

## Chapter One

It was a foggy evening in March 1924 when Samuel Dux began his life again. He came up out of the gloomy vault of Victoria station, hailed a cab and took a letter from his inside pocket. He glanced again at the address on the envelope, though he knew it by heart, and drew his coat more closely around him, hoping his ancient suit wouldn't appear too creased by the journey.

Leaning back against the cab's cracked leather, he felt a slight griping in his guts. That was hardly a surprise - a lingering stomach ache was one souvenir of Egypt that everyone brought home - but it could equally have been a quiver of excitement. Because this was a fresh step for him, and apart from twenty pounds in his wallet, a change of clothes and some books in his case, he came possessed of nothing but his past.

He only had a mile to travel, but the journey was exaggeratedly slow. He'd almost forgotten fog could be like this, hanging dense and clammy on the skin, blanketing the senses and muffling the car horns and early evening bustle. Through the murk office workers hurried home with their briefcases under their arms and shop girls marched along to the tube, their lean coats with collars ruffled up against the evening air, the taste of acrid smog at the back of their

throats. The newspaper stands advertised the latest move in a celebrated murder case. There was something about an actress he didn't recognise whose play was a triumph in New York. The new government was having a crisis. It was two years since he'd left, but behind the fog London was still stoically the same, staid and long suffering, enduring winter like a bad cold it might never shake off.

Elmer Barrington's house, on the corner of one of the smarter London squares, was even grander than he'd pictured it. Tall and majestic, it loomed like the prow of a huge ship, pale stucco gleaming in the dusk. When he went up the steps the light of a lamp above the black door reflected his face back at him in the paint's shine. It was a narrow, high-cheekboned, clever looking face, with a thin-lipped mouth. His skin was burnt to a coppery brown, and the ginger hair under the hat was bleached blond by the sun.

Practically as soon as he had rung the bell the door opened and a butler stood looking at him impassively.

"Good evening. I'm Mr Dux...I think Mr Barrington.."

"Of course Sir. You are expected..."

The man swept the door open and motioned Samuel into a hall with a floor of chequered black and white marble. There was a side table, with cut flowers and a silver card tray. A smell of vacancy and furniture polish hung in the air. A series of oak panelled doors led off the hall and directly opposite the front door,

facing the incoming visitor, was a portrait of a young man with a weak chin, widely spaced eyes and an unworldly expression. He wore an officer's uniform and had pale hair beneath his cap.

Once the butler had taken his coat Samuel stood still. In the distance he heard a dog's high pitched bark.

It seemed that no-one would be coming to greet him.

"Is this all your luggage, Sir?" Both men looked down at the single case which was shiny in patches and frayed at the edges.

"Er. Yes."

"Then allow me to see Sir to his room."

The butler moved off, up the wide marble staircase, to the second floor where he led Samuel into a bedroom of palatial proportions, with tall windows giving onto the square. There was a wide bed covered in a damson coloured quilt, heavy mahogany furniture and a cluster of silver-framed photographs on the chest of drawers, a couple of the same boy in uniform, staring blankly ahead of him. Perhaps this was his room, then. On the marble-topped dressing table stood a ship in a bottle and a chess board, with the pieces laid out, ready to play. In a bookcase to one side of the bed was a range of books with fraying, coloured spines, *The War Of The Worlds*, *She*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*. As Samuel looked around him, the butler twitched at the door.

"Dinner is at eight, Sir. Mr Barrington will expect you in the drawing room before then. If there is anything you need.."

“No. No nothing, thank you.”

Samuel waited until the butler had glided away and peered into the bathroom right next to the bedroom. It was lined in deep green Doulton tiles, with a bath encased in mahogany and, he was gratified to find, a shower cabinet installed with chrome attachments. Undressing swiftly he stepped in and hot water spurted from the circular head, coursing in rivulets down the ladder of ribs right to the small tidemarks of dirt between his toes, accumulated from days of travelling. He noticed a few grains of sand still stuck in his bellybutton. The soap smelt of musk and bergamot. He stood there for a while, the hot water planing down his body, feeling every muscle soften and relax. Before he changed back into the suit he flung himself flat out on the bed, in what the Egyptians called the corpse position, and exhaled. For a moment he was transported back to his small room in Luxor, with fat, bristly flies circling overhead and outside the shouts of the native workers in their guttural Arabic, getting drunk and fighting, and at night the incessant screams from the streets as though the entire country was engaged in ceaseless physical conflict. He pictured the little sun-baked houses, their insides thick with shadow, and the traders who sat there, regarding the passing strangers with a gaze that was at once acquisitive and indifferent. The distinctive stink of the city came sharply back to him, a mix of sweat and urine, dung and dust.

