



HUNT FOR THE GOLDEN SCARAB

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HUNT FOR THE GOLDEN SCARAB

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*For Sam,
thank you for the music and the adventures*

'Study the past and you would define the future'

– Confucius

'I call architecture frozen music'

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

*'Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches . . .'*

– William Shakespeare

Sir John Soane's House



Sim Lockier sensed a presence in the doorway behind him. His hand sprang up from the piano keyboard, shooting into the air just in time to catch the wooden staff that was flying across the living room. Flipping the stick down, he drove it into the floor, hopping off the piano stool and landing in a defensive stance. The chord he'd been playing reverberated around the room as he bowed to his mum.

'Osu, Sensei!'

'Good.' Callidora Lockier bowed back. She was dressed in her uniform black joggers, vest and hoodie. The rebellious wisps of chestnut hair that had escaped her high ponytail framed her heart-shaped face, softening her determined jawline. 'You must always be alert to the dangers around you.'

'What dangers?' Sim gestured to the living room and kitchenette of their tiny attic flat. 'I'm a twelve-year-old kid doing piano practice.'

'It's time to clean,' his mum said, padding to the front door like a panther.

In the mornings, Callidora worked at a dojo teaching judo,

aikido and tai chi, but her main job was being the caretaker of Sir John Soane's Museum. She enjoyed cleaning and would turn repetitive tasks into bodybuilding exercises, pointing out that it was like getting paid to work out at a gym.

'You can finish your piano practice later,' Callidora told Sim, pulling back the three bolts, turning the key and twisting the handle. Her biceps were like ripe peas ready to burst from their pods.

Sim wondered for the millionth time what the danger was that made his mum so guarded, but there was no point



asking. She never answered. He knew his mum had secrets. The lines on her face told of a hard life. Her strong, calloused hands kept the museum spotlessly clean, but they were also weapons.

A mop and bucket stuffed with cleaning products stood in the hall. Callidora picked it up as she descended the stairs.

Sim and his mum lived in the attic flat of number twelve Lincoln's Inn Fields. Two hundred and thirty years ago this building, and number thirteen, the house next door, were owned by a famous architect called Sir John Soane. Inside, he'd created a collector's paradise. Number thirteen was now a museum displaying the long-dead architect's collection of art, archaeological finds, architecture and an eclectic assortment of other fascinating objects. Number twelve housed the museum gift shop, an exhibition space, offices and, in the eaves of the roof, the caretaker's flat consisting of two small bedrooms, a titchy bathroom and a kitchen-living room. The attic flat of number twelve was Sim's favourite of the many places he and his mum had lived. When they'd moved in two years ago, he'd been delighted to find an ancient upright piano in the sitting room. It felt to Sim as if the instrument had been waiting for him. He loved it and played for hours every day.

Taking a heavy bundle of keys from her pocket, Sim's mum unlocked the connecting door that led them to number thirteen.

Cleaning took place after the museum had shut its doors at five o'clock. Unless Sim was at his best friend Nelson's house, he and his mum always did it together. They had a system,

starting on the second floor and working their way down through the public rooms. Sim was responsible for cleaning the glass. With two spray guns of window cleaner hanging off his belt like pistols, and an arsenal of cloths, he'd wipe out finger and nose prints, spraying every cabinet door, mirror and window, polishing the glass to a flawless transparency. He particularly enjoyed cleaning the Model Room, with its three-tiered display case holding miniature cork reconstructions dating back to the 1800s. He was fascinated by a model of the Pompeii archaeological dig. As he buffed the glass, Sim thought about how terrifying the moment must have been when Vesuvius, a stratovolcano, had exploded, suspending Pompeii in time for ever.

He was constantly discovering treasures in the museum. Many moments from history were gathered here: paintings by famous artists, archaeological treasures, grotesque gargoyles and ancient earthenware pots. The building felt more like a time traveller's palace than an architect's house.

After finishing the glass on the second floor, Sim found his mum and they went down to the first floor together. The South Drawing Room was a large, banana-yellow room with a huge rug, patterned with red roses, covering the floorboards. It had no furniture, except for the portraits of Sir John Soane and his sons on the wall. Callidora set her bucket down and slipped her feet out of her trainers. Sim went to the deep window alcoves and drew the heavy golden brocade curtains, then removed his shoes and stood opposite his mum, at the far end of the rug. The attic flat was too small to train in, but



the South Drawing Room was perfect.

‘The three aims of any fight are?’ Callidora asked.

‘Deflect. Disarm. Disappear,’ Sim replied automatically.

‘Good.’ She nodded and bowed.

Sim bowed back.

‘Now. Attack me.’

Sim darted one step forward and retreated, testing her intentions.

‘Try and throw me.’

Sim tried every move his mum had taught him, but none of his punches or kicks landed. She chuckled as she threw up block after block, finally sweeping his legs from under him. She reached out a hand and pulled him back onto his feet, ruffling his dark curls. ‘You can do better than that, Peanut. All you need to do is unbalance me. Use your imagination.’

