

LAKE VALLEY MYSTERIES

by Nathan Nish

I

The Sphinx in the Foyer

Charlie bolted out the door as soon as Sunday School ended the closing prayer with an "Amen." This was her second time through the Book of Mormon at church, and the classic Nephi story had been presented by Brother and Sister Mycroft, her new Sunday School teachers, with something lacking. Her friends had still been gathering their materials, but she had stacked her chair and grabbed her scriptures with haste to feed her cat, Tuna, at home.

The church foyer was still empty and Charlie knew there would be no point in waiting around for her father, Bishop Liddell, and her mother, Relief Society President Sister Liddell, as they talked to every single person at the church except her. She was to go home and feed the cat. And, if she felt like it, make food for herself. Most Sundays were spent waiting until supper, when her parents were home.

Today, Charlie wore a black pantsuit to complement her black hair. Likewise, she preferred clothing to match her blue eyes. She had accessorized with a black and blue bowtie and the black and blue striped ribbons in her hair bounced as she hurried down a hallway as other classes released. Behind her, Primary dismissed and the hallway conversation grew louder.

Charlie was nearly at the double doors out of the church when an odd toy caught her attention. It had Joseph Smith's face, but she had seen nothing quite like it. After glancing around to see no owner, she picked it up for further investigation later. The shape of the figure was too awkward to stow in her pocket. She carried it and took a quick pace home without further hesitation.

At home, Charlie locked the door behind her and whistled. "Tuna, I'm home!"

Tuna the cat was lounging on the couch in the living room. She had stripes and patches of most cat colors: orange, light brown, dark brown, white, and black. The color landed somewhere between a curious mix of light brown and dark brown, but if one were to look closer, a patch of orange splotches decorated her nose. Her underbelly fur faded to a patch of white. Depending on the lighting, she even looked a bit gray. Her eyes held the vibrant green of polished emeralds and sparkled with the allure of an otherworldly intelligence. Her paw beads varied in color from pink to brown, and her claws were sharp. She yawned, hopping with her lean, athletic figure from the couch to the floor, and stretched toward Charlie. "You were gone forever."

Charlie watched the cat flop in front of her, expectant of the pets to follow. "It was just the usual two hours," explained Charlie as her hand met Tuna's soft fur, scratching behind the curious patch of orange near the cat's nose.

"That's like, 6 billion years in cat time," countered Tuna. "Charlie practically missed all of Earth's oceans evaporating three times."

"Fine, Tuna. Look, I brought you something," said Charlie.

"It's for Tuna? Is it a sacrifice? Or a woobie?" Tuna gave Charlie an expectant look, with her eyes wide and her tail wagging.

"You tell me," suggested Charlie. She produced the strange figure with Joseph Smith's face.

Tuna sniffed at the figure. "Tuna is sure of it. This is a sphinx. But what's with that guy's face on it?"

"That guy," said Charlie, "founded the church where my dad is the bishop."

Tuna licked her paws without giving a reply.

"Not that you care," finished Charlie, rolling her eyes at Tuna's indifference.

Tuna stopped, backing her head away a short distance with offense. "Tuna cares. But Charlie hasn't fed me."

Charlie's face met her palm. She lowered her hand and looked toward her cat to say, "I almost completely forgot! Sorry, Tuna."

Tuna had just finished eating when Charlie's stomach growled. "Now I'm going to starve to death, Tuna."

"No!" replied Tuna, as a look of disbelief rustled her whiskers.

"I mean, unless you accompany me to Family Food Truck Night," said Charlie with a hopeful expression.

"Charlie, do you not remember what you're always telling Tuna about the Sabbath? To keep it holy?" Tuna expressed judgementally.

"Tuna. I appreciate your concern, but as you say, what would Bastet do?"

"Bastet would claw Charlie's eyes out," renounced Tuna, staring at the couch.

"What?" asked Charlie.

Tuna looked back at Charlie. "Tuna supposes Bastet also has a motherly side, too."

"So can we go or not, Mom?" asked Charlie with notes of sarcasm.

Tuna walked toward the front door. "Tuna is not Charlie's mom. Can Tuna go outside now?"