Sitting up, he shuddered. Just thinking about it brought anxiety creeping over him again and the familiar sickening sense of dread like a sour taste in his

mouth. He took a silver hip flask from his case and drained it. He had to forget about that now. He had a new job after all, even if he hadn't yet the faintest idea why he had been given it, or what that job was supposed to be.

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Elmer Barrington liked the monumental style. Being dwarfed by his furniture did not, despite popular aesthetic notions, make him feel at all insignificant. Instead it enhanced his considerable significance, in his own eyes at least, to surround himself with Doric columns, bulging chesterfields, enormous glass bookshelves and titanic chairs specially sculpted to accommodate his girth. He was not the kind of man to feel apologetic about his size. He had sharp little eyes buried in a puffy face. His flesh had a solid, mountainous quality about it as though it was more than mere muscle and fat sheathed inside its layers of linen, flannel and silk. Partly this was down to a whalebone corset that he wore for a back problem. The pain was continual but in a strange way he was grateful for it. It evinced a constant grimace which proved very useful in business transactions.

His first business had been confectionery. Back in Chicago, where he was born, his father had a firm, not a large concern, just a single factory and a couple of dozen workers, and the young Elmer's destiny had never been expected to stray far beyond winegums, pear drops and sherbet dips.

Marshmallows, butterscotch, fruit cups and liquorice had formed the boundaries of the business until the day that Barrington's Candy Cake, a little bar in silver paper and a red wrapper was born and became the favourite brand in the state. It sold across the country, sold and sold, the millions of squares of candy amassing like glutinous bullion, quietly consolidating the Barrington fortune. By the time Elmer Barrington was twenty-five he was able to explore his ambitions in many different spheres, and few people in England connected the Barrington name with something as simple or pleasure-giving as candy. Sugar may have been the bedrock of his wealth, but upon it he had stacked a fortune made from commodities and property, from shares and the stock market as well as other, less regular ventures. Almost nothing pleased him as much as the opportunity to make a deal, and there was almost nothing he would not make a deal in. With his fortune grew a desire for all the things money can buy - social position, political influence and power – and as he had grown more successful he had come to believe that nothing was quite beyond his grasp, nothing could not be rightfully his, if he only wanted it enough. That was how he felt about the business with the young man before him.

His back was nagging him, so he leant against the mottled marble fireplace for support and drank a glass of whisky.

“Good journey?” he asked, in a tone which did not convey undue solicitude for Samuel's comfort.

“Very good, Sir. The crossing was very calm from Alexandria to Trieste. Then I went on to Venice and took the Transcontinental Express up to Boulogne. In fact apart from fog in the channel ...”

“I expect you want to know why I’ve invited you here,” he interrupted. The tone was bored and impatient. His voice was a low, American growl which deterred dissent.

“I do rather.”

“Well you’ll have to wait until tomorrow, I’m afraid. My daughter will be joining us for dinner, and I don’t think we need to discuss it with her.” He looked at his watch. “She’s late, damn her.”

Unlike most people, Samuel was not especially offended by Barrington’s curtness. It reminded him of his classics master at school and he found the lack of small talk rather a relief. They stood together in silence, bathed in two yellow pools of light either side of the fireplace until above them, a door slammed.

“Here she is at last.”

There was the clacking of heels, and a girl in a duck-egg-blue dress walked into the room. She was accompanied by a hairy white dog on a lead, with a pink bow on its head, claws skittering on the polished floor.

“Iris, this is Samuel Dux. He’s come to help with my project.”

His first impression was that she was as unlike her father as a human being could be. Where he was solid, she was ethereal, the chiffon of her dress and the translucence of her skin adding to the impression that she might blow away

altogether, if not anchored by the dog. She was tiny where he was tall, with blonde hair cut in a heavy golden bell that framed an elegant face, just a little too angular to be called pretty, with high cheekbones and a sharp nose. But on closer inspection he saw the resemblance. She had her father's strong chin, and blue, intelligent eyes with a watchful, birdlike quality which made her look as though nothing would escape her attention. She gave Samuel a swift curious glance, which seemed to take in at once his suit (sagging), his shoes (scuffed) and the patches where his soft collar was worn threadbare. He proffered his hand and for a fraction of a second, her hand rested in his, cool and silky.

