

LAKE
VALLEY
MYSTERIES
by Nathan Nish

I

The Sphinx in the Foyer
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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 walked briskly 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 never seen anything quite like it. Looking around to see no owner, she picked it up for further investigation later. She 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. 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 could be observed along her nose. Depending on the lighting, she even looked a bit gray. Her underbelly fur faded to a patch of white. She had big green eyes. 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.

"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.

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 judgmentally.

"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 we 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.

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 unpopularity 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 French-American 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 didn't 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 nearly taking the first bite, Charlie relented. A mummy creeping between the two food trucks started to get 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 arrroun' the food trrrucks 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 prrrrobably 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.

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 'av said, what are ya doin' bringin' mummies arrroun' 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.

"The parrk! Why didn't ya say we were goin' tah the parrk? I love the parrk!" 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 parrk!" 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 guy you were 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.

"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, parrk!" 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 at the top of the stairs remained closed, but a light glowed beneath it.

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

"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. She tried a nearby door. It would not move.

Tuna dashed to hide behind the bookshelf, noticing 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.

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.

"Abracadabra!" Charlie repeated at the mummy as it was about to grab her. The mummy fell over backwards, defeated.

"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.

"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 musty smell of old bandages greeted his nostrils.

"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 room. His height allowed a small amount of room between him and the basement ceiling. 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 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.

"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 looked up at them with Tuna.

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."

II

A Hike on The Deseret Trail

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Charlie stowed her notebook, textbooks, and pencils away in her backpack for school on Tuesday. She had just finished Monday's homework and got up to move on with the rest of the day with a quick shift in attire from a school uniform to a black and blue striped shirt and some black pants. Downstairs, Tuna waited by the door.

"Looks like someone wants to go outside," mentioned Charlie.

"Looks like someone wants to open a door," countered Tuna.

It was starting to feel a little stuffy inside; after being all cooped up at school before this, Charlie had to agree with Tuna. Now was a good time to go outside for some fresh air.

Charlie opened the door, following Tuna before closing the door behind them. They walked together down the empty driveway of the house. Tuna had allegedly gained her athletic physique from her cat lifetime in organized crime, but maintained her form these days by lounging in the sun without further effort necessary to stay in shape. Charlie's stride was not quite the length she would have liked; while she was only slightly shorter than others her age, she was also much shorter than the average adult.

"Seems like a good day for a hike," commented Tuna.

"You're just going to want to go back inside. Why not skip all that and head back in now?"

"Tuna would like to stay outside," said Tuna with a resolute look toward the horizon.

"Hike it is, but don't cry to me about not being inside in a few minutes," sighed Charlie.

"It's still cold out here."