

HOW TO &

STEAL



THE ROSETTA
STONE



Stephen Davies

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HOW TO STEAL THE ROSETTA STONE

Stephen Davies



This book is dedicated to international school students all over the world. I admire your open-mindedness, your curiosity, and your ability to make friends faster than most people can get through customs. You inspired this story.

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This is a work of fiction, not an instruction manual.

Any resemblance to real people or to actual museum security procedures is entirely coincidental.

1

THE SANDSTONE TURRETS OF FORT RASHID GLOWED ochre in the afternoon sun. The ancient walls and arrow slit windows of the fort were surrounded on all sides by a more modern line of defence: black iron railings topped with spikes.

“Are you going first, or am I?” Pierre Dupont turned to Hassan with a twinkle in his eyes that Hassan had learned to dread.

“The fortress is closed,” said Hassan. “The CLOSED sign round the front is written in both French and Arabic to avoid confusion.”

“Aren’t you disappointed?” Pierre asked. “Coming all this way and finding the fort closed to the public?”

Hassan shrugged. “Old Egyptian proverb for you. To be disappointed is inevitable; to be discouraged is a choice.”

“*Précisément!*” Pierre beamed. “I knew you would understand.” He placed his hands between two fierce spikes and rocked forward onto the tips of his toes.

“Wait,” said Hassan. “That was supposed to be an argument for NOT breaking into the fort.”

Pierre hoisted himself up onto the iron railings and balanced precariously, his eyes fixed on the arrow slit a few feet away. “My English is not as good as yours, *mon ami*. Sometimes I misunderstand.”

Before Hassan could say another word, Pierre bent his knees, swung his arms and launched himself into thin air. As the soles of his trainers made contact with the sandstone, he grabbed the edge of the arrow slit with both hands and hung there for a moment to gather his strength, before pulling himself up to peep into the fortress beyond.

“What can you see?” Hassan hissed.

Pierre turned to flash his friend a cheeky grin. “Wonderful things!”

With that, he squeezed his slender frame through the arrow slit and disappeared into the darkness beyond.

2

*P*IERRE'S RECKLESSNESS MADE HIM INFURIATING TO hang out with, but never dull. While Hassan loitered outside the fortress, he could not help wishing that he were inside, exploring its hidden chambers with his friend.

Minutes ticked by. Still no sign of Pierre.

Hassan stood up and took a deep breath. "I'm going to regret this," he muttered.

Balancing on the railing was easy; the cat jump was the tricky part. As Hassan teetered on the rail, his eyes darted between the arrow slit above him and the cruel spikes below.

One—two—three!

The leap was clumsy, but Hassan managed to grab the stone sill of the arrow slit before his chest and knees slammed into the wall. He hung there, winded, his biceps burning with the strain, then gritted his teeth and hauled himself awkwardly over the sill.

He was in a large chamber with bare stone walls and pale flagstones underfoot. Pierre had lied. There were no wonderful things here. Nothing but a withered apple core and a faded information panel.

In the centre of the fortress was an open-air courtyard. Hassan walked blinking into the sunlight and found Pierre crouching in front of a huge, upright stone.

The face of the stone was divided into three segments: hieroglyphs on top, demotic in the middle, and Greek at the bottom.

“It’s the Rashid Stone!” cried Hassan.

“No, it’s not,” came a voice from above them.

Hassan and Pierre whirled round. A young Egyptian woman stood at an arched window on the second floor, overlooking the courtyard.

The first thing Hassan noticed about the woman was her hair. It was dark, almost black, and it fell on her shoulders in a vast cascade of kinks and curls. Her face was serious and full of character. She had a long neck, dimpled cheeks and a slight squint. She looked a few years older than him: nineteen, perhaps, or twenty.

“It’s not the Rashid Stone,” she repeated. “It’s a worthless replica. Identical to the original in almost every way, but still a replica. I hate it.”

Bikrahha. I hate it. The passion of those Arabic words seemed out of place in this peaceful, cloistered courtyard.

“The real stone was right here at Fort Rashid,” the woman continued. “It was stolen by Napoleon’s men when they invaded Egypt and took over the fort from my ancestors. It was stolen again a few months later, this time by British soldiers who invaded Egypt and took over Fort Rashid from the French.”