“Iris has quite a social life. Parties every night. Quite a whirl of excitement. She'll be more than capable of entertaining you while you stay, if you've a taste for such things. Won't you Iris?”

Iris gave him a glance. It did not signal unfettered excitement. She stuck her chin out, small and stubborn.

“Maybe. The thing is, Daddy, there's been a mistake. I'm afraid he'll have to move.”

The geniality which had softened Barrington's face with the arrival of his daughter clouded again. “What are you talking about?”

“Somebody, Cairns I suppose, has put him in Charles's room.”

Barrington's eyes did not flicker. Without further comment, he turned on his heel and led the way to the table.

Some hours later, back in the boy's bedroom, where he guessed he would be staying because his paltry belongings had been unpacked in the wide, mahogany drawers, he laughed at the strangeness of it all. What a way to spend his first night back in London.

The dinner had been good - the best food he'd had in ages – watercress soup swirled with cream, lemon sole and then duck, and you could tell all the ingredients were of the highest quality because everything tasted rich, dense with flavour. But the girl Iris just toyed with her food. That must be what kept her skinny as a rake. She had sat through dinner saying practically nothing and answering any enquiries just fully enough to pass as polite. She paid no obvious attention to anything Samuel said though she was listening to everything, he could tell. Across the polished expanse of table, through the branches of the handsome, silver epergne, he detected the occasional, subliminal flicker of interest cross her face.

It was a shame, really. A little social interaction wouldn't have gone amiss after his journey and it was a long time since he'd even talked to a girl of his own age. She shot him curious glances when she thought he wasn't looking. Samuel didn't know much about women, but he recognised a sulk when he saw it. If he was to stay here for any time, he only hoped her mood would improve.

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The next morning, lacking any particular instruction, he hovered outside Barrington's study, smoking a cigarette and waiting for the man to appear. Relieved though he was to have left Egypt behind him, Samuel was mystified by what Barrington could want with him. What talent could he possibly possess that this man might use?

He had grown up in a village outside Nottingham where his father owned a printing firm. His parents were Methodist people who valued decency and hard work and whose unfaltering devotion to him was accompanied by a marked aversion to emotional gesture. Love was expressed by the fleeting touch of a hand on the head or the occasional offer of a lean maternal cheek to be kissed. At moments of great affection his father shook hands. Embracing Rose, his mother, was a frigid, twitchy affair, and not lightly attempted.

As a young man Eric Dux had borrowed money and established himself in business and from the day his son was born Samuel's only destiny was to carry on the painstaking task of building up the firm. That was the natural order of things and undoubtedly what God ordained.

The first signs that God's plan might not run entirely smoothly came when Samuel showed a flair for drawing at grammar school. When he was sixteen, Mr Hennessy the art teacher came to see Eric and Rose and informed them that their son possessed real talent, which was something to be cherished and

developed, rather than crushed in the mundane environment of - what was it? - a commercial printworks. Samuel was the first pupil in decades who had shown such ability, and the teacher wanted assurances that it would not be stunted. Mr Hennessy, who drained several cups of tea during this one-sided encounter, was an eccentric figure, who wore hair slightly longer on his collar than was approved of, and told his pupils about Modernism. Sitting in the Duxs' front parlour he talked with much gesticulation about art school, in London maybe. Eric and Rose received him with the habitual attitude they adopted towards those they considered their slight social superior, rigidly polite, with tight smiles and poker straight. But when the man left, they made it clear to their son that any sort of art school nonsense was out of the question.

