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Sun Thief

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1. In which I tell you pretty much all I've learned before we've even started



1. Don't lie.
2. Don't kill.
3. Don't steal.
4. Don't marry more than one person at a time.
5. Be happy with what you've got.
6. Be kind to your parents so long as they are kind to you. If not, don't bother.
7. Take a day off when you need to.
8. Choose your god then stick to it.
9. Don't make models of him/her. It only leads to trouble.
10. Now think of something yourself, you lazy dog.

2. In which you have the huge honour of meeting me



So here I am, standing on top of a pyramid. I'm as high as the sky and king of the world.

In front of me, the Great River is a big, fat, dark, lazy snake, winding through a patchwork of fields: green grass, golden wheat, black earth.

Behind me, the desert is as dull as a dead lion's hide.

On my left and far, far away, the setting sun has just turned the stones of the old city to gold.

On my right, our town is a muddle of narrow streets and four-square, flat-roofed houses built of brown mud brick. Fires blink like bright eyes as people cook their evening meal. On the back road that leads in from the north, I can just see a small dust cloud. It's tearing along at a fair old lick and there's a dark man-shape in the middle of it, like the grit in a ball of raw cotton.

When you're up on a pyramid, you're standing on an old king who's buried somewhere in the pile of rocks beneath you. Soldiers used to march around its base to keep rabble like me away and the common people had to crawl up a long stone causeway to ask for blessings from the priests who prayed in his temple. But the new king in the south has banned the old gods and told us to worship the sun. The Aten, he's called. I suppose the king has his reasons, but I can't help feeling it's a bit boring. I mean, what does this Aten do except shine? The old gods got up to all kinds of mischief, some of which is too shocking to talk about, but that makes me like them more.

Still, look on the bright side: no gods means no priests; no priests means no guards; no guards means I get to climb the Great Pyramid whenever I feel like it.

So I'm up in the sky and feeling great when I suddenly realise that the little cloud of dust I saw on the back road could be a guest coming to the inn. And if it is, I have to

be back there to meet him or I'm in trouble – a muddy great heap of it.

3. In which a guest actually arrives at the inn



As it happens, I reach the inn just before my parents return from visiting neighbours, and they get back just before the guest bangs at the courtyard gate.

I'm sticky with sweat as I open it, still breathing heavily from running home. I grazed my knee from sliding down the pyramid too fast and the sticky trickle of blood is a cool itch on my skin.

The new guest is a big mud-coloured man with thick arms like rolls of linen and a face as smooth as wet clay. Dust is sticking to his shaven head and he doesn't greet us and he doesn't say any of the usual things.

Not: 'I was wondering if you had a room, and do you serve meals?' (Regular guest.)

Not: 'I say, what a charming inn! Now, would you be so good as to furnish me with a room for a week or so? And is that cooking I smell? How delicious.' (Will try and leave without paying his bill.)

Not: 'Gods, what a dump. Still, I suppose it's the only place I'll find in this miserable town.' (Will pay, but argue every penny.)

Not: 'I'm a poor, hungry traveller and I need a place to rest my head.' (Has money, but pretends he hasn't.)

This man says: 'I want good stew, strong beer and a quiet room.' And stares through my father into the space behind him. There's something in the way he talks, the way he uses just the right amount of words and no more, that feels menacing. I don't know why. I'm ready for my father to shake his head and say: 'Sorry – no rooms for tonight,' but I guess three things stop him.

1. My mother starts to make cooing, welcoming noises. She's fiddling with her good wig – the one with the beads woven into the braids that she stole from her mother's hoard of grave goods, though she will never admit it.

2. Although anyone can see that this new guest is trouble, something about him makes it hard to say no.

3. (the clincher) My parents are in no position to refuse anyone, even if they think he's a murderer. Even if they think he's a mass murderer, for that matter.

You see, ever since the new king banned the old gods, and the plague started devastating the Two Kingdoms, business has more or less dried up. The tourists who used to come to the pyramids and leave offerings at the temples are staying away and the little shrine at the back of our inn is deserted. Worse than that, no one really knows if the old ways of doing things are legal and, as a result, our regular drinkers – tomb builders, wall painters, grave-goods

makers, professional mourners and the like – are broke.

But the new guest doesn't look like the kind of man to worry about things like that. After he's eaten his stew and drunk his beer, he quietly says he's going to the shrine and no one will disturb him while he's there.

Not: 'I don't want to be disturbed.' Not: 'No one should disturb me.' Just: 'I will not be disturbed,' like he knows that if he says it, it won't happen.

We all sit around feeling slightly stunned. A few people wander in for a drink or a chat. I serve two travelling carpenters looking for work and a thickset man with a broken nose who wants to know if we've got a room, but he bets we're too busy for the likes of him.

'Only one guest and there he is,' I say, nodding to the new man. He's just left the shrine and is sitting on a bench the other side of the courtyard, leaning back against the wall, his eyes closed against the glare of the setting sun.

I guess the thickset man doesn't like the look of him any more than the carpenters because they all drink up and leave.

I, on the other hand, have to serve him.

'More beer, boy.'