“Sounds like invading Fort Rashid was a fashionable thing to do,” said Pierre.

“Still is,” sighed the woman. “The sign on the front door of the museum says CLOSED, but I’m guessing you noticed that.”

There followed an awkward silence. Hassan looked down at the flagstones at his feet, and when he lifted his head again, the young woman was gone from the window.

Beside the stone stood an information panel, telling the story of the Rashid Stone in Arabic, English and French. It explained how the stone was found by a French lieutenant, who handed it over to Jacques-Francois de Menou, a general in Napoleon’s army. A portrait of the general depicted a stout, fleshy man with pink cheeks, a white powdered wig and a double chin. He wore a white cravat and a tight blue army coat with brass buttons.

“Looks pretty pleased with himself, doesn’t he?” Hassan murmured.

The information panel went on to describe how the British Army defeated the French Army in Egypt in 1801, and how the Rashid Stone was handed over to a British colonel called Tomkyns Turner. A portrait of the colonel depicted another stout, fleshy man with pink cheeks, close-cropped

grey hair and a double-chin. He wore a black cravat and a tight red army coat with brass buttons.

Footsteps echoed on the flagstones, and Hassan turned to see that the young woman had come out into the courtyard to join them.

“I call them Tweedledum and Tweedledee,” she said, jutting her chin at the two complacent military men. “They took Egypt’s most important artefact, the key to our entire civilisation, and what did they give us in return? Football and croissants!”

“I like football and croissants,” said Pierre.

“Good for you.” There was fire in the young woman’s eyes. “And do you like invading other countries and stealing their most precious treasures?”

Pierre stared at her.

“Sorry,” she said. “What happened was not your fault.”

A fly buzzed past the stone and up into a cloudless sky.

“I’m Hassan,” he said, “and this is Pierre.”

“Aisha.”

“The real Rashid Stone is in London, isn’t it?” said Hassan. “We’re going there on a school trip a few weeks from now.”

Aisha looked at him sharply. “What school do you go to?”

“Alexandria International School.”

“And you’re going to London?”

“Yes.”

“To the British Museum?”

“Amongst other places.”

“To see the Rashid Stone?”

“I think they call it the Rosetta Stone over there.”

“Rosetta.” Aisha’s upper lip curled in scorn. “Sounds like a cheap pasta brand.”

Pierre and Hassan laughed, but Aisha held up a finger for silence. At the front of the fortress, a heavy key was turning in a lock.

“My father is back from Alexandria,” said Aisha. “If he finds you here, he will be furious.”

“*Au revoir!*” Pierre turned and dashed back towards the turret room.

Hassan smiled apologetically and touched his fingertips to his forehead and his heart, an Egyptian gesture of respect. He nodded a brief farewell to Aisha, then followed his friend to the turret room and out through the arrow slit window into the warm, Mediterranean air.

3

THAT NIGHT, HASSAN DREAMED ABOUT PINK-CHEEKED generals in tight uniforms, fighting over a battered rattle. A dark-eyed Egyptian family watched the white men heaving the rattle back and forth like children playing tug of war.

As the battle reached its climax, there was a sudden flash of lightning and the rattle morphed into a huge granite slab. Hassan woke to find his heart racing and his fists clenched.

At lunchtime, he sat on his own in the school cafeteria, reading about the Rashid Stone on his phone. It turned out that Aisha was not the only person who felt strongly about the artefact. Over three thousand archaeologists had signed a recent petition, asking the British Museum to return the Rashid Stone to Egypt. The museum's response was a flat refusal. The stone belonged in London, they said.

Hassan put down his phone and picked up his chicken wrap. That petition could have been signed by a million archaeologists, but it would not have made any difference. Rich institutions in powerful countries would continue to do whatever they pleased, just as they had always done before.

Pierre plonked down his tray opposite Hassan. “You still mad at me?” he said.

“Of course not.”

“Mad at my ancestors?”

“Yes.”

“Me too,” said Pierre. “But it’s not as if we can do anything about it.”

“We could always steal it back,” Hassan said. The words came out in a rush, a thoughtless knee-jerk response. But now that it had been spoken out loud, the thought did not sound completely stupid. “Actually,” Hassan continued, “stealing is the wrong word. It’s more like reclaiming a rightful possession. And it just so happens, we’re going to London in a few weeks. A few weeks, Pierre!”