Samuel didn't protest. He knew very little of what art school entailed but it didn't stop him drawing. What started off as a skill for sketching nature, birds and still-lives, began to show signs of developing into a mature, idiosyncratic artistic style and in the final summer of school he won a competition. The prize was awarded at the village fête by Lady Horrocks, the châtelaine of the local manor house, which had been taken over as a military convalescent home. Lady Horrocks was much taken with Samuel. Perhaps the eager, fresh-faced boy seemed more appealing than the dead-eyed, wounded soldiers who shuffled around her home or perhaps it was that with her husband, Sir David, away in Whitehall working for the War Office, she was simply lonely. Either way, the result was that he spent the whole of that summer roaming her house – with its

walnut-panelled rooms laid with kashmiri rugs, floor to ceiling glass cases stuffed with ethnographic artefacts collected by Sir David and its library converted to an officers' mess. Sometimes, in the conservatory amid the palm trees and exotic plants, Samuel would be required to take tea, entailing piles of sandwiches and cakes and a conversation with the soldiers, which was never an easy affair. The ones who were not physically impaired could seem at first glance normal, but on closer inspection there was something about the angular faces, the imperfectly fitting clothes and imprecise haircuts, the tics and spasms, which made him think of reject toys on a shelf, whose button eyes or ears deviate just slightly from the norm. One man stared ahead of him, his book clutched to his chest like an old lady clasping her bag on the bus. Another argued with an invisible visitor in a low conversational tone. "They would really be far better off dead," Lady Horrocks would proclaim quite audibly. "Kinder you know."

The chief pleasure of these visits was exploring her husband's collection of antiquities, standing in the long, airy passage where they were piled up haphazardly, in no sort of order, almost as if they had been abandoned and he was there to exhume them. There were statues, some with features blurred and vague, others acute as though listening to silent music. Little blue Egyptian funerary figures, a piece of a mummy case with delicate painting in pale gold and ochre, unguent jars and vases and fragments of stone carved with the

images of Thoth and Horus and Osiris and Isis. Samuel had never seen objects like them. Their dignity and restraint, the purity of the lines, the power of their dimensions and their severe simplicity.

He turned eighteen just as the war ended, escaping the fighting by the skin of his teeth. It might have been the sight of so many families in the village whose sons returned crippled from the front, but Samuel's parents abruptly rejected predestination, abandoned their protests and decided that he should, if he wanted, pursue an artistic career. In Nottingham preferably, but ultimately, and if it were absolutely necessary, they would not object to him going to art school in London.

Given this sudden, unlooked-for escape from the world of commercial printing, it did appear absolutely, overwhelmingly necessary to Samuel that he should move to London immediately. But once he arrived in the capital it became obvious that the whole art-school idea might be a little ambitious. For a start he would need to pay for it, and the fees seemed to be vastly more than the sum his father had pressed meaningfully in his hand "for contingency purposes". For a few weeks he flirted with the notion of moving to Paris and finding a garret to paint in, during which time he frittered away what reserves he had on exploring the city, until finally, driven by hunger and a reluctance to return home, he enlisted in a studio to learn draughtsmanship.

It was a mistake, and he knew it at once. Life as an apprentice draughtsman was unimaginably monotonous. He was put to work in a grey, high- windowed basement in Holborn, surrounded by serious, silent men much older than himself who had sat out the war at their desks. The time he would have to serve until he had earned enough to pay for his artistic studies seemed to stretch indefinitely before him. There was just one other apprentice, a passionate left-wing Welshman called Alan Collins, who had failed the medical during the war and driven an ambulance in France. After the fighting ended he'd been keen to study economics at the LSE but his family was too poor to send him. Together they would share a pint after work - Alan railing at the injustices of the world while Samuel contemplated the wrong turn his life had taken.

His only escape came in the lunch-hours when he would frequent the British Museum, drifting through the galleries, staring into the glass cases, imagining he was back at the Horrocks' home fingering the antiquities at his leisure.

One day, hanging on the fringes of a lunchtime talk, he heard of an archaeological survey of Egypt that was in need of volunteers. A body called the Egypt Exploration Society wanted draughtsmen to chart and record the work they were engaged on in the deserts outside Luxor. On that drizzly London day, Egypt sounded as exotic to Samuel as London once had. In one impulsive gesture he spent the whole of what he had earned thus far, plus the tiny sum his mother had sent for emergencies, on a ticket to Cairo.

And it was perfect timing, as it turned out. Four years after Europe's youth sank into the Flanders mud, Howard Carter brought up the boy king with the dazzling golden face, and the world went mad.

The atmosphere was exhilarating. Momentous. Suddenly Egypt was the centre of the earth. And Samuel was right in the centre of it.

