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Opening extract from

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TOMB



AS RYAN FLINT craned to see past the crush of archaeologists and workmen crammed into the narrow tunnel, he could barely breathe for excitement.

It wasn't every day you got to look inside a chamber that had not been entered by a single soul for more than three thousand years.

At least, not by a *living* soul.

For this was the final resting place of Pharaoh Smenkhkare.

The tomb, hewn deep into a remote crevasse in the limestone cliffs of the Valley of the Kings, had been discovered only a few months earlier. Stone by stone, rock by rock, the rubble had been cleared from the ancient complex of burial chambers.

So far there'd been no sign of the magnificent treasures that would surely have been buried with the pharaoh.

But everyone was certain that in *this* chamber they would finally hit the jackpot.

And now Dr Pete McNeil was about to slide back the huge boulder that blocked the entrance.

Spotlights flooded the scene with glaring white light, as though they were on a film set. Ryan tried to ignore the sweat sticking his T-shirt to his back. Here, deep inside the cliff, the tunnel was hotter than the Sahara in a heat wave. The rattling fan rigged up in the corner barely stirred the stewed air.

He felt a nudge in his side and looked down to see his mother bouncing up and down to get a better view, waving her voice recorder in the air, her short blonde hair hedgehog-spiked by dust and sweat.

'This is history in the making,' Mum whispered, grinning like a kid about to see Father Christmas coming down the chimney. 'It'll be the biggest discovery since the tomb of Tutankhamun. Bigger, even,' she added, 'if we find the Benben Stone!' She lowered her voice a few notches and sort of *breathed* the words *Benben Stone*.

Ryan had noticed that everyone did that.

Yes, he thought. *It's all about the Benben!*

He'd hardly heard about anything else since Mum had landed the job of reporting on the story. Every day he'd come home from school to their end-of-terrace house in Manchester to find her sitting at the kitchen table with her laptop, a pile of library books and a pot of coffee. The Benben, she told him, was one of the most important relics of all time, up there with the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail. According

to Ancient Egyptian myths, it was the Stone of Creation, a mysterious pyramid-shaped mound that had emerged from the primordial ocean at the dawn of time.

It was so sacred that the pyramids were built in its image.

But the Benben Stone had been lost from history thousands of years ago. Some said it was smuggled to a secret location in France by the Knights Templar, others that the Queen of Sheba's son took it to Ethiopia. There was even a theory that aliens had transported it to a far-off galaxy.

Many had searched, but it had never been found.

Until now, it seemed!

A single roll of papyrus had been discovered, tucked inside Smenkhkare's coffin. It claimed that the long-lost Benben Stone had lain hidden *right here in this very tomb* for thousands of years.

All at once, the boulder teetered and rolled to one side with a sound of rock grating over rock. Everyone jostled and surged forwards. Professor Lydia McNeil, the excavation leader, turned round and held up a hand to the team. 'Steady! We need to record everything exactly as we find it . . .' She gestured to a barrel-shaped man who was jugwgling an oversized camera and flashlights. 'No one is to touch anything until Max has taken all the photographs we need.'

The local Egyptian diggers had all backed away, as if unwilling to witness what lay inside, and had been swallowed up by the black shadows beyond the reach of the spotlights. Ryan found himself near the front of the group, so close to the entrance that he could feel the stale, clammy air exuding from the chamber like the breath of a sleeping animal.

Despite the heat in the tunnel, a feverish chill made the hairs on his arms stand on end. Legend had it that the Benben

Stone possessed certain *powers*. It could grant eternal life and the knowledge of secret magic. It could also be deployed as a terrible weapon, mightier than any nuclear bomb, toppling mountains and triggering earthquakes, floods and volcanic eruptions.

Ryan had even read stories on the internet that Hitler and the Nazis had searched for the Benben during World War Two, eager to harness its destructive force against their enemies. *No wonder this excavation is all so hush-hush,* he thought. Security guards were posted outside the tomb and down in the valley. Adolf Hitler might be long gone, but there were plenty of others out there who would stop at nothing to get their hands on an object of such mythical power . . .