Like I said, he uses exactly the right amount of words – no more, no less – and when he finally opens his eyes and finds me staring at him, he gives me a slow, mean, crocodile stare that zings straight into my brain. It isn't nice at all, but the funny thing is that the meaner he looks,

the more I want him to notice me, even though it frightens me half to death.

4. In which I talk about mud (yes, mud)



Next morning, first light of day, and my mother is screaming questions at me. I don't answer because she's managing to do that herself:

'What have you been doing? I tell you what you've been doing – playing with mud. What have you done to earn your keep? Nothing. What have we done to deserve you? Nothing. We've worked our fingers to the bone for you and what do we get in return? Nothing, boy. Nothing.'

And however hard I try, however much I hope, nothing is exactly what I mean to them. They found me in the Great River, you see, when I was a baby and although I call my father 'father' and my mother 'mother', I don't think they'll ever think of me as their son, although things might have been different if they hadn't had Imi, their daughter, a few years later. But it's no use worrying, because suppose they'd had Imi *before* they found me? They'd have left me for the crocodiles, I reckon. After a bad day, sometimes I wish they had, but then, after a good one, I'm glad they didn't, so I suppose you could say it all balances out.

'Yes, mother,' I say, but she doesn't so much as glance at me. All the time she's been yelling at me, she's had one eye on our new guest, whom she's started calling the Quiet Gentleman. He's sitting on the bench in the sun and looking at her through narrowed eyes. I notice that she's still wearing her best dress and her dead mother's wig, and she's painted her eyes with thick lines of kohl.

So I sweep the yard, I repair the gate, I fix a hole in the roof, I mend a bench, I fetch, I carry, and then when I'm knackered, my mother clips me on the side of the head, accuses me of slacking and orders me to make more plates and beakers.

So I do that too.

My pottery area is in the corner of the yard close to the kitchen and across from the Quiet Gentleman. No bit of him moves apart from his eyelids, which have closed again.

I begin to work. First, I lift the cloth off the special mud I use, feel its consistency, add a touch more water and knead it. Next, I put the mud in the middle of my potter's wheel and give the wheel a spin. Then I begin to work it.

I'm good at this. In my hands, a blob of mud flattens and stretches to make a saucer, a plate or a cup. I lose myself in my work, as I always do, and suddenly there's a row of plates and a tray of beakers drying in the sun. Twenty plates and forty beakers.

Each plate will last for one meal and the beakers for an evening. Back before the business fell off, I had to make twenty plates a day. Now the same number will last a month.

'Boy,' the Quiet Gentleman says, his eyes still closed. 'Mud boy. What else can you do with that stuff?'

He's talking so quietly that I have to strain to hear him.

'Make animals,' I say, 'as a matter of fact.'

'Like this, as a matter of fact?'

He holds up a lion that I must have left out.

'Yes,' I answer.

'Any others?' he asks.

'Falcons,' I say. 'And lionesses and dogs and cobras.'

'And storks?' he asked. 'And a sphinx or two. Maybe a crocodile?'

'Maybe,' I answer, wondering what he's after.

A pause. His eyes snap open. 'You will show me,' he says. 'Mud boy.' And then they shut again.

Mud boy. Not a bad name. I am a mud boy. In my humble opinion, but in no one else's, this makes me special. Yes, indeed. For the People of the Two Kingdoms, the People of the Great River, the People of the Black Earth, us in other words, mud is life.

Why are we the greatest nation on earth? Mud.

What do our crops grow in? The Great River's mud.

How do we build our houses? You guessed it: from bricks made of mud.

What's wrong with the desert? Extreme lack of mud.

If you work in an inn, you soon see how like mud we all are. Give us too much to drink and we collapse like wet mud. Give us too little to drink and we crack like dry mud. In life, we start out firm and strong and smooth like newly mixed-up mud and then, in the end, we just crumble away like old mud.

But here's an interesting thought. I know the new king has banned the old gods, but that doesn't mean they've gone away, does it? No, they're hiding and I know where.

You see, the old woman who used to sweep our yard told me that in the early days of the world, Ra and Isis and Osiris got bored strolling around the muddy young world on their own, so they decided to use the mud to make the man and the woman, the dog and the cat, the crocodile and the hippo, the horse and the cow, and every other animal you can think of. In other words, they must know a thing or two about mud, and that's a clue.

Here's another. As she swept our yard, the old woman used to mutter a rhyme as she worked.

The wheel turns, the wheel burns
The stork and the falcon fly.
The wheel turns, the wheel burns
The cobra and lioness cry.

The wheel turns, the wheel burns
The sphinx is buried in earth.
The wheel turns, the wheel burns
The queen of the sun dies of thirst.

The wheel turns, the wheel burns
The king in the cavern turns green.
The wheel turns, the wheel burns
The ram and the phoenix grow lean.

So hey for the wind and hey for the air
For they don't care for the wheel,
And the black dog walks and the black dog stalks
And the ghosts of the dead city squeal.

And the wheel turns and the wheel burns
The ghouls in the graveyard sigh,
The wheel turns and the wheel burns
And the stork and falcon fly . . .