Charlie sighed, grabbing some money from her handbag leftover from her allowance and paying tithing. She unlocked the door, and the duo walked outside together. Charlie closed the door, locking it before leaving with Tuna.

"What even is Food Truck Family Night?" asked Tuna.

"Don't you know, Tuna? Back forever ago, Sister Smith launched Food Truck Family Night as a revolution against idleness, no doubt at odds with others in her community attempting to keep the Sabbath holy. She actually gathered the community, with families from all around drawn by the scent of magic in the air. Over time, Food Truck Family Night became more than a delicious meal: It was a testament to shared experiences."

“And let Tuna guess, the time together was the most delicious meal of all?” quipped the cat.

“Yes, actually,” replied Charlie, somewhat embarrassed about the nostalgic reminiscence she had never personally experienced.

“Oh, ok. But why is it called Food Truck Family Night?” asked Tuna, walking alongside Charlie.

“I, um... I don’t know, actually. You’d think it would be called Family Food Truck Night or something,” pondered Charlie aloud as she safely crossed a quiet street.

“A whole family of food trucks,” commented Tuna with wonder. In no time at all, the pair arrived at the local commons hosting the event.

At the Food Truck Family Night, three places were already open for business, despite Charlie and Tuna's late afternoon timing. Charlie read the names: Gil's Taco Garden, Odin's Omelets, and Uncle Vern's Burgers. The line for Gil's Taco Garden was unpopularly vacant, and Charlie decided she could settle for an omelet. Tuna eyed the burgers from afar, ignoring the long line Charlie had taken into consideration on the cat's behalf.

Charlie ordered the usual dish she shared with Tuna: a double soufflé frittata vegetarian omelet with lime and watermelon in a mug. The duo waited. Charlie continued to watch a line, but Tuna was scanning the perimeter. Something was moving, and it did not look like any person from around this area.

“Charlie, look!” hissed Tuna.

Charlie could practically smell the divine aroma of the omelet allegedly from Odin’s own recipe book when she gave in and glanced over to Tuna, uncertain of what to look at besides her shameless distraction cat.

“Order four, yer up!” called someone holding a large mug filled with omelettey goodness.

Charlie rolled her eyes at Tuna and retrieved the order. “Let's dig in! You can tell me about what you saw earlier after we eat.”

“No, Charlie! Look!” Tuna pointed between Gil's Taco Garden and Odin's Omelets.

Withdrawing from almost taking the first bite, Charlie relented. A mummy creeping between the two food trucks gained the attention of customers. “It's probably not even real.”

“Tuna swears to Ra it sure looks real,” testified the cat.

“Tuna, you're ridiculous,” insisted Charlie. “Let's eat.”

“No, let's go! Look!” exclaimed Tuna.

A flash of green light emanated from the mummy's eyes. “Feast not upon the food of famine! Away, away!” The mummy's voice had an otherworldly rasp. A young man in line at Uncle Vern's collapsed and promptly received the proper attention to ensure his safety. Everyone else ran away in terror.

Charlie and Tuna were nearly home when a small black Scottish terrier approached them, eagerly panting with his tongue out and his ears bouncing.

"Tuna! Charlie! It's grrreat tah see ya both!"

"Nice to see you too, Duke," Charlie said with a smile.

"Duke! Just the dog Tuna wanted to see," remarked Tuna with a friendly stretch toward the dog.

"Happy tah see ya too, Tuna!" replied Duke, wagging his tail.

Charlie reached down to pet Duke on the head.

As Duke enjoyed Charlie's head pets, Tuna persisted in her explanation. "Tuna thinks this is a mystery on the paws."

Duke seemed to be more excited by the moment. In an instant, he was jumping about the path ahead of them. "A mystery! I love a mystery! What 'av ya got, then?"

"Well, Charlie here found a sphinx with Joseph Smith's face. Tuna went to get some food — Hey, Charlie, what happened to the food, again?" sassed Tuna.

"You see, Duke, we got chased off by a mummy," Charlie explained, gesturing like a zombie. "I lost the food in all the commotion."

"Chased off by a mummy, ya say? Tuna, why are ya bringin' mummies arroun' the food trrucks again?" questioned Duke.