Pierre put down his fork and stared at his friend. “It’s a school trip,” he said. “We’re in Grade 10.”

“Exactly,” Hassan said. “Three thousand archaeologists couldn’t reclaim the stone, but maybe two idiots can. Who would suspect a group of innocent teenagers visiting a museum on a school trip?”

Pierre stood up from the table and bowed to Hassan. “It’s usually me who has the scatterbrained ideas and you who talks me out of them. But now, the student has become the master!”

Hassan could not help smiling at his friend’s lyrical flourish. Pierre had joined the drama club in Grade 6 and had won a part in every school

production since. When he wasn't rehearsing for a play, he was making electrifying speeches at the after-school debating society.

"Last night," said Hassan, "I dreamed about that French general with the powdered wig and the double chin – and that British colonel, Tomkyns Whats-his-name. I was grinding my teeth so hard in my dream, I woke up with jaw-ache."

As if in reply, Pierre leaned over the table and pressed play on a video on his phone. A skinny American teenager was demonstrating how to smash a pane of toughened glass using a single fragment of a broken spark plug. The boy had edited together a series of super-slow-mo replays from various angles. Over and over again, the pane burst languidly into a million glinting pebbles.

"No," said Hassan, before the video had even ended. "No violence."

"It's only glass," said Pierre.

"It's criminal damage," said Hassan.

"*On ne fait pas d'omelette sans casser des œufs*," Pierre muttered. "You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs."

Hassan took another bite of his wrap, thinking about the Rashid stone imprisoned in its case. Pierre's approach was wrong, but the basic idea was beautiful. Just imagine, the stone returning home to Rashid after all these years...

"Have it your way," said Pierre suddenly. "No damage. We will acquire a set of...how do you call *clés squelettes* in English? Those special keys that

can open any lock?”

“Skeleton keys,” said Hassan, “but I hardly think we’re going to find skeleton keys in Alexandria.”

Pierre waved away the objection. “We’ll go to the old souq,” he said. “Have you ever been to the old souq and not found what you were looking for?”

Hassan sighed. He had to admit, the old souq had everything.

4

THE OLD SOUQ WAS AN ANCIENT COVERED MARKET IN downtown Alexandria, a labyrinth of narrow backstreets crammed with jewels, vases, lamps, spices and curiosities of every sort. Hassan and Pierre went there on Saturday afternoon and headed straight for the stall of old Al Haji Amadu the locksmith.

Amadu welcomed the boys with a guarded smile, but as soon as Hassan enquired about skeleton keys, the old man's bushy eyebrows waggled in annoyance. "This is a reputable establishment," he snapped. "You think I sell mischievous keys to mischievous boys? Be off with you, before I summon the police!"

The boys did as they were told. They fled down a series of narrow alleys and did not stop until they came to the tea room on Kafafi Street.

"*Sahlab*?" Pierre suggested.

"Definitely," said Hassan. "I think we need it after that."

They sat at a circular table by the wall and ordered *sahlab*, a hot milky drink made from orchid roots, coconut and cinnamon. All around them,

wrinkly men drank mint tea, smoked *shisha* pipes and glowered at each other across backgammon boards.

Hassan held his glass in both hands and took long, slow sips. The *sahlab* warmed his soul as well as his body. It transported him back to his childhood in Al Mamurah, sitting cross-legged on his grandparents' Ushak rug.

As if conjured by the memory, a small Egyptian boy appeared and sat down uninvited between Hassan and Pierre. "Order me *sahlab*," he said in Arabic.

"Who are you?" Pierre asked.

"My uncle sent me."

"What do you want?"

"*Sahlab*." The boy stared at them, unblinking. "And business." He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out a red velvet pouch.

"Excuse me!" Pierre called to the waiter. "Another *sahlab*, please."

Hassan stared at the small boy. With his long eyelashes and snub nose, he looked no older than eight or nine.

"My uncle overheard your enquiry," said the boy. "He sent me to show you these." The boy shook the pouch and seven silver keys slid out onto the table. They ranged from medium-sized to tiny, with narrow shafts and evenly spaced notches.

"Skeleton keys?" Hassan asked.

