

The Mystery of the Plundered Tomb

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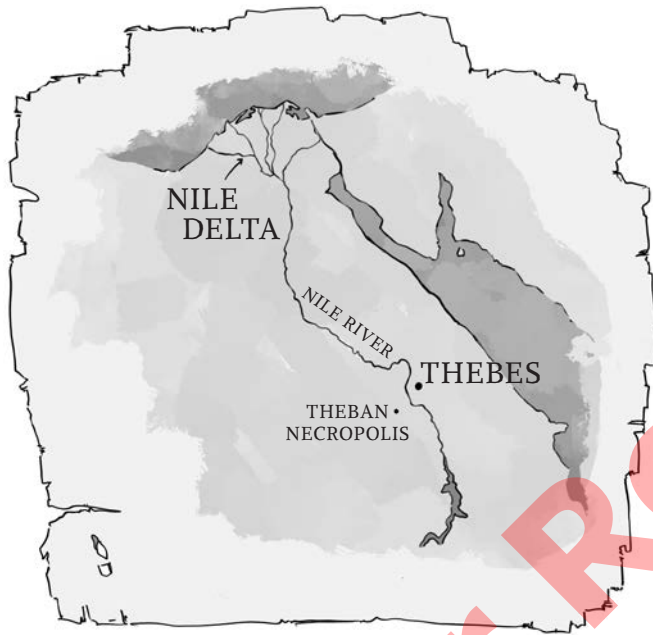
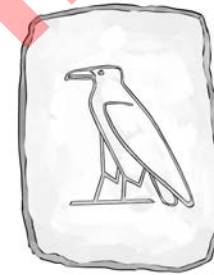
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One

A Special Day

Thebes, Egypt, 3000 years ago



Thebes, ancient Egypt

It isn't every day a girl gets to go with her father to visit the tomb he's having built for himself. So I woke up early, full of excitement about the adventures ahead. I lay and listened to the rest of the household waking up, hugging the knowledge to myself. I was thrilled to be visiting the valley of tombs with my father, anticipating it in the same way I would look forward to a delicious honey cake I planned to eat later on.

I heard the servants moving about the house. There was water splashing, and cooking scents were drifting in from the kitchen. My own new slave girl, Ibon, put her head around the doorway to see if I was awake.

“Are you ready for your bath, Lady Meryet?”
Ibon asked. “It’s a special day.”

Indeed it was. I’d begged my father, Lord Kahotep, to take me with him the next time he went across the Nile River into the desert to inspect his tomb. He was reluctant at first, but after weeks of pestering he smiled and said, “Yes, yes. All right. Do stop bothering me, Meryet. The very next time I go, you can come with me.”

Today was the day.

I jumped out of bed and stood in the bathroom as Ibon poured jugs of cool water over me. It was going to be a hot day. Through the high window I could see the first rays of golden sunlight and drifts of yellow dust from the streets of Thebes beyond the high wall of our house. People were already out and about in the streets. I could hear the cries of a woman selling onions and a man peddling sandals. Soon I’d be out there in the streets with them.

Ibon had laid out my very best dress of finely pleated linen. It was so light and thin it floated around me as I walked. Beside it was my best wig, made of hundreds of fine plaits of real hair woven with tiny gold flowers.

It was considered very grown-up to wear a wig. Younger children wore their hair in one long lock from the top of their heads, but now that I was thirteen my hair had been cut very short, and on special occasions I wore this magnificent wig.

Ibon carefully painted black lines around my eyes and green on my eyelids.

“Sit still,” she warned me. “I can’t get the lines straight if you wriggle.” But it was hard not to wriggle when I thought about the excitement of the day ahead.

When I was dressed, Ibon held up my mirror for me so I could admire myself. The mirror was made of polished metal, and although my reflection in it wasn’t as clear as my reflection in our lotus pool, it was still such a grown-up object to own.

My older sister, Harere, had pulled a face when Father gave me the mirror, after his last trip far down the Nile on his trading ship. “Father spoils you,” she had said. “I didn’t have a mirror when I was only thirteen!”

But my younger brother, Anoksabe, had supported me by pulling a face back at her.

So Harere hadn’t been happy then, and she wasn’t happy today either.

As I approached the garden where my family was being served breakfast, I could see that Harere was scowling and muttering to herself.

I could also hear my father talking to my stepmother, Nafre, and my great-aunt, Woserit. "I'm quite concerned," Father was saying. "There are rumours going around about tombs in the valley being robbed. Imagine thieves getting into the tombs! I'm going to see what I can find out about it today. I'm hoping the stories are exaggerations, but if they're not, I'll have to talk to the tomb builders about extra security."

Tombs being robbed, I thought. *Really?* I was curious about that. But I didn't ask any questions because I was always being told off for being too inquisitive. For poking my nose into things that weren't my concern. *I'll ask Father about this later*, I decided.

Two Processions and Professions



I paused before I walked out into the garden. I wanted to make a big entrance.

"Good morning!" I called. Everyone looked up and smiled at me. Well, almost everyone – my sister Harere didn't.

"Don't you look beautiful!" said my stepmother, Nafre.

"Hmm," said Aunt Woserit. "It's nice to see Meryet looking like a lady for once." She leaned closer. "And with a clean face, too."

Anoksabe clapped his hand over his eyes. "I'm dazzled!" he gasped.

My father smiled at me. "I'll be truly proud to escort you today, Meryet," he said.

Harere looked at him pleadingly. "Father, can't I come, too?" she begged. "It's not fair!"

Father could seldom resist his children. He looked at Nafre and Aunt Woserit to see what they had to say.

Aunt Woserit stopped Harere at once. "You know you're busy today, Harere," she said. "You're helping Nafre and me count all the household linens and sort out the pieces that need mending."

"But –" began Harere.

Aunt Woserit glared. "It's time you learned how to run a household properly, Harere," she scolded. "You're fifteen! Many girls are married at your age."

Harere bit her lip at Aunt Woserit's words. She seemed worried at the thought of getting married. Who knew what would be arranged for her? It could be a marriage to someone much older, or someone who wasn't kind – although I doubted Father would allow that to happen. He'd choose carefully for his eldest daughter because he'd want her to be happy. But still, you never knew.

Harere looked as if she was going to argue, which really wasn't wise with Aunt Woserit at the table. But Nafre stepped in quickly. "Remember, Harere," she said gently, "you have to be at the temple in the

afternoon. There's a practice for the festival, isn't there? You can't miss that."

Harere looked a little happier. As the daughter of a high official, she was a junior priestess at the temple of Bastet. She was very proud of her role. She walked in line with other noble girls during festivals at the temple and played the sistrum, a percussion instrument.

"Oh, heavens," groaned Anoksabe. "Don't tell me those girls will be trying to play music this afternoon, rattling and tooting away! It's enough to drive the sacred cats into the river, and put us poor scholars right off our lessons."

Anoksabe went to school in the temple. He was learning to read and write so he could be a scribe like our father. It was important work, but the lessons were challenging.

Father often quoted old sayings to Anoksabe when he found his lessons difficult, such as "Be a scribe, who is freed from forced labour and protected from all work" and "The scribe, he directeth every work that is in this land. For him there are no taxes, for he payeth tribute in writing, and there are no dues for him" as well as "Set thy heart on being a scribe, that thou mayst direct the whole earth."