Sim retreated. His breath was coming in fast gasps. To bring down his mum, he’d have to do something she wouldn’t expect. There was a noise outside in the corridor, but he barely registered it. Darting towards his mum, he reached his hands forward, as if he were going to grab her hoodie. Instead, he slid his right leg forward, throwing his body behind it, as if he were doing a sliding tackle. As the lower half of his body slid through his mum’s legs, he kicked his legs up, wrapping them around her waist and yanking her backwards. She lost her balance and fell. He kept his grip until she hit the floor, then rolled, putting his hands down and bouncing up onto his feet, resuming his defensive stance.

He expected his mum to cheer, as she always did when he

managed to floor her, but she had sprung up faster than him. Her eyes were wide. She'd thrown out a protective arm to show he shouldn't move.

That's when Sim heard the voices.

'We're not supposed to let people into the museum after closing time,' came the anxious tones of Mrs Armitage from the stairwell.

'I told you. We're from the British Museum,' replied a deep male voice. 'We won't take long.' And after a moment, 'You can go.'

'Erm, I'm not really meant . . .' Mrs Armitage's voice was trembling.

'We don't need a chaperone.'

'Right. Yes. Of course. Sorry.'

Sim heard the light patter of Mrs Armitage hurrying away.

He watched a towering shadow appear on the yellow wall next to the half-open door of the South Drawing Room, and beside it the silhouette of a boy about his own size.

With her finger to her lips, his mum was frantically waving Sim backwards, towards the door that led into the North Drawing Room. Sim grabbed his shoes and retreated. His mum had the energy of a coiled snake. She looked alarmed.

As they slipped soundlessly into the North Drawing Room, his mum whispered, 'We've got to get to the Picture Room.'

Sim's heart was hammering as he heard the man and boy enter the South Drawing Room. His mum was already at the door leading to the stairwell. He noticed her bare feet, and pointed.

‘She’s here,’ said the man.

‘How d’you know?’ asked the boy.

‘Shoes,’ replied the man. ‘Find her.’

Sim felt a jolt of panic at the swooshing sound of the heavy curtains being yanked aside, but he couldn’t tear his eyes from the door of the South Drawing Room. An icy dread had taken hold of his body and his feet felt glued to the floor.

Callidora grabbed his sleeve, pulling him across the room and out into the stairwell.

‘Run,’ she mouthed silently. ‘*Run!*’

The Door to the Picture Room



Running down the stairs soundlessly, Sim darted into the dining room, which was decorated in a deep red with forest-green trim and housed shelves of enormous leather-bound books. Callidora carefully closed the door behind them. Sim glanced up at the ceiling, painted with the scene of Pandora opening her jar. He listened for the footsteps of their pursuers.

‘Sim. Come on.’ His mum was holding the door to the study open. Darting through it, Sim wondered who was chasing them. Why was his mum scared?

Ushering him into the dressing room, Callidora closed and locked the study door. They were standing in the corridor leading to the Picture Room. It was crammed with big bits of marble and plaster casts of details from Greek and Roman temples. The Picture Room door was always locked because inside were famous paintings worth millions of pounds.

Callidora pulled a black penny whistle from the holster on her belt and placed her fingers over the holes, lowering her lips to the mouthpiece. She paused, twisting the head, aligning it with the body. Facing the Picture Room, she closed her



eyes and softly played a musical phrase, leaning forward until her forehead was almost touching the door.

Sim frowned.

What was she doing? The whistle would give them away. Feeling light-headed, he found he was holding his breath. His pulse was racing. A wave of nausea caused pinpricks of sweat to

erupt all over his body. He closed his eyes as his mum played a long note that made the air around him vibrate. Through his eyelids he saw a golden glow. He felt her grab his arm and yank him through the door.

‘Callidora! Goodness! . . . Oh! Hello! Who’s this?’

Sim blinked. He was astonished to see an elderly man in the Picture Room, dressed in an old-fashioned black suit with a froth of white lace cascading from his collar. He was sitting in an armchair in front of the white marble fireplace where a fire burned in the grate. The olive walls were hung with paintings framed in gold but the colours somehow seemed more vibrant. And the room smelled odd. The usual scent

of furniture polish was eclipsed by a mix of tobacco, boiled vegetables, human sweat and woodsmoke. Sim's head was spinning. How could this man be in here, when the door was locked and the museum closed? How had he got in? And who had let him light a fire?

Sim studied the elderly man's kind, intelligent eyes, which peered over spindly half-moon glasses. He looked familiar.

'Sir John, I need your help,' Callidora said, her voice hushed and urgent. 'There are hunters in your house, in my time.'

As Sir John closed the green, leather-bound book in his lap, Sim glimpsed handwriting. 'Are they looking for you? Do they know about the door?'

'Yes, they're after me, and if they don't know about your door, they're about to find out.' She looked nervously over her shoulder, then glanced at Sim. 'We need to hide . . .'