"Tuna would never bring any mummies around the food trucks before now," countered Tuna with a shocked expression. Her face turned more serious as she asked, "What would father Orion make of all that?"

"Well, I don't talk tah Father Orion much these days. But Father Sirius would prrrobably tell ya tah sit back and hear a fated tale of a trrip at a trropic garden tour. Would that mean anythin' tah ya now?" asked Duke, looking hopeful.

Charlie looked at Tuna, both of them adding a shake of their head. "No, I can't say it does," replied Charlie.

"At least Father Orion's advice made sense," mumbled Tuna.

"His belt was irrrresistably delicious, alrrright? So I try to listen to the advice of Father Sirius these days," answered Duke.

The trio were still trying to put it together when a menacing rasp sounded behind them. "I'll get you yet!"

"I guess I should have said, what are ya doin' bringin' mummies arroun' here?!" Duke shouted.

Charlie and Tuna turned to see the mummy reaching out to grab them. Charlie ducked, scooping up Tuna as she ran away with her black and blue ribbons bouncing chaotically in her black hair and Duke following at her heels.

"It's right on top of us! Quick, Charlie, what do we do?" asked Duke.

"Hurry! I know a place!" Charlie rounded a corner, crossing a street with some train tracks. The train was an uncomfortable distance close and at least one adult yelled at her to stop. She finished crossing the street as the mummy seemed to have disappeared. Not wanting to confront an angry adult, she and the two small animals safely completed the short distance to the destination while the train obstructed the view.

"The parrrk! Why didn't ya say we were goin' tah the parrrk? I love the parrrk!" exclaimed Duke, scarcely able to contain himself as he hopped around Charlie and Tuna.

"Yes, it's the park. But the sun is going down. And there's snow," reminded Tuna.

"But it's a parrrk!" insisted Duke.

"Tuna would rather be warm," reasoned Tuna.

"We just need to stay long enough to lose that mummy," explained Charlie. She looked around the park. Something caught her attention. "Hey, I've never really noticed this before. Look, Tuna!"

Tuna shivered and reluctantly looked over to where Charlie pointed. A large statue of a sphinx with a familiar face on it. "Isn't that the Joseph Smith Charlie was talking to Tuna about earlier?" asked the cat.

"Yeah, that's him!" Charlie confirmed.

"And his face is on the sphinx, like ya said!" added Duke.

"Tuna remembers hearing something about famine. What do Charlie and Duke make of that?" asked Tuna.

"I think ya sound hungrrry, Tuna," remarked Duke.

"I think there's more to this mystery than meets the eye," admitted Charlie. "We should all go home and get some rest. It'll be best to tackle this after some good sleep!"

"Warm sounds good," agreed Tuna.

"See ya again real soon, parrrk!" said Duke with a smile and a wag of his tail.

After seeing Duke arrived home safely, Charlie made the remaining journey to her home with Tuna keeping pace at her side. Her parents appeared to be home, since both cars were parked in the driveway. They stepped inside a warm house. The door to her parents' room at the top of the stairs remained closed, but a light glowed beneath it. The usual hum of the evening news was absent, replaced by an unsettling quietude broken only by the rhythmic creak of the floorboards beneath Charlie's feet.

"It must be later than I thought. Do you think they've noticed we're gone?" asked Charlie, flipping the light switch near the front door. She turned back to see the usual living room in front of her and Tuna, but Tuna looked at something else as a shadow crept closer to Charlie.

"I'll get you for your meddling," grumbled the mummy's otherworldly rasp.

Charlie bolted to a wall, knocking over a stack of VHS tapes upon her arrival. A crunch of plastic made her cringe as she tried a nearby door. It would not move.

Tuna darted behind the bookshelf, her emerald eyes gleaming with a mix of fear and feline curiosity as she noticed some Egyptian hieroglyphics on a papyrus sticking out of a VHS tape case.

"Charlie, look! Quick!" Tuna pushed the case toward Charlie with her nose.

"Thanks, Tuna!" exclaimed Charlie as she reached toward the floor and retrieved the VHS depicting people stranded on an island. A desperate plan flickered in her mind.

The mummy was closing in on them. There was nowhere left to run.

Charlie extracted the strange, fragile document from the case with as much care as could be spared.

"Tuna, I can't read Egyptian!"