The society had entrusted him to the care of a Dr Fellowes, a tiny, kindly gentleman in a white pith helmet who was involved in an excavation just the other side of the hills from the tomb. He was exploring some twentieth-dynasty tombs which had been comprehensively looted by robbers thousands of years before. The work was dull and unrewarding. Dr Fellowes, an archaeologist of the old school, spurned modern comforts and liked his helpers to erect their own tents on site, rather than take houses locally. He had dug at Giza, and the early dynastic necropolis at Nag'ed Der and at Lisht, but he had been here for twenty years now and had very little to show for it.

Despite his training as a draughtsman, Samuel was put to work excavating, sorting through shards of limestone chips day after day, sweating and cursing in the coruscating heat.

One morning, alerted by a native runner as he was taking his tea on a camp table laid with starched linen cloth, Dr Fellowes called Samuel over. His normally spry, sun-wizened countenance was pink with excitement.

“You, dear boy, are about to witness something very exciting. Something you will be able to tell your grandchildren.”

Samuel was momentarily confused. Talk of grandchildren evoked the fleeting image of himself here forever, as the years reeled away behind him. He tried to question Dr Fellowes but the man seemed to want to preserve the surprise, as though Samuel were a child himself. Not that Samuel, or anyone digging in those valleys could have had any doubt what the find was, as they walked across the cliffs and climbed up the limestone terrace of the escarpment where everyone believed the boy king Tutankhamun’s tomb was situated.

Dr Fellowes impressed upon Samuel that he occupied a very privileged position. One indeed that he would fill only until more experienced people could get there to help. But as soon as Carter met Samuel he seemed to take a liking to him. Once he found out about Samuel’s skill at sketching there was no more talk of him being there in a temporary capacity.

“I think I can use you, Mr Dux,” Carter said, with a momentary look of keen scrutiny.

He was put to work copying the objects in the ante chamber. Sketching them was a vital exercise because things that looked perfectly solid had an unsettling tendency to crumble into dust within minutes of exposure to air. Even standing in that space he was almost afraid to move. The tiny chamber was crammed like the props department of a touring opera company, the objects encrusted with gold and semi-precious stones. The work was intricate and time-consuming and

it was almost too dark to see in the tomb until a photographer arrived and fixed up a system of mirrors and silver paper reflectors so that shafts of sunlight were thrown into the depths.

There was something about these figures, and their serene inscrutability, that felt comfortable to Samuel. Their demeanour seemed unconnected with the earthy squalor of humanity around them, as though they were sprung from a different race entirely. Their expressions were devoid of human nuance. The artists who made them spoke not of love, or envy or regret but empire and dominion and posterity. Who would not feel foreign in this place, surrounded by indecipherable symbols and a culture so distant and estranging? Which meant that Samuel, with his habitual sense of dislocation, was somehow at home.

It was soon after he arrived that he met Violet Esterhazy, a well-born Englishwoman in her forties with an aristocratic bearing but no income to match. Her absentee husband had taken work on another dig but she remained at Luxor for the social life, one of a crowd of ladies, including the wives of visiting dignitaries and friends of Lord Carnarvon's daughter, Lady Evelyn, who clustered round the site, getting their silk dresses and cotton parasols coated with dust. Sometimes they'd even take lunch with Howard Carter and his colleagues in one of the Valley's empty tombs, on a table set with spotless linen and crystal glasses. Samuel remembered one such lunch, trying to remain

composed and negotiate his poached fish while Violet pressed her knee against his thigh beneath the tablecloth.

It was down to Violet, in the end, that he had fetched up here. The day the letter arrived they were at her home – events had forced him to stay in as much as possible – and she was languidly stroking his hair in a maternal manner that was intensely disconcerting. She sat up, so that the flesh on her stomach rucked in little rolls, and lit a cigarette.

“Oh Elmer Barrington. He’s a darling. A great friend of mine back in London. Didn’t I mention that I’d had a word with him?”

“No. You mentioned nothing about arranging my career for me. Anyway what does he want? He doesn’t say.”

“Oh it’ll be something perfectly pleasant. I told him how clever you were. Besides, he’s ridiculously rich.” She paused to exhale and smile down at him through the smoke. “Samuel, don’t look so fierce! I thought you’d be pleased! It’s probably a little consultancy work for him. He’s a terrific collector. He probably wants you to ferret things out and tell him exactly where to *pounce*.”