One of the spotlights flickered off and then on again.

'Er, aren't we meant to recite special rituals to protect us from all the curses that guard the stone?' Ryan muttered nervously to nobody in particular.

'My parents do know what they're doing!'

Ryan looked down. The voice came from the McNeils' teenage daughter, who was kneeling near his feet, busily scraping fragments of rock away from the entrance with a trowel.

Ryan wasn't so sure. Hadn't any of these people heard about the death and misfortune that had befallen Howard Carter and his team after they'd opened Tutankhamun's tomb? The Mummy's Curse, it had been called. And that was *without* a mountain-toppling weapons-grade artefact in the mix. *Surely there are more than enough earthquakes and weapons of mass destruction in the world already*, he thought. *Maybe we should leave the Benben Stone in peace. Wedge that boulder back in place and walk away . . .*

Before he could stop himself, Ryan lunged forward, propelled by a sudden urge to grab Professor McNeil and pull her back from the chamber.

He was blocked by the bulky figure of Dr Rachel Meadows, one of the senior archaeologists. 'Watch your step!' she said sharply, gripping Ryan by the elbow. Then she smiled and patted his arm. 'Do be careful, dear. It can be very uneven underfoot in these tunnels.'

As he was swept along into the chamber, Ryan reached up and felt for the tiny St Christopher pendant that hung from a chain under his T-shirt.

He didn't realize he'd squeezed his eyes closed until he forced them open.

Blinking in the dim light, he saw shadowy wall paintings shrouded by a thick layer of dust. He saw a rubble-strewn floor and a low ceiling that had been washed a beautiful midnight blue and studded with gold five-pointed stars.

But there were no magnificent treasures.

No mystical stone.

The chamber was empty.

2

OFFERING



RYAN LEFT THE others in the tunnel to argue over their next move and trudged back up the passageway to the main burial chamber.

He took a bottle of water from the icebox and perched on the edge of the sarcophagus in the centre of the room. He probably wouldn't have sat on it if Pharaoh Smenkhkare had still been inside – it would have felt disrespectful somehow – but the mummy had been removed and shipped off to Cairo for scientific tests.

Ryan took a deep breath. The air was a little fresher up here. The crowded tunnel had been smellier than the school changing room after rugby practice. There was some natural

light too. Sunlight sliced in through the entrance and splashed a long diamond shape across the stone floor.

Picking up his pencil and sketchbook, Ryan turned to the copy of the wall painting he'd been working on earlier. The scene, which covered most of the north wall, showed Pharaoh Smenkhkare kneeling, making an offering to Osiris, Lord of the Underworld. Jackal-headed Anubis rested a hand on Smenkhkare's shoulder, while falcon-headed Horus, and Hathor – with her headdress of cow horns – looked on from either side. The colours sang out as if they'd been painted yesterday; bright white, brick red, coal black and sky blue against the pale ochre background.

But it was the object on Smenkhkare's offering tray that really commanded attention: a gleaming black pyramid, its peak gilded with gold, and beams of golden light radiating from it in all directions. It was an image of the Benben Stone, of course.

Ryan dragged his eyes away and tried to focus on drawing Anubis's long pointed ears, but they kept going wrong. They were starting to look more like devil's horns.

He groaned and rubbed out the troublesome ears again.

He felt a bit embarrassed about getting so spooked down in the tunnel. He hoped nobody had noticed. *It was just my imagination playing tricks*, he told himself. *That's what happens when you hang around in old tombs all day*. Or maybe it was jetlag. He and Mum had only flown out to Egypt to join the dig two days ago, and his brain still hadn't quite caught up with his body.

After all, he told himself, the Benben was only a *stone*.

A black, triangular stone.