Tuna was at Charlie's side in an instant, jumping over the mummy as it crouched for Charlie.

"Repeat after Tuna," said the cat, whispering something to Charlie. Emboldened by the cat's unexpected intervention, Charlie brandished the papyrus scroll like a magic wand.

"Abracadabra!" Charlie repeated at the mummy as it was about to grab her.

The mummy stumbled back as its desiccated hands clawed at its bandaged chest. A plume of green smoke erupted from empty eye sockets. With a strangled cry, it collapsed onto the plush living room rug in a heap of smelly bandages, defeated.

Silence descended, thick and heavy. Charlie stared at the fallen mummy, her mind racing with astonishment. Defeating an undead pharaoh with a campy VHS tape by pretending to do magic was one way to spend an evening.

"Does Charlie think this mummy was a real mummy?" asked Tuna.

"I don't believe it for a second. I mean, maybe I did for a second. When we were running away from it," admitted Charlie. She thought really hard about a closer inspection, but remained a safe distance away from the mummy.

"Tuna is not convinced either, then," agreed Tuna with a glare toward the collapsed mummy.

"What on Earth is going on down here?" called Charlie's father as the pungent smell of old bandages greeted his nostrils, a stark contrast to the usual lavender pot-pourri scent.

"Uh...." started Charlie.

"Oh, Chuck," commented Charlie's mother as she joined her husband, "she doesn't have to have an explanation for every mummy in the—"

"Mummy?" asked the mummy.

"We don't count any mummies among us in this family," declared Chuck, entering the living room. His appearance was somewhat rough around the edges, having made a long journey across the plains some

time before Charlie had entered the family pictures. "What we need to know now is why there's a man dressed as a mummy in our house?"

The mummy backed through the pile of VHS tapes on the floor up against the nearest wall. "Please, I didn't mean anything by it!"

"Charlie, what happened?" asked Charlie's mother.

"Well, uh," Charlie omitted as many details as possible. "This mummy has been chasing us all night! He was about to grab me when suddenly, he fainted. I'm pretty sure he was possessed."

"No, no! That's not it!" pleaded the mummy. "Look!" He sheepishly undid his bandages around his head, revealing a sweaty face.

"Brother Godot?" asked Chuck.

"He owns Gil's Taco Garden, the food truck," explained Charlie. "Doesn't always come to church, but was kind enough to talk with me when he first moved in. Why'd you do it, Gil?"

"The food truck business isn't working out for me. No one likes my Garden of Earthly Taco Delights menu idea," justified Gil.

"Gil, there's like, at least five guys in the ward that do marketing. Just ask one of them; I'm sure they'd be happy to help," mentioned Charlie's mother, allowing her elegant appearance to quell the situation.

"You... do you really think so? I... guess I hadn't really thought to ask them. I don't really know anyone around here," confessed Gil.

"We'll help you out, won't we, Vivi?" asked Chuck.

"Sure we will, Brother Godot," stated Vivi, giving a nod and crossing her arms.

"But you can't just go around terrorizing people's houses from now on, or I'll have to turn you over to the Battalion to decide whether the General Authorities should investigate you. Got it?" Chuck said with a stern glance.

"I... I think I can do that, yeah. Just a little more work into the business, that's all," Gil reasoned with himself, endeavoring to stand while exhausted.

"Don't sweat it, Gil. We've all had our... creative marketing moments," assured Chuck, assisting Gil and patting him on the back.

"Now leave my family alone," said Vivi with a smile hiding several sharper words.

Gil left the house. Chuck picked up the shelf and Charlie helped place the VHS tapes in their proper places, while Vivi held Tuna as a protective measure. The task was completed and Charlie went to visit Tuna.

Handing over the cat, Vivi joined her husband by the stairs. "I think we're going to have to talk to our daughter about a lot more, and a lot sooner than we thought," she said.

"What do you mean?" asked Chuck as Charlie and Tuna looked up at them.

Vivi handed Chuck the Egyptian papyrus. "Along with the sphinx figurine you let Brother Godot leave in the foyer, things could get out of hand real quick," she explained as she went upstairs.

Chuck looked at Charlie with a somewhat disappointed expression. "We'll talk more later."