

The Case of Colonel Smith's Archaeological Findings by Kaye Linden

Colonel Smith aimed his flashlight into the pyramid's darkness revealing broken pottery, a splintered femur bone, a torn burlap sack, and a few scattered hexagonal copper coins. He threw down his backpack, relieved to find shelter from the encroaching sandstorm. Smith took a long draw of water from his canteen and leaned against the rough stone of the pyramid.

1943 and still German bombs fall on London, he thought, while he fingered his dog tags, shining light over their metal. The air smelled musty with a hint of cinnamon. He examined the defunct compass. It led him to the pyramid but the pointers were now frozen at the southeasterly setting. "Great Scott", he shouted into the silence. "I'll never find my way home". He smashed the compass against the wall.

By late afternoon, the storm passed over and a shaft of light pierced the chamber entrance highlighting carvings on the walls — men hammering, men standing, women sitting on the ground, cats prowling, eyes watching, and thin dogs with long snouts seated next to rigid people in high-backed chairs. Smith shivered and zipped up his jacket. After nightfall, the stars of a clear sky could guide him towards his army base outside of Cairo. He remembered stories of thirsty men who drank their urine when lost in the desert ... he shook his head. *Don't think so*. He continued to study the figures on the wall and waited for night.

A few hours later, when Smith lowered his flashlight to exit the cave, he noticed an odd-shaped relic, and bent down to examine his find. A woman's stiff, mummified hand lay in the sand like an abandoned silk glove. He turned the pale hand over, touching its smooth skin, the light red fingernails, rounded and stained with what appeared to be henna, tiny designs of a black cat on each nail. The ring finger of each hand displayed a white lotus on the nail instead of a cat. He caught his breath at the hand's surprising humanness, its flawless frailty. He envisioned the woman it had once belonged to — head held high, dangling gold cloisonné earrings, straight shoulder-length black hair, perhaps the willowy wife of a pharaoh. *Was her husband buried here as well?* Smith held the hand in his own, as if caressing that of a lover. Perhaps she had known Tutankhamen, had sat with him, slept with him. He paused, a wave of sadness flooding over him. He

opened his backpack and pulled out his sleeping bag, wrapped the hand inside its softness and returned the bedroll to his backpack.

Pricked with guilt, Smith recalled the tales about Carter and the curse of Tutankhamen, but that curse was for thieves of stolen artifacts. He wasn't stealing piles of gold coins, just a body part that someone had dropped or discarded. With care, he heaved the pack into his jeep and drove into the desert. The stars blinked bright, the darkness of the desert night permitting the illuminated sky to weave its celestial magic. One particular shape, a dog's tail, glittered with brilliant yellow, its northern star pointing towards Cairo.

For the next two hours he followed the starry map, measured his water in sips and thought about the woman's hand. Maybe he could sell it to the highest bidder, or put it on the mantel, (great conversation piece) sell it to a museum, (his name on the donation plaque) or keep it to show his grandkids, if he ever had any. When he arrived at base camp, gas tank close to empty, Smith felt a rush of relief.

"Good evening, colonel," the private saluted. "We got worried about you."

"I took a wrong turn."

The private saluted again. "Good to have you back, sir."

For the rest of the night, Smith paced around his room and hesitated to open the backpack. *What if the hand was cursed or bore a disease? What if it choked him in his sleep? What if...?* He felt demented, guilty, but rich indeed. Such a find was rare and sure to prove valuable.

The next day, he hid the pack under his office desk and ordered the privates to bring him coffee and sandwiches. Whenever the telephone rang, he jumped up, certain that the police had discovered the missing national treasure. Perhaps someone had seen him and reported his indiscretion. Sweat dripped into his eyes and down his back, soaking his brown army shirt. He opened a window and welcomed the hint of a breeze, but closed it again in case her spirit might find him. A sudden pain split through Smith's head like hieroglyphic hammers beating on his brain. He took four aspirin, ripped off his shirt and threw it to the floor. A private brought him another cup of coffee.