She made a little feline gesture of entrapment, but he moved away.

“He wants me to go to England to see him. He’s offering to pay the fare.”

“Don’t be miffed darling. I shall miss you frightfully, I will absolutely pine every day, but the digging season’s practically over and besides, you know, I think it’s really about time you left.”

How much did she know? Violet was always hard to read. Her true beliefs and motivations were a mystery to him. She might care for him, but equally, she might long to be rid of him. Either way, even as he sat there, frowning at the letter, he knew that this was his escape.

The heavy tread of Elmer Barrington down the corridor cut short these reflections. He ushered Samuel into his study, a comfortable, opulent place, with an Aubusson rug on the floor, Watteaus and Fragonards on the walls and shelf upon shelf of Egyptian pieces. Barrington's collecting craze had been through many phases - from paintings, illustrated prayer books, tapestries and musical instruments, right through to mediaeval weaponry and roman marbles. Once he had shipped back from France an entire staircase with balustrade which had been affixed, with anachronistic panache, to the front of his Jacobean country house. There was a room in his house which the maids fought among themselves not to dust because every surface was crammed with priceless porcelain from the Ming dynasty. Many a hillside chapel in Tuscany had born the brunt of his flirtation with Italian altarpieces. Greek ruins had been rifled for their statuary. But right now the full blast of his passion was concentrated on ancient Egypt.

“You know, Mr Dux,” he began, pouring coffee from a silver pot. “I envy you.”

He paused for a chuckle at this preposterous notion.

“Yes it’s true. Listening to you last night, I reflected that you have had an experience that I myself have never had, and can never have.”

“You can visit Egypt can’t you?”

“Oh yes. Of course, and I intend to, whenever my business permits me. I will see the pyramids and sail down the Nile and visit the tomb and fulfil the entire ‘*touristic*’ agenda, though I flatter myself I’ll be a little better informed than the average traveller. I was a personal friend of Carnarvon for years - he had me down to see his furniture collection at Highclere. I can’t tell you the splendour of the things he had there. To sit at the desk of Napoleon taken from Elba and see where the chair’s arms have been scratched by the imperial fingernails. Can you imagine that? Hmm? Nothing one can get from pictures compares to the sense of history one has from actual contact with the authentic item.”

He ran his sausagey fingers along the arm of his chair as he spoke, as if making his own historical indentations, and fixed his small eyes on Samuel intently.

“But even though I will be exceptionally, *formidably* well prepared, I will still never achieve what you have. Because you were there at the moment of discovery. You saw those wonderful things untouched, exactly as they had been left by the funeral priests thousands of years ago.”

Samuel flinched. The next thing he would be asking about was the curse.

Was it true that secret poisons had been released when the seals of the tomb were breached? Had not Lord Carnarvon himself fallen victim to the curse?

Even the esteemed author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, said the Earl was killed by an elemental. Was he not, like other famous explorers before him, like Frankenstein and Faustus and Dr Jekyll, destroyed by the results of his own explorations? How else could anyone explain the fact that Carnarvon - a man in apparent good health - had died so suddenly after the discovery? Not to mention that at the moment he had expired, on the night of the 5<sup>th</sup> April 1923, all the lights in Cairo had gone out and his little terrier bitch back in England had keeled over too, and died? Because after all these were facts and indisputable.

Anticipating Barrington's next line of enquiry, Samuel said: "I expect you want to ask about the curse."

"Heck." Barrington shot him a sceptical look. "You don't believe in that, do you?"

If he hesitated, it was so slight that Barrington didn't even notice it.

"No, actually."

"Good to hear it. It's a heap of superstitious nonsense."

Samuel shifted in his seat. Misjudging Barrington made him look foolish. He began to worry about this proposed new job. Surely the idea wasn't that he would simply sit here and talk about his years in Egypt? What kind of job was that?

"You said, Sir, you would explain what employment you had in mind for me."

"Ah yes." Barrington relaxed his posture. "It's to do with a building I've been planning."

“A building?”

“Well,” he laughed deprecatingly. “More of a monument really.”

Sitting back in his mammoth chair and steeping his fingers beneath his chin, Barrington began to outline his vision. He had decided to build a vast headquarters for his company, to be established on a piece of land he had already purchased in the east of the City. In design it was to be elegant, absolutely of the moment, yet, in the quality of its construction, a landmark for posterity.