And so on. And so on. And so on. That old song is as much a part of my world as the feel of dust under my feet or the smell of woodsmoke in the evening, but I never really thought about it as I followed the old woman around the yard.

Then just last year, after the new king had declared the Aten to be the one true god and his soldiers had closed the

temples, the old woman checked we were alone, put her broom down, grabbed me by the arm and marched me to the empty temple at the foot of the Great Pyramid. I was frightened of the enormous stone gateway, the dark doors and the huge statues of dead gods and dead kings, their faces and names hacked off on the orders of the new king.

On we walked, through empty courtyards and dusty, high-pillared halls. Courtyards and halls grew smaller, then darker, then even darker and smaller but the more scared I grew, the harder the old woman's nails dug into my arm.

At last we paused at a low, square doorway. Inside I could hear scrabbling and snarling. The old woman pushed me to one side and threw stones through the dark doorway until a wild dog rushed out and past us. Then she led me in.

We waited in the dark stillness. Slowly my eyes adjusted and dim shapes began to emerge from the walls. Figures carved into stone. The king's soldiers had been at work with their chisels here as well and it was hard to make the shapes out until the old woman took my hand, laid it on the stone and started to chant.

Through the stone, under the roughness of the chisel marks, the shapes of the falcon and the stork, the sphinx and the lioness pressed up against my fingers. Gods and goddesses.

'The new king thinks he killed 'em, but he's just driven

'em out of the stone,' the old woman whispered in my ear. 'They're hiding now. Boy of water, boy of earth: you'll find 'em, boy. You'll bring 'em back. That's your job.'

At the time what she said made no sense to me, but when you're young nothing does.

All I know is that if I mix water and earth it makes mud, and in the mud I can find the stork, the falcon, the cobra, the lioness and all the rest of them. It's not me that's doing it; the shapes of the animals press up against my fingers from inside the mud. The gods are in the animals and the animals are in the mud and that is where they're hiding.

5. In which I introduce you to our dead neighbours



No time to think about that now. Here comes my mother, swooping down on me, her head pecking the air like a chicken.

'Time for you to stop daydreaming and fetch your little sister. Can't you see how late it is? What are you thinking?'

She glances at the Quiet Gentleman out of the corner of her eye and simpers: 'What is it with the young of today? They're like chalk and cheese, him and my daughter. She's as good as gold, but he's –' and her voice takes on an all too familiar rasp '– he's like a moonstruck cow. A burden

ever since we took him in. Go, child. And be back before sunset or there'll be a clip round the ear waiting for you.'

She points up at the sun, which is where it always is at this time of day, and nips my earlobe between her finger and thumb. What I'm thinking is that I was told to fetch my sister from her aunt's house tomorrow morning, but someone's changed their mind and forgot to let me know.

'But it's too late,' I protest. 'I'll never be able to get there and back in time.'

'Then hurry! And don't go taking any short cuts through *you know where*.'

'But . . .'

'GO!'

Imi, Imi, Imi. My little sister. My parents' daughter, their real child, as they never stop reminding me. I'm big enough to admit that Imi's great, even if she is my kid sister. But sometimes, *sometimes*, I think that if she wasn't so perfect, I might seem a little less bad.

I scrape the mud off my potter's wheel, prop it against the wall and leave.

The aunt doesn't live far away, just the other side of the pyramids, but between our home and hers is *you know where* – a place that scares the loincloth off me.

It's like a town, this place. It has streets. It has squares. It has houses, and the rich stay in the big ones and the poor stay in the small ones. But there's one VERY BIG

difference between this town and the one I live in: everyone in it is dead.

I know, I know. Dying is not really dying. This life is a preparation for the next one which is far, far better and you go there surrounded by all your favourite possessions and pets and food and drink and blah blah blah . . .

But here's the catch. To keep your spirit alive, your relatives have to say your name and bring food to your tomb, and just to check, your spirit flies back from the underworld like a bird every evening. The houses of the dead sometimes even have a little perch above the front door for the soul to rest on.

But what happens to souls that have been forgotten, whose relatives don't turn up with biscuits and milk? I'll tell you. They become wandering ghouls. Not just hungry ghosts but hungry, *angry* ghosts.

Now, because I actually have eyes in my head and a tiny little bit of reasoning power, I know for A FACT that grieving relatives have pretty much given up visiting these houses of the dead. Result? An AWFUL LOT of whispering ghouls and MORE and MORE every day.

Here I am, walking past the wall that surrounds the City of the Dead. Now I'm passing its main gate and I look in – and wish I hadn't. The houses of the dead are spilling darkness. It fills the streets and alleyways and in the darkness are the ghouls.

My friends, it's a good place to avoid.

6. In which my sister is too neighbourly



The aunt is rich. She has a two-roomed house with a bread oven out the back and a slave who does just about everything for her. My little sister Imi goes there to learn manners, weaving, hair-braiding – all a girl needs to hook a good husband.

When I get to the house, Imi's hair is neatly braided and she's showing off a new tunic and a brightly coloured belt. She jumps up when she sees me and throws her arms around me. I give her a little ram I made earlier and she runs into the house to say goodbye and thank you to her aunt.

