

Until
She
Sleeps

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FIRST EDITION

*For Andy,
Cousin and Friend*

NIGHTMARE

Do you know the curse of Tutankhamon?”
Norris shook his head, scratched the back of his neck and hefted the sledgehammer. It was mid-morning already and all they’d done is fanny around in the basement—crypt, he supposed, but that sounded just a little too spooky—without actually getting any work done. And now James was wasting time coming out with this crap again. And although Norris could only ever admit it to himself, his colleague’s knowledge shamed him. James was twenty years his junior and barely out of school, but he knew an awful lot of stuff.

Most of it bollocks.

“Tootan-fucking-who?”

“Tutankhamon. An Egyptian king, buried with full honours. His tomb was excavated early this century and before long everyone—”

“Jimmy,” Norris said, knowing he hated being called ‘Jimmy’, “where do you get all this shit from?”

“A book I read once.” James shrugged, sort of embarrassed but secretly pleased as well. He read. He watched documentaries. And he had a good memory. Labouring was not destined to be his lot in life, he

swore that to himself every night; yet but every morning he got up and went out to dig holes or shift bricks for another measly fifty quid. Perhaps it was because he really rather enjoyed blinding Norris with information. The old fart didn't know his arse from his elbow.

“Well, close your book, take your finger out of your arse and grab that pick-axe. This wall's got to be down by lunchtime.”

James stood back and looked the wall over. For the tenth time that morning he had some doubt about what they'd been asked to do. “What if it's holding the church floor up?”

“It isn't.”

“But what if—”

“Vicar says the church has been here almost five hundred years. This wall's less than three hundred years old. Says so in the church records.”

“Which are undoubtedly accurate and exact,” James mumbled, but Norris either did not hear or chose to ignore him.

The older man looked at the tall youth he'd been working with for a year and wondered—for the last time in his life, so it turned out—just what James was doing here. He was bright, he had ambitions, prospects, yet he barely earned his keep by digging in muck and sweeping up and knocking down old walls in damp, dark basements. Norris had used to think to himself that there was more to life than this. He'd not thought it for a long time now, because he was getting on and he feared he knew the truth of the answer, but for James...well, there was still time to make that statement come true.

What could be wrong in trying?

“Okay, you lazy bastard, I'll start.” Norris swung the hammer at the stone wall. Whoever built this all those years ago had evidently done so in a hurry—the stones weren't well fitted together and the pointing in

UNTIL SHE SLEEPS

between, although thick and well compressed, was sloppy in the extreme. How the hell it had stood for three hundred years God only knew.

The first blow punched a hole straight through.

They felt the old air gushing out, James thought as he watched Norris tug the sledge hammer from the hole it had made. *And with it came the curse.* The string of lights they'd hung from the old ceiling beams threw strange shadows at the hole, shifting slightly as if the whole wall had let out a startled gasp.

"Piece of piss," Norris said. He hefted the sledge again and paused—only for a second, but long enough to be surprised—when he saw movement through the hole. *What's behind the wall?* he'd asked the vicar. *Space*, the old goat had replied. Norris wondered exactly what he had meant; there seemed to be small lights floating in the blackness, stars swimming in a night sky distorted by heat, the blackness of the cosmos seen through the flames of a burning—

But where the hell did that come from?

"Been working with you for too long," Norris mumbled as he swung the hammer again.

"What?" James hadn't quite caught what his colleague had said. Something abusive, no doubt, a friendly dig hiding a subtle bitterness. He liked Norris but sometimes James thought the old git resented him his youth.

Norris aimed the hammer slightly to the left of the hole. A lump of stone shattered and shards flew, some of them pattering to his feet, others disappearing behind the wall and falling on something unseen. He swung again, knocked out the remainder of the broken stone. Again and a whole block came out, thumping to the ground behind the wall so that he felt its impact through his feet.

And then something else. The floor was vibrating, shivering as if a generator had started up somewhere or a million similar stones were hitting the ground a long way away.

“What’s that?” Norris asked. But he would never hear James’s voice again.

He looked at the hole and saw something strange. It was filled with water, its plane vertical as if it was the surface of a small pool viewed from above. He thought briefly of a fishing hole punched in the ice by Eskimos, but the depths beneath those holes disturbed him so he tried to purge the image.

The water cleared it for him. It cleared everything in a matter of seconds, because suddenly Norris was drowning. There was no surge or gush, he was not swept from his feet as the water poured into the crypt...it was simply there. And he was bobbing in it, sinking because he still held the sledgehammer, and whatever orders he sent his hand to open were lost along the way. He could not for the life of him let go. And it *was* for his life...he smoked, he ate badly, his lung capacity was not what it should have been...he opened his mouth to scream and breathed in the waters instead.

Hands held him down, although he could not see them.

As panic gave way to something worse, Norris managed to turn and look for James, see if the lad had managed to save himself, drag himself away to survive and live the life he should have been leading before.

But all around him was water. Above, below, left and right...and like a sea without a shore, he could see no walls.

“Norris!” James shouted. The old git was having a heart attack here underneath a church, banging holes in a wall built hundreds of years ago when none of them knew exactly what was behind it, what it held up, what it held *back*...he was having a bloody heart attack. “Norris!

Fuck's sake, mate!" He tried to reach out for the older man but found his hands slowing down on their way to him, slowing until he could almost not move them at all.

He pulled back and tried again. It was all wrong.

His movements slowed the nearer he got to the struggling Norris. It was as if he was trying to run through water. "Norris!" No water here, only the thick, dank air made thicker by fear. Real fear, because now there was something strange happening which James had no inkling of, all the books he'd read did no good down here, down here was *real*.

They felt the old air gushing out, and with it came the curse. There were no old Pharaohs in Whitgrove, he knew. But every country has its dark, nasty secrets.

James couldn't reach Norris so there was only one thing left to do: run for help. He turned, then glanced back at the hole in the wall...something had grabbed his attention in there. A smell, a sound, a shadow seen in darkness. And then, just as in all the worst nightmares and dreams, the impossible began to come true.

Horses ran through the small hole in the old stone wall. They galloped in a blind stampede, all of them wild-looking, unshod, eyes wide and mouths foaming as if they were fleeing something unmentionable. Six of them came through, eight, ten, and although the hole was only a few feet away they ran towards James, their hooves kicking up shards of broken stone. Their manes danced, waving slowly and softly like kelp in a gentle current, but their nostrils streamed snot and blood and he saw the muscles flexing beneath their hides as their legs pummelled down....

Impossible, unreasonable, James should turn and run but he could not move. It was a nightmare, a waking nightmare, he'd wake up soon and it would all be back to normal again, Norris would be shouting and James would smile and think of what could be—

The first horse knocked him flying. He would have hit the wall of the small basement had it not vanished. He kept skidding and bouncing along the ground, feeling his clothes ripping and stones slashing into his skin, pain breaking through the disbelief and making it all too real.

James opened his mouth to scream, but then the rest of the galloping herd bore down upon him, and their hooves crushed the cry as it rose in his throat.

At last the crypt was silent again. A silence so profound that, surely, it could never have been disturbed in the first place.