“Bump keys,” said the boy. “You tap them with a little hammer and—*tok*—you’re in! My uncle says these keys work for nine hundred and ninety-nine locks out of a thousand.”

“Who is your uncle?” Hassan asked.

“He is a businessman.” The boy pursed his lips. “Do you want the keys or not?”

DEBATE SOCIETY AT ALEXANDRIA INTERNATIONAL School took place every Monday afternoon and was always well attended. Some, like Pierre, were the children of ambassadors, already skilled in the arts of diplomacy, persuasion and negotiation. Others had politicians for parents and had grown up participating in furious debates around the dinner table.

“Good afternoon, students.” Miss Marikar adjusted her headscarf and smiled up at the rows of tiered seating in the lecture theatre. “It’s great to see all of our silver-tongued regulars, and also—” (she beamed at Hassan) “some less familiar faces.”

Hassan grinned back. Miss Marikar had taught him English Literature back in Grade 7 and she was one of his favourite teachers, enthusiastic and fair-minded.

“Teacher’s pet,” whispered Pierre, who was sitting next to him. “Is Mariokart your mum or something?”

“Don’t call her that,” Hassan mouthed.

“Call her what?” Pierre chuckled. “Mariokart or your mum?”

“Today,” Miss Marikar continued, “I have received a special request for the following intriguing motion: This Society would repatriate The Rosetta Stone to Egypt. Do I have any volunteers to speak for the motion?”

Pierre’s hand shot up immediately.

“And to speak against?”

An English girl in the back row raised her hand. Rachel Montgomery was a seasoned debater who always exuded confidence.

“Thank you, Rachel,” said Miss Marikar. “Would you like to speak first or second?”

“First.” Rachel jogged down the steps to the front of the theatre. She took out her phone, set a timer for two minutes and placed it on the lectern in front of her.

The lecture theatre fell silent.

“I’m excited to speak against this motion,” said Rachel, “because I had the privilege of visiting London with my family last year and seeing the Rosetta Stone with my own eyes. Do you know how much I paid for my entrance ticket? Nothing. *Nada*. Zilch. It is what we call a universal museum, benefitting not just the people of Great Britain but all the people of the world. I stood in front of that grey granite slab and I felt its historical significance in every cell of my body. It was dizzying to think that the stone before me was the single most important key to our understanding of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs.”

A murmur of approval rose in the lecture theatre. Rachel was a popular girl, and her speeches at debating club always went down well.

“Did you know,” Rachel continued, “that the Rosetta Stone has been in the British Museum for more than two hundred years? It is looked after with a care so intense you might even call it love. During World War II, the stone was kept out of harm’s way in railway tunnels near the museum, and when peace returned, the stone returned as well. Every year it is enjoyed by more than six million visitors, most of them from overseas. That stone is more than a symbol of ancient communication. It is an icon of international friendship.”

Applause broke out along the back row, and Rachel had to raise her voice to be heard.

“Here at Alexandria International School, we know a thing or two about international friendship. We know it is a beautiful thing, to be treasured and conserved. I applaud the work of every truly universal museum, and I urge the Society to reject this childish motion.”

The clapping increased in volume. Rachel stepped forward and gave an awkward bow. She had spoken well, and she knew it.

As the applause died away, Pierre bounded to the lectern and reset the timer for two minutes.

“Wait.” Rachel looked confused. “Aren’t you going to use your own phone?”

“This one will do, *merci*.” Pierre looked up at the audience and spread his arms wide. “Miss Marikar, fellow students, Rachel has spoken

eloquently about the stone. She has called it a symbol of communication and an icon of international friendship. I was taking notes, see.”

Pierre waved a piece of card covered in writing. Some of the students laughed.

“How can I follow Rachel’s powerful words?” Pierre scanned the rows of faces before him. “How can I argue against this noble idea of the *musée universel*? I am stuck. I am speechless. I am silent.”

Pierre drew an imaginary zip across his mouth, locked an imaginary padlock and threw away an imaginary key. He stood wordlessly before his audience as second after second ticked by. The students looked at each other uncertainly. Even Miss Marikar was staring at Pierre in bewilderment.

Their confusion was about to deepen.

Here goes, Hassan murmured to himself.