Who comes out into the street in order to be rude to me.

'Oh, it's you, is it?' she says.

'Of course it's him,' Imi says. 'Who else would it be?' She doesn't say it sarcastically. She doesn't understand sarcasm.

'Never you mind. He's late.'

I open my mouth to protest, but decide it's not worth it.

'Look, he brought me a sheep!' Imi holds up the little ram. The aunt snatches it and holds it out at arm's length, squinting the way old people do.

'Blasphemy,' she says. 'I should grind it to dust. The

Aten is the one true god and the blessed one has eaten all the old gods.'

'So if he's eaten them, how could this be a god?' I ask innocently. 'It's just an animal.'

The aunt looks at me suspiciously, but hands the clay model back to Imi.

'Right, Imi, time to head off,' I say.

Please note, the aunt has not asked me if I want a drink of cool, refreshing water or a place to rest before setting out on the long journey home.

'You'll have to hurry if you want to get back before dark,' is all she says.

'Yes, Aunt.'

She hates it when I call her aunt. Auntauntauntauntaunt.

'And don't just stand there gawping.'

'Yes, Aunt.'

'Off you go then.'

'Yes, Auntie.'

'What did you call me?'

'Auntie, Aunt.' I get the scowl I was waiting for and off we go. Imi is skipping along and holding a bunch of weeds that she manages to make look like a posy of flowers. I'm walking quickly because I don't want to be seen running after my little sister, but don't want her to get too far ahead either. And everything's fine until we get to the City of the Dead. Then Imi stops right at the gate and looks through it.

‘Come on,’ I say, walking past very deliberately. ‘It’s getting late.’

It’s true. The sun’s already disappearing behind the pyramids and bats are fluttering between the houses of the dead, black scraps patted by an invisible wind.

‘Let’s go that way.’ Imi points down the street that leads straight into the heart of the shadowy city. ‘It’s much faster. You go down there and turn left and then there’s a hole in the wall and you’re home.’

‘It may be quicker, but it’s too dangerous,’ I say. ‘We’ll get lost and then we won’t get home at all. And you know you’re not allowed.’

‘It’s not dark yet,’ Imi says, holding the ram up so he’s pointing in the direction she wants to go.

‘It will be soon.’

‘Are you scared?’ she asks.

She’s not teasing me, I know, but it still niggles. ‘NO!’ I snap.

‘Silly. Come on!’

‘I’m not . . . no, IMI! COME BACK!’

Because she’s running through the gate and straight into the City of the Dead.

I make a sound that’s a cross between a shout and a whisper. Make too much noise and the ghouls will hear.

She disappears between two buildings. I can hear the *pat-pat-pat* of her feet. Fine dust hanging in the air is the only sign of her.

'*IMI!*'

I take a step, then another down the long straight street and try to look straight ahead. My footsteps *paff-paff* through the dust, beating out the words: *angry, hungry ghouls; angry, hungry ghouls*. Outside the houses are the dried-up remains of meals left for the dead: empty bowls, sheaves of grain, the odd goose bone . . . Some of the doors have crumbled or been kicked in and even though I don't want to look, I can see long pale shapes in the darkness.

Mummies.

My heart starts whacking away inside me like it wants to escape and my stomach's chasing it up my throat. I reach the place where Imi turned off the main street. It's an alley between buildings so narrow I have to turn sideways to fit. Another lane crosses it in a T.

Left or right? I think I hear the patter of Imi's sandals and follow the sound, but the alley jinks around a corner and stops dead at a sagging wall. I want to howl with despair.

'*IMI*. This isn't a joke!' I do the shouty whisper again and look up. The sky's darker now and I can see stars behind the pyramids rising above the rooftops. I jump as something flaps off into the air. Too big for a bat. An owl. It must be an owl.

Imi, I hate you!

I backtrack and take the first turning in the direction of

home. It's another alleyway, very dark and narrow, but the gloom seems to lessen in the distance. Perhaps I'm nearly on the other side. But when I get there I stop dead. I could not be more wrong. Instead of heading out of the City of the Dead, I've been going right into the middle of it.

I'm looking down a wide, straight street lined with the grandest buildings I have ever seen. They're built of stone with pillars and porches. The walls inside the porches are painted. I can just make out a man fishing, a woman being waited on by dancing girls. The relatives of the rich dead folk didn't just leave meals, they left feasts: piles of grain, pitchers of beer, jars of wine – all dry, all dust, all pecked by birds and gnawed by dogs. Under the blown sand, I feel smooth flagstones beneath my feet.

Ahead of me the pyramids loom above the rooftops. They've never seemed so big and black and jagged. The ghouls are gathering – I know they are – and I can't see Imi anywhere.

My steps slow. I am awed by the grandeur of everything around me. I'm sure I can hear dark things calling me in whispers. Dread seeps through cracked walls. I stare into a doorway under a wide porch and am backing away from it when something clutches my ankle . . .

I stumble and fall backwards, too shocked to make a sound. A hand flutters over my mouth. I screw my eyes shut, feel breath on my face . . .

