage.

If only Ahmed and Salim could see me now!

It didn't take me long to reach the steps. I slipped through the grille and hollered up to the men at the top. "Candles – we need candles. Hurry!"

A copper face peered down at me. "Wait," it said. A few minutes later, a handful of sticky wax candles in my hand, I was racing back along the passage. Dodging neatly round the foremen, I slipped up to Carter's side. Carter picked up a hammer and began to chip a hole in the door. I watched as the flakes of plaster drifted down into a basket. Soon we'd see what lay behind that door!

Carter put down the hammer and picked up an iron rod. The hole he'd made was just big enough for the rod to fit through. I watched as he slid it in, testing what lay behind, if anything. I kept my eyes fixed on it until I saw Carter's fist flat against the door. The rod had gone all the way in, right to its tip.

My heart gave a big thump. Whatever was behind that door, it wasn't rubble.

"Pass me a candle, boy! Quick! Quick!" Carter clicked his fingers impatiently. "Before we go any

further, I need to make sure that there are no poisonous gases in the chamber."

I fumbled for one that hadn't already melted in the heat. Carter grabbed it out of my hand, lit it with trembling fingers and held it up to the hole. A flame sputtered fiercely in the blast of hot air that gushed out. It smelled heavy, and sweet with ancient spices. Carter had a smile on his face as he handed the candle back to me. "It didn't go out!" I heard him say. "The air in the chamber is pure. It is safe to carry on. Ha!"



He began to chip away at the door again. Flakes and lumps of plaster crumbled down. I noticed that the patch of plaster he was attacking was a different colour to the rest. Robbers had broken through this door, too, making a hole that someone had patched up later. It couldn't have been a big hole, but a small boy like me could have crawled through it easily.

I tried to imagine the scene. The boy slipping through the hole into the chamber, hastily grabbing whatever he could, passing the precious things back through the hole to his gang. They'd be small things: jewellery, coins, boxes, vases like the alabaster vase that had been found in the passage, things that were easy to carry, then sell or melt down. My heart sank. When Carter was finally able to see into the chamber, would there be anything left to see? The hole was too small for robbers to carry out anything large but they may have forced another way in that we hadn't found yet.

Was there even one tomb left in the Valley that hadn't been broken into?

But I still didn't know if it was a tomb. And if it was,

whose was it? Carnarvon had switched on the torch and now I could see the door clearly. I bent closer. Strange symbols were written on it. I'd seen symbols like that before, on my shabti. It was ancient Egyptian writing. But what did the symbols mean? I looked back at my companions' faces. They looked excited. They knew all right.

"Tutankhamun," I whispered to myself. Behind that door I felt sure was the tomb Carter had so long been searching for.

"Quick! Give me that candle!" Carter seized it from me and pushed it through the hole. The flame danced and flickered. He moved it lower. The chamber must be some feet lower than the passage, I guessed. All I could see was the back of his head.

What could he see? Why didn't he say? Was the chamber empty, plundered thousands of years ago?

I heard someone clear their throat.

"Can you see anything?" Carnarvon's voice trembled.

Carter let out a deep sigh.

That sigh might mean anything. Anything at all.

We waited. I thought I'd burst. *Please!*, I begged him silently. *Tell us!*

“Yes,” he said at last. “I can. Wonderful things!”