He sprang forward out of his seat, snatched Rachel’s phone and Pierre’s notes off the top of the lectern and sprinted out of the theatre, slamming the door behind him.

6

IN THE CORRIDOR OUTSIDE THE LECTURE THEATRE stood a rosewood trophy cabinet containing dozens of sports cups, debating trophies and maths Olympiad awards. Hassan knew he had thirty seconds, maybe less, to do what needed to be done. He took a red velvet pouch out of his inside pocket and got to work.

The bump keys did not disappoint. By the time Miss Marikar and the debate society students came out into the corridor, Rachel's phone was imprisoned behind the thick glass of the trophy cabinet, the timer on the screen still counting down.

"Welcome to the AIS Museum," declared Hassan, "and to our most interesting exhibit, the Montgomery Phone."

"Give it back!" Rachel darted forward and pawed at the glass. "It's mine. I need it."

"Step away from the case, please," Hassan said. "Our visitor regulations are very clear on the whole Look Don't Touch thing."

"It's locked!" Rachel was cross but also mystified. "What the...how...?"

“Gather round, friends!” Hassan called. “Peruse the information panel and feel free to ask questions.”

He pointed to a piece of card on the outside of the cabinet – the same card that Pierre had just waved at the front of the theatre.

THE MONTGOMERY PHONE

What is it? Metal slab with sleek contours and shiny screen

Where was it found? The Dion Lecture Theatre, International School of Alexandria

When was it found? Today

Why is it significant? The Montgomery Phone is the key to Rachel Montgomery’s life, an object to be treasured and conserved. It contains all of her pictures and music, as well as hundreds of fascinating texts like ‘you free tonight?’ and ‘maths homework sucks’.

“It’s mine!” Rachel clenched her fists. “Miss, tell him to give it back!”

“If I did, you would just put it in your pocket,” said Hassan. “This way is much better. This way, anyone in the school can come and feast their eyes on an icon of international friendship.”

“Yes, very clever,” said Rachel. “Now, give it back this second!”

“You’re upset,” said Hassan. “I can see this is a shock to you. But you’ll get used to it, I promise. Two hundred years from now, your descendants will understand the rightness of what we have done here. In fact, they will feel an almost pathetic gratitude in visiting our universal museum and seeing such a powerful symbol of twenty-first century communication.”

“I swear, I’m going to smash the glass,” said Rachel. “I’m going to take it back myself.”

I’m going to take it back myself. The timer hit zero and emitted a volley of piercing bleeps.

“There will be no glass smashing today, thank you very much,” said Miss Marikar. “We will return to the lecture theatre in an orderly manner and open the floor to comments and questions. As for your phone, Rachel, it will be returned to you immediately. Isn’t that right, Hassan Farouk?”

“Yes, Miss,” said Hassan.

7

THAT EVENING, HASSAN AND PIERRE WENT TO THE non-fiction section of the school library. The library in Hassan's old school had been a dark, pokey space, but this one could not be more different. The south wall of the AIS secondary library was one enormous window, bathing countless rows of reference books in bright Egyptian sunlight. Dotted here and there were large wooden desks and smaller cubicles for private study.

Pierre went deep into the Biography stacks and pulled an enormous tome off a shelf. "Well?" he whispered. "Do you know her?"

"Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt." Hassan squinted at the book. "Bit before my time."

"Not the book, dummy, the gap."

Hassan stood on tiptoes and peeked through the gap left by the fat biography. In the study cubicle on the other side of the book shelves, a girl sat hunched over a laptop, typing fast. Hassan could only see the back of her head, but he recognised her from her jet-black braids, coiled into two big space buns on top of her head. "That's Bree James," Hassan whispered.

Pierre nodded. “How well do you know her?”

“Well enough to say hi to in the corridor, I guess, but not well enough share a shawarma.”

“Well enough to recruit for the job?” asked Pierre.

“I don’t know. Why her?”

“She’s the best coder in the school. Possibly in all of Egypt. You remember last year when the government put up that massive electronic sign on the Alexandria-Giza highway? It was supposed to say *TEMPORARY ROAD WORKS. DRIVE SLOW.*”

“I remember.” Hassan chuckled. “Some joker hacked the sign and changed the message to *KING KHUFU HAS AWOKEN. TURN BACK!*”

Pierre jerked his thumb towards the girl in the study cubicle. “Some joker.”