'*Sssss!*' the ghoul hisses. '*Shhh*.'

Then: 'Open your eyes. It's me!'

I open my eyes. Yes, it's Imi, but she looks terrified.

'Shh! People. Here!'

When you're well-behaved like Imi, getting caught is unimaginably bad – even worse than ghosts – but I'm so relieved to see her that I stop being scared for a moment. Her beautiful new tunic, once so white it glowed, is filthy now, but I don't care.

Then I hear the voices too. They're coming from both ends of the street so we're trapped. Some families hire guards to watch over the graves. If it's them, we're in trouble. I look for places to hide. The porches are wide open to the street. It'll have to be inside one of the houses of the dead.

The nearest door is twice my height and set with copper panels. It scrapes open just enough for us to slip in. Half the roof has fallen in so I can just make out a broken chair, a bed, furniture, musical instruments, smashed jars. There are shelves all the way round stacked with mummies – people on the left, cats and other animals on the right. They're lying this way and that, like there's been an earthquake, and the floor is crunchy with shattered tiles. The air is musty and musky.

Imi starts to whimper. 'I don't like it, I don't like it.'

I almost snap, IT'S YOUR FAULT, but control myself.

The voices outside are getting closer. Greetings are

called. I lift Imi on to a shelf, clear a space, then slide her behind a family of mummified cats.

They're right outside now. I dive behind a mummy lying on the bottom shelf, but it's so light it falls to the floor. Something quick and dark scrabbles away.

'What was that?' A startled voice comes from right outside the door. There's no time to pull the mummy back on to the shelf, so I roll off and pull it on top of me. It's big enough to hide me, but I'm breathing in mummy scent and mummy dust. I'm breathing in . . . someone dead.

'It came from in there.' A second voice, cold and sneering.

They heard me. They're coming in.

7. In which I overhear what I wish I hadn't



I hear a third voice: 'What? In here?' I think I've heard it before, but I can't quite remember when. It sounds slow and rather stupid.

Three voices then: one cold and sneery, one worried and jittery, and one slow and stupid.

'What do you think it is?' Worried and Jittery asks.

'Only one way to find out,' Cold and Sneery answers.

'What?' Slow and Stupid joins in.

'Go and look,' Cold and Sneery snaps.

‘Why is it always me?’ Slow and Stupid grumbles.

Where have I heard him before?

‘Because you’re so brave,’ Cold and Sneery sneers coldly.

The door scrapes across the floor. I hope and hope and hope it’s too dark for them to see our footprints in the dust.

‘Anything?’ Worried and Jittery sounds, well, worried and jittery.

‘Can’t see,’ Slow and Stupid says. ‘It’s dark and I don’t like it. It’s full of . . .’

‘You’re not scared, are you?’ Cold and Sneery interrupts. ‘Just get a move on.’

Footsteps shuffle across the floor. Something skitters away in the darkness. Slow and Stupid shrieks out a sound like WHUFFLE! which brings the others running. I pull my mummy as close to me as possible and then it starts to move, with a scraping and a scratching, as if the body inside is trying to get out.

A scream gathers in my chest.

‘What?’ says Worried and Jittery. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Something’s moving. It ran across the floor!’

‘It’s just a rat! Come out, you idiot!’ Cold and Sneery laughs.

The mummy shifts. Squeaks. Then I realise it’s not a dead person trying to get out of the mummy, it’s rats – a disturbed family of rats. I feel around until I find the rat

hole. The last thing I want is baby rats crawling out all over me and the first thing I want is for those men to go away.

But they stay. Of course they stay. They go back outside, stand under the big covered porch, and they start to talk.

Cold and Sneery starts off with, 'Well? I told you it was a good place to meet in secret. I'd have thought you were used to tombs by now.'

'Not with bodies in, I'm not,' Slow and Stupid says. 'Not like Jatty.'

'Oh, I forgot. You just dig the tombs and leave the hard work to everyone else. And don't use names, you idiot,' Cold and Sneery says.

'It's hard work digging tombs,' Slow and Stupid says.

'Not as hard as breaking in and finding out that they haven't mummified the body properly and the first thing you touch is an oozing grave shroud,' Worried and Jittery answers.

'Enough with the hard-luck stories,' Cold and Sneery says. 'What have you got to report?'

'We think we've found him,' Worried and Jittery answers, talking fast. 'He's staying nearby. Bek's description matches: big, ugly, moon-faced, scary bloke. Keeps himself to himself.'

'What did I say about names? Oh, never mind. Where exactly is he staying?'

I've got a pain starting in the arm that's trapped under

my body and I think the baby rats have found the hand that's blocking the hole in the mummy's side because I can feel their warm noses and itchy whiskers against it. But when I hear the answer, I forget all discomfort.

'An inn. This side of town. Got an old shrine round the back.'

'And you've checked this out?'

'I did,' says Slow and Stupid. 'He came into town by the north road and I followed him. Had a drink at the inn and took a room.'

'You did?'

'No, he did. Think I'm stupid?'