'Hmm. Yes.' Sir John stood up and Sim realized he was wearing black breeches and leather boots up to his knees. The cuffs of his jacket were unusually long. 'I've got just the place.'

Picking up a staff with a hooked end from the top of a low bookcase that ran around the room, Sir John lodged it in a catch, pulling at the wall to the left of the fireplace. The panel, on which paintings were hung, opened like the cover of a book. Behind it was another wall with more paintings. Sir John opened this panel too, and the one behind it, revealing an alcove containing yet more art.

The magical thing about the Picture Room was that it was a puzzle box, and beneath the swinging panels, behind the

bookcase, was a vacant rectangular space.

‘Get in,’ said Sir John, nodding to the space.

‘What about you?’ Callidora asked, coming closer to Sir John and lowering her voice. ‘You’re not safe from the hunters. None of us are.’

‘I knew there was a risk I would get a visit from the Council when I built this room.’ He smiled at Callidora.



‘I’ve managed to avoid the hunters all my life. Now that I’m in my autumn years, I no longer fear them. There isn’t a time that I’m not prepared to die in.’

Fear sparked in Sim’s chest at this bewildering statement.

‘I shouldn’t have come.’ Callidora shook her head as her voice dropped to a whisper. ‘I didn’t know what else to do. They mustn’t know about Sim. They will take him from me.’

Sim’s breath stuck in his throat.

‘Hush now.’ Sir John put his hand on hers. ‘I’m grateful to you, Callidora, for opening the door and proving my theory.’ He smiled. ‘If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t know about Drake’s map. I’ve got people looking for it. We suspect Napoleon had it when he spent those years in Egypt, but that’s where the trail goes cold. Wars are frustratingly messy things . . . but I’m getting distracted.’ Sir John nodded at the hiding place. ‘We can talk another time.’

Sim scrambled over the bookcase and lay down in the hiding space. His mum got in after him. Sir John closed the picture panels above their heads. Sim’s eyes quickly adjusted to the dark. A thin beam of light was coming through a spyhole. He wriggled, putting his eye to it, and saw Sir John slotting the pole into a groove along the cabinet top. The old man withdrew a big brown book from the bookcase opposite and opened the cover. It wasn’t a book! It was a box *disguised* as a book. Sir John put his green book inside, closed the cover, and returned it to the shelf before taking a different book to his chair and sitting down.

For several long minutes all Sim could hear was the distant crackling of the fire, his mum's breathing and the beating of his own heart. Questions flew about his head like moths around a light bulb. Who was Sir John? How did he know his mum? Who were the hunters? Why would they take him away?'

Sim heard a distant drumming and his mum stiffened.

'Good evening, gentlemen,' Sir John said. 'Can I help you?'

From his spyhole, Sim saw legs he guessed belonged to the man and the boy from upstairs.

'We're looking for someone.'

Sir John's visitors prowled around the Picture Room. Sim drew back from the spyhole, holding his breath.

'By Jove! Is that the time?' exclaimed Sir John as a pair of legs moved to stand directly in front of the spyhole. 'Of course! You're here for the Royal Society meeting to discuss our archaeological explorations of Egypt. I'll bet the person you're looking for is there already. I popped in here a moment ago to grab a book.'

'Yes,' came the low reply. 'We're here for . . . the meeting.'

'I'm Sir John Soane. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr . . .'

'Penhooligan, Larrikin Penhooligan. This is my assistant, Master Kabir Burman.'

'Are you a keen Egyptologist, Mr Penhooligan?'

'No. Unless . . .'

 There was a shift in Penhooligan's voice. 'You haven't come across Nefertiti's golden heart scarab in your archaeological explorations, have you?'

‘How odd!’ Sir John’s voice took on a hint of mystery. ‘You are not the first person to ask me about that particular artefact. I encountered a woman a moment ago who asked me the very same question.’

‘Woman?’

‘Yes. She was dressed rather oddly. Come with me to the Sepulchral Chamber – that’s where I sent her – and we can talk more.’

Sim heard the door open.

‘Did you gentlemen read in *The Times* that the six Tolpuddle Martyrs have been convicted and are to be shipped to a penal colony in Australia?’ Sir John said, as he ushered his uninvited guests outside. ‘That’ll not be a popular ruling, mark my words.’

Callidora waited until she was certain they’d gone, then pushed the picture panels open.

‘Who are those people?’ Sim whispered, scrambling out after her.

‘Shh. Now is not the time, Sim.’ His mum listened at the door as she took out her penny whistle. ‘Stand beside me.’ She turned her face to the closed door and began to play.

One of Sim’s knees buckled. He lurched forward, feeling unbalanced. His head was fizzy. Nausea threatened to overwhelm him. He closed his eyes to steady himself and felt his mum grab his sleeve. When he opened his eyes, he was out in the corridor with the chunks of marble. Blinking, he noticed the smell of woodsmoke was gone. All

he could smell was furniture polish.

‘We need to get back to the flat,’ his mum said, pulling him back the way they had come. ‘We’re not safe here.’