“Bree James did that? You’re kidding!”

“She’s in our year,” said Pierre, “and as luck would have it, she’s coming on the London trip.”

Hassan’s phone pinged. The incoming text message was marked *Number Withheld* and consisted of just eight words.

talking about people behind their backs is
rude

Hassan gaped at his phone screen and then at the girl in the study cubicle. She had not stopped typing the whole time.

His phone vibrated again.

especially within earshot

She must have the hearing of a desert owl, thought Hassan. He hurried around the edge of the bookshelves and over to the study cubicle.

“Bree, I’m sorry,” he said. “Pierre was just telling me about that thing you did on the desert highway. The road works sign?”

Bree sat back in her chair and looked up at him. She was scowling but Hassan thought he spotted a glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

“A simple RF hack,” said Bree. “Pretty funny, though. Almost as funny as when I hacked the intranet of the terrorist group Ansar Dine and replaced their bomb-making manuals with cupcake recipes.”

“Wait...you did that?”

“If I did, do you think I’d be telling you?”

“I don’t know.” Hassan felt way out of his depth. He could sense Pierre at his shoulder, no doubt grinning his head off.

“So what now?” Bree raised a sarcastic eyebrow. “You recruit me for some job and we seal the deal by sharing a shawarma?”

Each lazy Californian vowel knocked another dent in Hassan's confidence. "We didn't mean 'recruit'," he stammered. "We meant 'invite'. And it's not so much a job as a...a..."

"An act of compassion," interrupted Pierre. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "We're going to take the Rashid Stone from the British Museum and repatriate it to Egypt, where it belongs."

Bree's expression did not even flicker at this revelation, but Hassan noticed that her hand tightened a little around the computer mouse in her hand.

"Where it belongs." Bree rolled the phrase around her mouth, as if tasting it. "Sounds so simple when you put it like that. And where do you belong, Pierre Dupont? Egypt? France?"

"We're not talking about me," said Pierre hotly. "And for your information, I—"

"Chill out, I'm just messing with you." A languid smile spread across Bree's face. "Ain't nothing so triggered as an international school student being asked where they're from."

"Ain't nothing so rude as messing with people you hardly know," snapped Pierre. "And don't pretend you don't agree with us. I saw you at Debate Society earlier. You voted for our motion."

"The motion didn't mention stealing."

"It's not stealing. It's repatriating."

Bree smirked and turned back to her computer. “And how do you imagine my role in this heroic act of repatriation? Let me guess, I’ll be the nerdy girl using her awesome hacker skills to exploit weaknesses in the museum’s security protocol. I’ll have a super-cool hacker nickname like Oracle or 8-Ball, and as soon as the job is done I’ll remove my glasses and let my hair down and you’ll realise that as well as being super-intelligent I’m actually kinda cute. Something along those lines?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Hassan mumbled. “But you can keep your glasses on if you prefer.”

Bree pulled her chair forward and continued coding. Pierre shrugged and went to reshelve the Cleopatra biography. Hassan stood there awkwardly, unsure whether to stay or go.

“I’ll take a look at it,” said Bree without looking round. “But I’m warning you, the security systems at the British Museum will be nothing like the electronic display board on the desert road. In terms of encryption, we’re talking chalk and cheese. Night and day. Llama and shawarma.”

Hassan’s pulse jumped. “Yes, of course,” he said. “All we’re asking is that you take a look.”

SATURDAY NIGHT WAS FUN NIGHT AT AIS, AND THIS Saturday the entertainment was *Alexandria's Got Talent*. Pierre and Hassan sat in the dark auditorium and clapped a series of mediocre acts onto and off the stage.

"When is Miyoung coming on?" Pierre whispered. "If I have to sit through another cello recital, I swear I'm going to disembowel myself."

"I think she's next," Hassan replied.

A round-faced girl strode barefoot onto the stage wearing a black jumpsuit and cat-ear headband. Hassan was in the same physics class as Miyoung and he had heard rumours about her magic skills, but he had never actually talked to her.

"Good evening, AIS!" Miyoung shouted. "May I have a volunteer? One of the teachers, perhaps?"

