

Beth and the Nile

Chapter 3

We join the action two and a half minutes later. We are still deep in the bowels of the last pyramid on the left, which is lit by the flickering wick of a sesame (or sunflower) oil lamp and resounding with the echoes of the sounds coming from Scarab's terrified mouth: "Aargh!" "Urghh!" "Letmeout!"

In the two and a half minutes in question, King Tut the Boy Pharaoh has climbed out of his sarcophagus, 'Scaredy' Scarab has fainted three times and his sister Beth has been desperately thinking of how to introduce herself to undead royalty.

Finally, she settled on "nice to meet you, Your Ex-King Tutness" and threw herself on the floor in what she hoped was the shape of an ankh. An ankh, as I'm sure you know, is a symbol of life, a sort of cross with a circle on top, and she felt it only polite to greet the recently dead pharaoh with a symbol he might recognise. However, she looked nothing like an ankh, not having enough arms to do both the cross and the circle bit at the top at the same time.

"Are you alright?" asked King Tut, not unreasonably, as it also looked as though she were having some sort of fit.

"Very well, th-ankh you." (She was determined to be polite.) "How are you, oh Royal One?"

"Tired, actually."

"Not surprised. It's a long way back from the Afterlife, I expect, Sir Tutness."

"I wouldn't know. I've just been asleep."

Beth stopped her flailing and looked up. "Asleep in a sarcophagus?"

"Yes," sighed King Tut. "It's a bit of a long story."



Fortunately, no one had anything better to do, so King Tut told Beth and Scarab his bit of a long story (which was actually quite short). He had to shout some of it because Scarab insisted on hiding behind a hoop, which made him a little happier and stopped him screaming.

"As you probably know, I've been pharaoh for nine years or so, but for most of that time I've been a little kid, so I've mainly just been playing hoops. All the real pharaohing stuff, like ordering pyramids to be built and constructing armies, has been done by my vizier, that's my main advisor, who in this case is my Uncle Aye."

"I bet he isn't a patch on me," sniggered Scarab. "Geddit? Aye. Eye patch."

Tutenkhamun, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, ignored Scarab (and quite rightly, too).

"But Uncle Aye, instead of acting on my behalf, plotted behind my back to take over my kingdom."

"So he's an evil Aye," chipped in Scarab from behind his hoop.

Tut sighed and went on. "He plotted to take over my kingdom and have me killed. He tried to poison me, but my stepmum, the blessed Nefer'say'nefer, managed to replace his poison with a strong sleeping potion. She told me I would wake up inside a sarcophagus, within the tomb of the last pyramid on the left."

"So Aye tried to kill you but your stepmum made sure you only fell asleep?" called out Scarab.

Tut nodded.

"Did she plot to have us two here as a rescue team?" asked Scarab.

"I don't think so," said Beth. "I'm only ten and you're scared of sand. I don't think we make a very good rescue team."

"Then what are you doing down here?" asked King Tut-again, not unreasonably.

"We got tricked," Beth told him. "By a small man with a scarf over his face. He told us you were nearly dead and that he'd pay us for your sarcophagus if we met him down here at midnight tonight."

"That's my Uncle Aye," said Tut. "He planned my 'death' very carefully and obviously cheated you as well."

"Aye aye," said Scarab, very pleased with himself because he'd been waiting to say this for the last few minutes.

"The tomb door has been shut," said Beth.

"Then it looks like we're going to be stuck down here," murmured Tut gloomily. "As you know, burial tombs have only one door. As that door has been sealed, it's all over for us. Soon we'll just be three skeletons."

The silence hung in the air like an old curtain, but more see-through, till the Curtain of Silence was suddenly torn down by Beth.

"Hang on a minute. There *must* be another way out. If I were building a pyramid I'd definitely make another entrance, aye aye..."

"I've already used that one," shouted Scarab from behind his hoop.

"No: I mean, aye aye, look what we've got here," said Beth. "There are some hieroglyphs on the wall. I think they're saying something."

"I thought that was the whole point of hieroglyphs," said Tut.

"Yes, Your Royal Smug-Face," said Beth, "but I think these hieroglyphs are saying something important. They begin, 'My dear fools, I have some rather bad news for you...!'"