'Yes. Did he recognise you?'

'No. I saw him on a job years ago. He never noticed me then and he didn't notice me now.'

I remember where I heard the voice before. He was one of the men at the inn yesterday. Without a doubt, the Quiet Gentleman is the ugly, moon-faced, scary bloke.

The man with the cold voice is talking again, sounding excited. 'That double-crossing rat. The first thing we have to do is search his room. He won't have got rid of it. Trust me. And if he's hidden it we can make him talk. No, I've got a better idea. We'll wait and see whether he's moving on or staying put, and then we'll . . .'

At last they start walking away and their voices grow fainter before they fade to nothing.

I push the mummy off me and stand up. It's darker

outside now and almost pitch-black inside. I can't see the shelf Imi's on and whichever way I turn it's just going to be mummies everywhere.

'Imi,' I whisper. 'Imi.'

No answer. I force myself to think. The door must be ahead of me so Imi's to my left. I feel for the shelf I left her on, scattering mummified cats and birds and not caring how many rat families I'm disturbing. My fingers touch something warm.

'Imi?' I whisper again.

'Yes?'

'You all right?'

'I was asleep. The cats were trying to talk to me, but I couldn't understand what they were saying because they were talking cat language.' I feel her sit up. 'Can we go home now?'

That's Imi – instead of being frightened by cat ghosts, she talks to them. I almost hug her.

Outside, the pyramids bite black-toothed chunks from a bright field of stars.

The wheel turns, the wheel burns . . . The old woman told me the rhyme was all about the gods as they go wheeling across the sky. I can see the sphinx up there, and the ram, and think about the great boat below the horizon that carries the sun across the underworld sea so it rises fresh and new in the morning.

Fresh and new.

It would be good to feel fresh and new and hopeful and not scared, but I'm not stupid. I know who those men were: tomb robbers, the worst criminals in the world. Ruthless, violent and secretive. They'll kill anyone who knows who they are, and from what they were saying, it sounds like the Quiet Gentleman is one too. And if that's not enough to worry about . . .

8. In which help comes from an unlikely source and I behave oddly



. . . I'm in trouble.

How much? Quick answer: a heap. Long answer: trouble, trouble with more trouble piled on top and then doubled. Double, double, double trouble. And my mother doesn't care who knows about it.

She shouts at me so loudly as I walk into the courtyard, with Imi holding tightly on to my hand, that it's a wonder the walls don't fall down. We're late. It's dark. Anything could have happened. We could have been attacked by robbers, by wild dogs, by lions. And look at the state of Imi: what did I do? Did I try to kill her out of black-hearted jealousy?

It's a rare busy night and all the drinkers at the inn are

nudging each other and shaking their heads, and in case you're wondering why I don't run off and hide, my father is gripping my arm so tightly he leaves a bracelet of bruises around it.

And there's nothing I can say. We got lost in the City of the Dead, the one place I was forbidden to enter? We were trapped there by tomb robbers? That just means more danger for Imi and more trouble for me.

A couple of my father's cronies start to mutter about bad blood and how I need a good thrashing, when the Quiet Gentleman, who's been sitting on his own on his usual bench, stands up.

'You've said enough,' he tells my mother, who shuts up like she's lost the power of speech.

'And why don't you let go of the boy's arm?' This to my father, who obeys.

'And why don't you step back?' This to my father's cronies.

'There,' the Quiet Gentleman says, 'that's better for everyone. And now we ask the little girl what happened.' His smile reminds me of a split in an overripe melon.

This is where we get to the bit where you understand why I actually like my sister.

'I ran away from him,' Imi says, looking up at the Quiet Gentleman. 'And I got lost and then I was scared, but he came looking for me and found me and he rescued me from the ghosts and brought me home.'

Perfect answer.

The Quiet Gentleman looks around. As well as the drinkers, a small crowd has gathered at the gate, attracted by my mother's screeching. He says: 'All these people want to buy a drink. You'd better get busy, boy.'

I get busy and my parents sell more beer and wine than they have since the shrine became illegal, and I get more tips than I've had in my life and a few slaps on the back for being a good boy.

But I don't tell the Quiet Gentleman about the men who were talking about him in the City of the Dead. I don't try to warn him. Why? Because if I tell him what I overheard it'll be like pointing a finger at him and saying *tomb robber*.

And then he'll have to kill me.

Next morning I get up early, fetch water, sweep the courtyard, then buy fresh bread and goat's milk for breakfast.

By the time I'm back, the Quiet Gentleman is sitting in his usual place on the bench. The morning sun's not too hot and he's closed his eyes and tilted up his head towards it. He's found one of my mud animals – a sphinx – and he's holding it up to the sun as well.

As soon as he hears me, his eyes open sleepily. Whatever I do, wherever I go, he watches me like a dog watches an ant.

When I pass close to him, carrying a heavy leather bucket of water to sluice the kitchen floor, he says: 'Stop right there, boy.'

I freeze.

'Look at me.'

Very deliberately I stare past him.

He says: 'Three questions. You call the innkeeper and his wife mother and father, but you look different. What's your story?'