Mr Annon the sports teacher hopped up onto the stage, beaming expectantly.

“Take this, sir.” Miyoung passed the teacher a coin. “One Egyptian pound, newly minted. Hold it far out in front of you in your clenched fist.”

Mr Annon grinned. “Do I get to keep it?”

“If you’re lucky.” Miyoung touched him lightly on the arm. “Hold it a little higher, please. And a little higher still. Good. Now concentrate on that coin and whatever you do, hold it tight and don’t give it to anyone. Excellent. Now give it to me.”

The teacher obligingly handed back the coin.

“I said, don’t give it to anyone,” snapped Miyoung in mock irritation. “Here, take it. Clench your fist. Guard it properly. Stand here. No, here. Do you have the coin?”

“Yes.” Mr Annon stared at his clenched fist. “I think so.”

“You’re sure about that?”

The teacher chuckled. “Not entirely.”

“You do have the coin, sir.” Miyoung turned to the audience. “And in return, I have your fountain pen...your wallet...your house keys...” (she showed the items one by one) “...your lovely gold watch...and your *Café du Soleil* loyalty card!”

Hassan could not believe his eyes. With amazing sleight of hand, Miyoung had picked the teacher’s pockets – and wrist – in plain view of the entire audience. They had been so fixated on the coin in Mr Annon’s hand, they had missed everything Miyoung had been doing.

As his fellow students burst out laughing and clapping, Hassan leaned over and whispered in Pierre's ear, "We need her."

"I know, right?" Pierre beamed. "If she can steal Annon's watch, the Rosetta Stone is toast!"

Mr Annon jumped down from the stage, still shaking his head in bewilderment.

Miyoung acknowledged the applause by curling her hands into a heart symbol. "You want more?" she called.

"Yes!"

Miyoung took off her cat ear headband and put on a black cloak and a gold-painted mask. With its delicate features and high, arched eyebrows, it reminded Hassan of Tutankhamun's death mask.

Two pony-tailed Grade 9 girls appeared stage left, carrying a three-sided cabinet. They set it down in the middle of the stage and exited stage right.

Miyoung strode to the cabinet and swung the two front sides apart. The interior was bare, save for a large burlap sack lying crumpled on the floor.

"Volunteer!" cried Miyoung imperiously.

Pierre and Hassan's hands shot up, but so did a hundred others. Miyoung pointed at Pedro, a pale Grade 9 boy, and he joined her on the stage, looking more than a little anxious.

When Miyoung commanded him to climb inside the burlap sack, Pedro looked even more nervous, but it was too late to back out now. He stepped

into the sack and allowed Miyoung to seal the opening with a fiendish double knot.

“Mail him to the Siwa Oasis!” yelled a hoarse voice, and there were nervous titters of laughter.

Hassan did not laugh. He was engrossed in the spectacle, following Miyoung’s every move. She closed the cabinet door and turned to face the audience with a pharaoh’s crook in one hand and a flail in the other. Had she retrieved them from the sack, or from some hidden fold of her cloak? Hassan had no idea.

Gentle harp music embroidered the air and Miyoung began to dance around the cabinet, bobbing and twirling. On the first beat of every bar, she tapped the plywood with her crook, and on the off beats she whipped it with the flail. Hassan was mesmerized by the resonant, cascading beauty of the harp, the improvised percussion and the graceful dance.

As the music faded to silence, Miyoung darted to the cabinet door and flung it open to reveal the squirming burlap sack. She approached the sack, untied the knot and released her captive.

There was shocked silence from the audience, followed by a gasp so sharp and pure it made the hairs on Hassan’s arms stand up.

The person emerging from the sack was none other than Miyoung Moon. As for the pharaoh – he whipped off his golden mask to a second tremor of astonishment – it was Pedro, the pale Grade 9 boy.

As soon as the initial shock had passed, the audience rose to their feet as one, clapping and stamping and yelling themselves hoarse. Miyoung

shuffled to the front of the stage and once more curled her hands into a heart symbol.

“Come on,” said Hassan, putting on his jacket. “Let’s go.”

“What do you mean?” Pierre whispered. “The talent show’s not finished.”

“Ours is. We’re going backstage right now to recruit a magician.”

end of sample

Thanks for reading this far.

Please do buy the book and read on!