In fact, if you ignored the rays of light shooting out of it, it

looked as if Smenkhkare were offering Osiris a giant triangle of dark chocolate Toblerone, with a scrap of its foil wrapper still sticking to the top. The Lord of the Underworld was eyeing it suspiciously. Ryan flicked to a new page and quickly sketched a comic-book version of the scene, adding captions. *Not for me, thanks, Smenkers, old chap!* Osiris was saying. *I'm allergic to chocolate*. Ryan was so absorbed in adding a speech bubble for Anubis (*This way to the afterlife, Sir. Have you made a reservation?)* that he jumped when he heard voices behind him. The team were coming up from the tunnel, plucking at their sticky shirts and wiping their foreheads with the backs of their arms.

Dr Rachel Meadows sank her wide khaki-trousered bottom into a folding chair and blew her springy brown curls off her face with a handheld fan. 'I just don't get it,' she sighed into the whir of the blades. 'I thought you said the stone would be in the third chamber along the passage.'

Professor McNeil ground the heels of her hands into her temples, smearing streaks of dust over her dark skin like war paint.

'We'll find it, love,' Pete McNeil said, patting his wife's shoulder.

Dr Meadows smiled at them both. 'Yes, Pete's right. Of course we will.'

Ryan stopped listening as he noticed the McNeils' daughter sit down cross-legged on the floor and lean against the side of the sarcophagus.

It was, he thought, difficult *not* to notice Cleo McNeil. Although it wasn't for her fashion sense! She was sporting a shapeless green T-shirt that looked like it belonged to her dad (*Glasgow University Table Tennis Team, 1992*), a pair of

beige hiking shorts with zip-off legs and an old leather belt with a bum bag containing her own personal trowel.

Who, he wondered, *has their own personal trowel?*

But somehow she still managed to look stunning. Her glossy black hair was tied in a loose plait that reached almost to the hem of her T-shirt. Her fringe fell across wide-set green eyes. Ryan could almost hear his friends at school: *She's way out of your league, mate!*

They'd be right, of course. If she ditched the bum bag, stood sideways and wore a long white dress – and possibly a set of cow horns on her head – Cleo could have stepped straight out of the wall painting: the reincarnation of the goddess Hathor. Not that she was doing anything very goddess-y right now. She was scowling at a bundle of photocopied papers by the light of her head torch, muttering to herself like someone you'd move to avoid if they sat down next to you on a bus.

'Hey, Mum!' she called. 'Dad! I think I know . . .'

But Lydia McNeil was still locked in a debate with Rachel Meadows, and Pete McNeil was trying to calm Max, the photographer, who was complaining about the spotlights, which were all starting to flicker alarmingly.

'I can't work like this!' Max grumbled in a gruff Yorkshire accent. 'Is this a dig or a disco?'

Ryan slid down from the sarcophagus. 'What's the problem?' he asked.

Cleo glanced up at him with a doubtful look. They'd only spoken once before but Ryan could tell she'd already filed him under *Hopeless Halfwit*. It wasn't really his fault. When they'd met at the welcome dinner the McNeils had organized at their apartment, and she'd introduced herself as Cleopatra,

he'd naturally assumed she was joking. 'Good one!' he'd laughed. 'And I'm Tutankhamun!'

She'd stared at him with those ridiculously green eyes.

'You know? Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, had a thing with Julius Caesar? I'm King Tut . . . the boy pharaoh . . .' Ryan had ploughed on, even though he knew that the second you started *explaining* a joke you might as well tattoo L for Loser on your forehead and go home.

She hadn't even blinked.

Ryan had suddenly clapped his hand over his mouth. 'Oh, no! Don't tell me your name really *is* Cleopatra?'

'Cleo for short,' she'd said stiffly, before turning away to discuss the finer points of Ancient Egyptian funerary texts with someone who wasn't a total idiot.

And she was staring at him again now, blinding him with her head torch.

Ryan reached out to switch it off but he missed and jabbed her between the eyes instead.

Cleo flinched, but finally she spoke.

'I think I know where the Benben Stone is hidden,' she said.