“It sounds very impressive. But- I don’t mean to sound dense - I still don’t see how exactly it involves me.”

Barrington stood up abruptly, signalling that the meeting was at an end.

“I’ve a very special role in mind for you, Mr Dux. But I suggest we discuss the details at the site tomorrow. In the meantime, I hope we have the pleasure of your company for an extended stay, so settle in. Enjoy yourself. I’ve told Iris you may be available to escort her tonight. As I said, she’s out almost every evening, at parties, balls and that sort of thing. She doesn’t stop.”

“Must be tiring.” Samuel felt ill-disposed towards Iris after her behaviour the previous evening.

Barrington seemed to understand the inference. “Perhaps my daughter seemed a little..., unforthcoming last night. She’s not used to visitors. And she was badly struck, we all were, by what happened to her brother.”

That must be the boy in the uniform. So he was dead then.

“May I ask what happened?”

“Charles? It was the Somme. 1916.”

“I’m sorry.”

Barrington’s small eyes, glinting sharp in the folds of his face, fixed on him.

“Sure. I take it you were too young to fight...”

Samuel dug his hands in his pockets.

“Yes, Sir. I was born too late.”

Barrington glowered at him. From disbelief, or disdain, it was hard to tell, and for just a moment he seemed locked in private thought, until he turned away and said: “I expect your father’s grateful.”

As they went out into the hall they passed Iris just coming in, the little dog tethered on a plaited leather leash, her skin tinged with a rosy glow. She wore a grey chinchilla collar which framed her face in a cloud of fur and she trailed a light, floral perfume.

“I’ve told Mr Dux that you may be in need of an escort tonight, Iris.”

There was a slight, rebellious purse to her lips. Without looking at Samuel she said lightly: “Oh not tonight, Daddy. I’m afraid I’m going out with Dolly.”

“Another time perhaps then?”

“Yes, I’m sure there’ll be another time.”

She passed them dreamily on her way upstairs, but Samuel caught her eye and thought he detected in it the faintest glint of mockery. It was enigmatic, that

face, but he couldn't help feeling it was a face set against him. Why? For some reason she seemed intent on being deliberately antagonistic towards him. What had he ever done to her?

Barrington, however, did not appear dismayed. His composure restored, he turned to Samuel and rubbed his hands.

“Well then Mr Dux, it seems we have the evening to ourselves. And I have to say I'm keen to hear more of your experiences. I want you to tell me everything that happened.”

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So he wanted to know everything that happened, did he? Just the thought of it made Samuel quail. Could it really be that he was going to have to relive the time he so dearly wanted to forget? To recall the events that he wanted to obliterate from his memory as thoroughly as the priests of the nineteenth dynasty pharaoh Horemheb had obliterated the memory of his predecessor Tutankhamun, toppling every statue, defacing every relief, chiselling out every cartouche of his name? Where could he even begin?

At the start, he supposed, because when he thought about it, that was where things had begun to go wrong.

The first hint of it came one evening a few days after the opening of the tomb in November 1922. Carter had invited him for a drink to his house at Elwat El Diban, but when he arrived Samuel found him hunched in his chair on the verandah, drinking whisky and soda and gazing blankly into the distance as a flock of slow-winged birds passed, black against the violet sky.

The British liked to joke that Howard Carter had made this particular part of Egypt his own. The Valley was Carter's Colony and the house was known to everybody as Castle Carter. It was a squat, brick construction, set in a striking situation on the hill at the entrance to the Valley with a spectacular view of the boats on the Nile and beyond them, the far hills melting into the dusk. Carter had designed it himself with an Arabic-style domed central hall, set with low sofas and cushions, and high, arched windows. The bricks had been shipped all the way from Lord Carnarvon's English estates and Carter had each one stamped, just like a pharaoh, with his own name and date.

Samuel knew all this because people were always talking about Howard Carter. It was a curious fascination given that Carter did not exactly exude charisma. He was said to model himself on his patron Lord Carnarvon, to the extent of using identical toilet water and the same tailor in Savile Row and taking elocution lessons to round his flat Suffolk vowels. On the dig he cut a dapper and immaculate figure in his tweed three piece suit, homburg, and blue spotted bowtie, but in conversation he was graceless and by nature he was a loner.

