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I DON'T KNOW how a cheesy place like the Haunted Museum ever got hold of such valuable treasures," Taylor Mason's father griped as they stood in line outside the Haunted Museum. "I can't believe we have to come *here* to see them."

"What's wrong with here?" Taylor asked. She didn't share her dad's dismay. This was her first time at the Haunted Museum and she was thrilled to be there. She looked ahead at the banner outside

the large brick building and smiled. NEW DISCOVERY! THE LOST TREASURES OF NEFERTITI!

“These artifacts should be at a real museum with proper security,” her father said, his voice taking on that familiar tone he used when he began a lecture. Professor Mason taught classes on ancient Egypt at the nearby university. The Masons’ home was full of books about ancient Egypt, many of them written by him. Any surface that wasn’t a bookshelf held Egyptian artifacts or models of famous sites or landmarks.

Mrs. Mason, Taylor’s mom, was also interested in the history of Egypt. She had written a play about Queen Nefertiti, wife of the pharaoh Akhenaten. A local theater group had even done a performance of it. The county newspaper had given it a great review, calling the play “a thrilling look into a lost world.”

The fact that ancient Egypt was a huge part of the Mason family's life was fine by Taylor. She thought it was all extremely interesting, from the beautiful art to the incredible buildings, and wished she could have lived in the times of the pharaohs. Sometimes she daydreamed about being an ancient Egyptian princess.

Taylor even blew her dark hair straight and wore it in a blunt cut to her chin, in the style of ancient Egypt. If she was feeling brave, she'd tie a thin gold cord across her long bangs and wear white to really highlight the Egyptian look.

Some kids in school made fun of her for dressing up when it wasn't Halloween, but her good friends called her Queen Cleo, after the ancient Queen Cleopatra, even when she wore jeans and a plain T-shirt. They understood it was a look that came out of her true interest in Egyptian

culture and not just a show, so they thought it was cool.

But today, since seventh grade had just ended for summer vacation, Taylor was free to attend the exhibit as soon as it opened. Unfortunately, it seemed like a lot of people had the same idea, and she and her dad stood in a long line of families and groups of teenagers.

A tall boy with a blond crew cut stood in front of Taylor in line. He had on a black T-shirt covered with the symbols of ancient Egyptian writing. Hieroglyphics.

As they moved forward, Taylor was so busy looking at the symbols, trying to figure out what each one meant, that she accidentally stepped on the back of his sneaker. The boy whirled to face her. Behind his black-framed glasses, his eyes were a piercing blue.

“Sorry,” Taylor murmured, embarrassed.

He didn't seem angry but he wasn't smiling, either. "Nice haircut," he said. "Very Egyptian."

Taylor squinted at him, uncertain. Was he making fun of her? "Thanks," Taylor said cautiously. "I like your T-shirt."

The boy held out the hem to gaze down at it. "It spells my name — Jason — in hieroglyphics."

"That's cool," Taylor said. "Where did you find it?"

"Online," he replied. "I'm always browsing the ancient Egypt sites. I'm kind of an expert on it."

"Really," Taylor said, more as a comment than a question. He certainly seemed to think a lot of himself. Jason smiled a tiny bit and nodded, then turned back around.

"You've made a new friend," Professor Mason remarked.

Taylor scowled at her father. Jason had ears — he could hear! "Dad, shhhh!" she whispered.

“Sorry,” her father said more quietly.

Jason was *not* a new friend! She barely knew him. Besides that, Taylor didn’t even particularly like his self-impressed manner. Kind of an expert! Really?!

“Hey, look at that photo.” Professor Mason pointed to the doorway. “Isn’t she something?”

The banner by the main entrance featured a picture of the famous head and shoulders statue of Queen Nefertiti carved by the ancient Egyptian sculptor Thutmose. The bust showed her adorned by the well-known conelike crown. The heavy-lidded, dark, almond-shaped eyes were rimmed in black kohl. Her long neck stretched forward regally, drawing the viewer’s eye to the many levels of her wide necklace of semiprecious stones.

From reading about the royal queen, Taylor knew that the name Nefertiti meant “the beautiful

one has come.” To Taylor she was more than lovely. Everything about Nefertiti was magical and glamorous. The queen embodied all that was intriguing and mysterious about ancient Egypt. Taylor could hardly believe that soon she would be viewing objects that the intriguing queen had actually touched with her own hands.

As the line moved forward, Taylor noticed security guards in identical black pants, white shirts, and black sport jackets stationed all around the sidewalk outside the building. Stone-faced behind the mirrored lenses of their sunglasses, they balanced on the balls of their feet, pivoting this way and that.

“There are security guards here,” Taylor told her dad, recalling his concerns about the artifacts. “Lots of them.”

He scanned the area and nodded. “Well, that’s good, at least.”

“How valuable *is* this stuff, anyway?” Taylor asked her father.

“A treasure thought to be lost to the world, newly discovered, and of the size I’ve heard it described?” Professor Mason said. “Any of the pieces would be priceless, just for having been among the treasure of Akhenaten and Nefertiti.”

Taylor was even more impatient to see the collection, but the line didn’t seem to be moving at all.

“Will you be all right here for a moment?” her dad asked, nodding toward the restroom.

“Sure,” Taylor said, “but if this line moves and you’re not back, I’m going to see the treasure without you!”

As her father walked away, Jason turned back to Taylor. “You know, the value of the treasure isn’t why it’s here at the Haunted Museum.”

“Oh? Why, then?” Taylor asked.

Jason looked at her with a grin. “Because it’s *haunted!*”

“Oh sure!” Taylor said. “Totally haunted.” She knew they were at the Haunted Museum, but she’d never believed in the supernatural. She was just there to see Nefertiti’s treasure.

“It’s more like *cursed* than haunted,” Jason went on.

“Every other treasure found in Egypt is ‘cursed,’” Taylor said.

“Yeah, but this one in particular,” Jason said. “Smenkhkare was this wizard sort of guy, and he ruled with Akhenaten toward the end of his reign. Nefertiti’s treasure was stolen and Smenkhkare put a curse on whoever stole it.”

“Did Smenkhkare’s curse work?” Taylor asked.

Jason shrugged. “Probably. All I know is what they said on the Haunted Museum website. That the treasures of Nefertiti are among the most

mysterious and strange Egyptian collections ever uncovered.”

“That assumes you believe in ancient curses at all,” Professor Mason said, stepping back into his place in line next to Taylor.

“Of course not,” Taylor said. She knew it was superstition, and it wasn’t like her dad had been cursed in all his years in the field.

“I totally believe in ancient curses,” Jason replied with conviction. “It’s been proven. They’re real.”