'They found me in the river,' I say with a shrug.

'How?'

'My father used to be a fisherman, too poor for a boat, so he had to throw his nets from the shore. One day he was out fishing late and heard a noise in the bulrushes. He thought it was a kid or maybe a lamb and waded in to get it. It was me. I'd been wrapped in a cloth, put in a little reed boat and sent off down the river. Anyway, he brought me home to my mother and she . . . Well, I don't know. Maybe they liked me until Imi came along. Maybe she always thought I was a waste of space.'

'And now he's an innkeeper. Interesting. Second question: why are you so eager to please him and the woman? All they do is abuse you.'

'You made them look stupid last night so they'll take it out on me today,' I say. 'I just try to give them fewer excuses.'

'No one likes a cringer,' he says.

That hurts like a slap in the face. I don't say anything, but I feel a hatred for him so deep and strong that I can hardly breathe.

He nods. 'All right,' he says in that quiet voice. 'There's a bit of life in you, boy. Third question: what's changed?'

'What does the master mean?' I say, adjusting my tone. Submissive, sullen, sarcastic. I know how to annoy guests.

'The master means what he says,' he answers right back.

'Because the master stood up for me last night, I now have money,' I say. 'That's changed.' I take the tips from my purse and offer them to him. 'Does the master want a cut?'

'No.'

'Then I don't know what the master means.'

'The master will tell you, boy. When I arrived at the inn, you were curious about me. But from the moment you walked in last night, you've been keeping something from me. So what's changed?'

I try to hide my shock and start to bluster. 'I don't understand the master. I'm only a poor serving boy. The master knows how grateful I was. Am! I'm still grateful. That is what the master sees.'

My dumb act only amuses him. 'Anyone who can make this –' he holds up the little mud sphinx '– has got more than nothing going on between his ears. It's not grateful I'm seeing. It's something else. You went away to pick up your sister. You came back filthy and knowing. Now, how

do two little brats get dirty like that? From playing? I don't think so. From running? Maybe. From hiding?'

The shock must show again because he says: 'I can see through you like water, boy. Where were you hiding?'

'The City of the Dead,' I say, resistance crumbling.

His eyes narrow. 'Why would a cringer take his sister into the City of the Dead?'

I shake my head. 'She ran into it on the way back.'

'Why did she do that?'

'She said it was a short cut. And she thought it was funny that I was scared and she wasn't.'

He closes his eyes slowly. It's like his mind is chewing what I say to get the full flavour of it. Then the eyes open. 'But last night the little girl said she *had* been scared. Not of the dead or she would have stayed away. Why is that?'

I feel I've just walked into a trap that I knew was there all along. My mouth opens and closes.

'You tell me if you know so much,' I just about dare to say.

He shakes his head, then stands, those awful, thick arms heavy by his side.

'We'll get to the bottom of it, boy. I'm going for a little stroll, but we'll talk again when I come back.' And he walks out of the courtyard.

I'm so scared that I want to be sick.

9. In which I have a revelation



I try to settle down at the wheel to make more plates and beakers, but it's like he's put a spell on me. My hand can't shape the mud, can't make it rise and hollow into a beaker or thin into a plate.

This has never happened to me before, but my hands find something else to do. They pick up a lump of mud and start to shape it. A big, round head, piggy little eyes, nose like a broken rudder and an oddly full mouth. The Quiet Gentleman is the colour of mud anyway and no one seeing my model of him could mistake it for anyone else. Or mistake what I think of him.

I leave it on his bench, then retreat into my corner to think.

No one likes a cringer, the Quiet Gentleman says. Well, I'll show him what a cringer can do. From the way the tomb robbers were talking, it's clear he's brought something valuable with him, so when I go off to sweep his room, I check for soft earth where he might have dug a hole in the floor.

Nothing.

I run my hands over the walls, looking for missing bricks. All present and correct. A sudden burst of certainty sends me up a ladder to check the roof, but there's nothing

up there either. Now I have to hurry, because how long can he be out strolling for?

Come on, come on . . .

My father comes out of the kitchen and scratches himself in the morning sunshine. He looks at me warily. I will him to notice that the courtyard has been cleaned from the night before and I've been out to get milk and bread.

He notices all right. He clears his throat, spits and says: 'Have you cleaned the shrine? It must be filthy. Take a broom down there and make sure you do a good job.'

It's like a sudden handclap of understanding. That's the place I should be searching.

Once, a long time ago, there must have been a temple or palace where our inn is now. If you dig in the courtyard you can find huge blocks of smooth stone just a little way down. All gone now but for a sort of hut with the goddess in it and that's our shrine.

I've never liked visiting the shrine. Now the gods are hiding, the statue down there is not much more than a stone corpse.

The light comes through the holes in the roof so she's always half lit, a worn lump of rock with an animal head and a woman's body. I think she was meant to be Sekmet, goddess of war and plague, but my father thought there were more commercial possibilities if she was one of the fertility goddesses, so he borrowed a chisel and hacked

away until she looked a bit more like a hippo and said she was Tawaret, the goddess of making babies.