Now, looking across at his host, frowning and abstracted, Samuel was puzzled. This should have been the best time of Howard Carter's life. Each day the excavation rendered up new excitements and Carter's celebrity spread further round the globe, yet the man seemed listless and preoccupied.

As he cast around awkwardly for something to jolt Carter from his reverie, the pet canary let out a stream of song from its cage up in the bougainvillea and Samuel was reminded how Abdel Al, Carter's servant, had called it a "bird of gold", presaging the discovery of the tomb.

"Perhaps the natives were right about that bird," he commented. "I mean Sir, you'd not had much luck until now."

There had been some jars and a yellow limestone statuette and some cracked alabaster vessels that bore the name Amenophis I. One season they dug up a mummified cat. But there was nothing really major. Nothing to make up for the desolate landscape with its brutal cliffs rising each side of a dry plateau and the heat which seared down on the arid gravel like a furnace, accompanied by a hideous wind that whipped up out of nowhere and flung scalding sand in the face, leaving a bitter aftertaste of clay in the mouth. People said the east valley was empty. Three thousand years of robbers filleting through the layers of sand and rock ensured there was nothing left but more sand and rock. But finally Howard Carter had proved them wrong.

Carter shook himself from his thoughts, tipped his glass to Samuel and said with the ghost of a smile,

“So you call this luck do you, Mr Dux?”

“I didn’t mean - that is, Sir, I wouldn’t ever underestimate your achievements...”

He fixed Samuel with a steely stare, then smiled.

“No, of course not. It was the war that inspired me actually. A grid system I heard about for mapping out artillery barrages in the trenches.”

He’d divided the triangle of ground in the middle of the valley on this grid, ensuring in his meticulous way that not an inch of the rock face would be left unexamined. From 1917 onwards he made a systematic search beneath all the rock chippings and debris thrown out by previous excavations until that season there was just one small section left. This little area had been deliberately untouched before, so as not to impede access to the popular tomb of Rameses VI. Carter decided to clear the debris of some ancient workmen’s huts and dig down to the bedrock though he thought it unlikely there would be any other tomb so near.

When the find came, he was alerted because the usual babble of the men’s voices had fallen silent. Then there was a shout. Carter’s water boy, struggling to set up the communal zeer, the water jar for the men, had laid bare a stone slab, which when it was cleared proved to be a flight of 16 steps, leading into a passage cut from the rock, sloping downwards and just high enough to stand upright in. At the bottom was a sealed doorway, quite evidently, by its size and shape, in the style of the eighteenth dynasty. Above this doorway were seal

impressions of the Royal Necropolis, Anubis the jackal, seated over nine foes.

The seal of a king.

Carter managed to contain his excitement for two weeks, until Lord Carnarvon arrived from England and together they prepared to open the sealed door. Carter inserted a candle at first, and the hot air escaping from the tomb caused it to flicker. He replaced it with a torch, peered inside and was struck dumb in amazement at the sight of strange animals, statues and sacred objects within. There were massive gilded wooden funerary couches, giant statues, caskets, boxes and chariots. Monstrous creatures, part hippo, part crocodile, loomed out of the darkness and their shadows reared up on the wall. Works of art were stacked seemingly at random, resting on thrones. And everything, on every surface, was gilded. Carter gasped at the gorgeous, sumptuous splendour of it all. "Do you see anything?" demanded Carnarvon, beside himself. "Oh yes," said Carter eventually. "I see wonderful things."

Once Carter had stepped into the antechamber, where no-one had trodden for three thousand years, they couldn't get him back. They heard him exclaiming in the darkness and saw the flash of his torch as it passed from one group of objects to another. "There's enough stuff here to fill the whole Egyptian section of the British Museum!" he exclaimed. And then, against the right wall, sandwiched by two black sentinel statues, he saw a sealed doorway stamped with the seals of the royal necropolis and realisation dawned. Surely just feet away from them, untouched by robbers, lay the sepulchral chamber of

Tutankhamun, where the sealed sarcophagus and the choicest treasures would lie. This had to be the greatest body of archaeological material ever found. The only intact tomb of a king of Ancient Egypt.

It was wonderful, Carter said.

But it didn't stay wonderful for long.