"Are you alright, sir? You don't look well. A little pale..."

Smith felt his face droop, his eyes tear, and his body temperature soar. He picked up a pen and started to write on the desk calendar. “Get me a wet rag, would you? I think I might have a fever,” he said.

The private nodded and returned a few minutes later with a bowl of tepid water and a washcloth. Smith dipped the cloth in the water and, without wringing it out, slapped it against his forehead. Water dripped down his neck and chest, over the desk.

The private frowned. “Did you hear sir?”

“Hear what?” Smith sat up straight and took a sip of water from the bowl.

“We’re expecting a major sandstorm again later today. Keep the windows shut tight. You never know what those storms carry...”

Smith stared back at the private. “What do you mean?” Once more, he wiped the wet rag over his forehead and chest.

“The wind blows sand into every crack. The big storms like this one take your breath away. I’ve seen it before sir. These desert storms make people feel strange, ill with fevers and headaches.”

For a moment, the private’s face became that of a crow with a hooked yellow beak and daunting black eyes. Smith looked down at the calendar and realized he had sketched the shape of a woman’s hand. He looked up with a start.

“Sir? Can I get you something else?”

Smith waved the private away and rested his head on the desk. Nausea gripped his gut and spewed vomit into his mouth. He imagined the woman’s restless spirit finding a crack in the window, a crack in his mind. He should throw the hand in the trash, out a window, into the desert sands, but...what if someone saw him? He flushed with shame, as if he had committed murder. She needed to return home. He couldn’t just throw her in the trash where she could escape to haunt him. Such an ancient spirit belonged where she had been buried thousands of years ago.

Smith locked his office door and filled the jeep with fuel. He lowered his pack into the car. The blackness of evening bore down heavy on his head. He heard the private calling out— something about the “storm coming.” He felt irrational, clandestine. Sweat covered his face in a greasy slime. He could rest later, after the

return of his lady's hand. At least he had plenty of fuel and water. He drove the jeep the way he had returned last night, straight south, away from Cairo, along the main road and onto the route that veered southwest. This time he backtracked according to the stars and a new compass.

Two hours turned into three hours and four. The sandstorm descended like a tidal wave, whipping and slashing sand through cracks in the jeep, rocking and pitching the vehicle like a raft on an angry ocean. The jeep sunk into the dunes, lower and lower until the engine stalled and refused to start. Smith cursed "the bloody sand in the engine" and flashed his light searching for the pyramid, but he could not see through the sand curtain shrouding the jeep. Smith struggled with the windows in an attempt to minimize cracks, stuffing them with pieces of rags and newspaper shreds. He eyed the backpack and wanted to toss it out. He was sure she had cursed him. He had to get her back before... before...

The jeep groaned under the force of the winds. Sand streamed into unseen cracks, rags blew onto the seats, and newspaper shreds flew through the air. The roaring of wind and sand sounded like a train. Smith reached into the pack, removed his bedroll with the hand wrapped inside, and placed it next to him on the seat, his arm hugging it close. He would protect the precious relic till the storm ended and search for the pyramid in clear weather. His eyes felt heavy and his head nodded to his chest in sleep.

A few minutes passed. Without warning, the jeep abruptly pitched forward and lurched to its side. Smith fell sideways and smashed into the sleeping bag with a loud "whack." He sucked in a surprised breath and woke up. With shaking hands, he unfolded the bedroll and stifled a sob at the vision of hundreds of shattered shards. He picked up one fingernail at a time, one fragment at a time. He fell over the brittle scraps of tar and skin and dust and painted nails, and with loud cries, surrendered to the shivering spasms of grief.

While the shifting sands swallowed his jeep, Smith held the ancient debris to his chest and floated in and out of dreaming. He felt the presence of a woman, soft and comforting, her breath warm against his neck. She tousled his hair and kissed his hot forehead with lips that smelled of cinnamon. Dust to dust. When he exhaled his last breath, the lady reached out for him, and Smith smiled as he took her perfectly manicured hand in his.

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