It worked, I guess, because Imi arrived, but I still think the goddess looks more like Sekmet, and a pretty angry Sekmet at that.

I stand in front of her. She doesn't look at me, just keeps on staring at the entrance with her badly painted eyes, like she's wondering where the crowds have gone. I put a coin between her stone feet and say: 'I'm going to look behind you. I hope it's not rude. Please don't give me the plague if you're Sekmet, or a baby if you're Tawaret. I don't know why the king killed you off, but it doesn't matter really, does it? You're still here and you're not going anywhere. Thanks.'

With a last glance up to see if she's angry, I squeeze into the space behind her. It's darker round here. No sand. A flagstone rocks slightly under my feet. I manage to lever it up and peer into the dark hole. I should have brought a taper from the kitchen fire . . .

The darkness moves. I know I'm not imagining it. There's just enough light to see something dark in there, as dark as water, gleaming like water, pouring itself like water, but with more purpose. And rustling with a dry sort of hiss.

Snake!

I jump back and the flagstone falls, but instead of a dull *whump* there's a wet crunch, then . . . nothing. I wait, motionless. Still nothing.

Swallowing my fear, I reach down and touch the dead snake's head, half severed by the edge of the falling flagstone, which I lift again and push back.

The first thing I find is a leather roll, wrapped tightly. The second is a small bag that is very, very heavy.

BOM-BOM-BOM-BOM-BOM. That's my heart.

My hands are trembling as I pick up the objects, then I squeeze out from behind the goddess into the half-light at the front of the shrine. And there is the Quiet Gentleman.

10. In which I accept that I have ruined my life forever



'So, boy,' he says, 'you found a way round my guard. Don't drop what you're carrying.' His voice is calm and level.

I was about to, I admit, just to show that I don't really care if I keep them or not. I can hardly breathe.

'Talk, boy.'

'Can't.'

'You just did.'

'Found these. Cleaning. They yours?' My voice is shaking and high. I hold out the leather roll and the heavy little bag. He takes the roll, which clinks like there's metal in it.

'You hang on to that,' he says, nodding at the bag.

'Why?'

'Just while we have a little chat. Now's the time to tell me everything you know.'

His voice is as flat as a knife. In that little shrine, with the sun slanting down through the holes in the roof, making everything striped, the truth comes pouring out of my mouth like grain from a slashed sack and it doesn't stop until there's no more truth to tell. The City of the Dead, the hiding, the rats, the men and all they said . . .

I finish and wait for the punishment I'm sure is coming, but the Quiet Gentleman just asks questions.

'So you think I'm a tomb robber, do you, mud boy?'

'I don't want to think anything,' I say.

'Why's that?'

'If you're a . . . you know what, you'll kill me.'

'So you know other tomb robbers?'

'No!' I almost shout.

'Then don't you worry about dying quite yet,' the Quiet Gentleman says pleasantly. 'I need you alive to answer a few more questions. These people you overheard: you never saw their faces?'

'Sort of. I think one of them was here the night you turned up. He left as soon as you arrived, but I recognised his voice.' I describe him, but can't see any change in the Quiet Gentleman's expression.

'Will you know the voices if you hear them again?'

I nod. 'And one was called Jatty.'

A pause. ‘Did the other have a voice like a smear of cold vomit?’

I nod enthusiastically, but suddenly he’s towering over me like a mountain. ‘And why did you look for my things? To steal? To sell them to these men if they found me? Are you lying? Did they catch you? Did you do a deal with them to save your life?’

‘NO! I just . . .’ I gabble. ‘I was scared to tell you in case you killed me. And then I was angry because you called me a cringer. I just – just wanted to look at what you had.’

He inhales like he’s about to say something, then breathes out through his nose. When he finally speaks, I know it’s not what he was going to say at first.

‘Well, in that case, you’d better look before you die,’ the Quiet Gentleman says. His eyes are like little dark slits, pushed up by his cheeks.

I open the bag. The object is wrapped in swathes of fabric.

‘Careful, boy.’

And I unwrap a statue. It’s the size of a kitten and the weight of a baby: a naked woman with the head of a cow and a sun balanced between her spreading horns.

‘There,’ the Quiet Gentleman says. ‘Know what you’re holding?’

‘A goddess,’ I whisper. ‘One of the dead goddesses. Hathor.’

The gold is warm and buttery under my fingers and somehow it feels like there's give in it. I want to stroke it all over.

'Melt her down and you could buy this whole town. Think you should do that?'

I nod. Shake.

'It's too beautiful,' I say. 'It's worth more like this.'

'You're a strange one,' the Quiet Gentleman says. 'I should kill you, but you're more use to me alive than dead so here's how you pay me for your life. I want you to keep watching and listening. You see a group, any group, of three men in the street, you tell me.'

I nod.

'Know what will happen if you sell me short?'

I nod.

'Good, because now I won't have to watch the street, boy. I'll just have to watch you,' he says.

11. In which my father lets me down. Again. And uppances come



Next day, Imi's playing with her toys in the corner of the courtyard. She knows something's wrong with me because her eyes keep flicking from me to the Quiet Gentleman and back again.