

LVW Flash Fiction Contest 2017

HONORABLE MENTION

Ka of Imen-Potek

by Cindy Bartolotta

Hidden in a deserted gully far west of the Valley of the Kings, Dr. Ben An-wala led the small excavation. It was not a sanctioned dig by the Ministry of Antiquities, but the compensation offered to him was extremely lucrative. Weeks went by without any luck. He was about to give up, but the pair who hired him insisted he continue for three more days. When asked why, Rashida brushed away his question. "It will no longer matter."

On the third day, when the sun was nearly overhead, the workers called out. They had discovered a door! The pharaoh's seal was broken, but the door was jammed. Dr. An-wala examined the door, noticing an irregularly shaped indentation. "It looks like a keyhole."

Rashida moved forward. "Dismiss the workers, Dr. An-wala. They are no longer needed." When the doctor hesitated, Rashida stepped closer and brushed away more dirt. "Behold the curse," she pointed. The workers stepped back, murmuring in fear.

"Do it, doctor," she urged. "For their sake."

An-wala turned to his foreman. "Tell the workers to go home. All of you go home."

Within fifteen minutes, the three were alone.

"Now what?" An-wala asked.

Rashida pulled a chained amulet from beneath her shirt, fitting it into the keyhole. When she turned it, they heard a grinding noise deep beneath their feet. The door slid open.

"How?"

Rashida entered the black tunnel and disappeared.

Mushafa, the young man, pushed An-wala forward.

"Wait. At least allow me to get a flashlight."

"That is not necessary." Rashida stood before them with a lit torch. "Come. We must hurry." She led the way deep into the tomb. Broken pots and figurines littered the tunnel.

"Someone plundered the tomb before," An-wala stated.

"Yes," Mushafa answered. "Many times. And they were all punished for it."

An-wala squinted. "How do you know this?"

Rashida spun around. "Because we were there."

Finally they reached the main chamber. The lid of the sarcophagus sat askew. Linen from the mummy draped over the side. All possessions for the afterlife had been rifled through and broken.

Rashida bowed her head. "They even defiled his body."

Mushafa urged, "Hurry, sister. We haven't much time."

She nodded and reached into a leather pouch at her side. She held a gold scarab brooch inset with a huge sapphire. Stepping behind the stone coffin, she placed the scarab into an opening in the wall. Like the key, it was a perfect fit. When she pressed it, the room spun in shimmering lights.

When the lights settled, brother and sister, dressed in ancient Egyptian garb, stood with An-wala in the desert.

"I don't understand. What just happened?"

"The scarab contains the pharaoh's ka. His soul, if you will. You are witnessing what happened three thousand years ago. Watch, as we did."

People huddled outside beneath the shimmering glow of torches. Despite the gentle night breeze from the north, the heat from the sand was already oppressive. The sun was not yet visible, but a faint glow appeared in the east.

They watched as guards pushed several people forward. In the torchlight, the terror on their faces was evident.

Everyone went silent as the tent flaps parted and the high priest strode forward. Holding his staff, he raised his hands to the rising sun and spoke. "I, Unakumun, humble priest, beseech the great god Ra! Punish the infidels. They plotted to defile the tomb of the Pharaoh, Imen-potek. Punish them so all may observe your wrath!" He turned and waved his staff at the three people standing aside.

Immediately everyone else dropped to their knees, averting their eyes. As soon as the morning sun fully lifted in the eastern sky, there was a single piercing scream—then nothing.

The high priest ordered, "Look what awaits those who disobey."

On the ground was a pile of dust. A strong breeze blew scattering the remains amid the grains of sand, forever to be lost in time.

"No one dares disobey the gods," the high priest warned. He pointed his staff at two others. Looking at his temple guards, he demanded. "Bring them."

An-wala's eyes opened wide. "That's you."

"Yes."

Their current selves followed behind Unakumun. They watched as brother and sister were tattooed with the ancient symbols and charged with guarding Imen-potek. They observed the sacred mummification process and assisted in placing the dead pharaoh in his final resting place. They watched as they were drugged and seated at either side of the head of the pharaoh's coffin, sealed in the tomb at the side of their charge.

"Buried alive?"

Rashida nodded. "That was the way. Watch. There is more to come."

The tomb turned black; the shimmering lights returned. Again they stood inside the temple. This time, others were there. Grave robbers seeking whatever gold or artifacts they could find. Nothing happened until one of the thieves pried the scarab out of the wall. Minutes after he crossed the tomb's threshold, the skeletons of the brother and sister came alive. Everything disappeared and the scene changed.

The three watched as the thief sat with another man examining the artifacts. Flames shot from the scarab, surrounding them. When the fire died away, there was nothing left of the men but a pile of ashes. The siblings, hidden in shadows, retrieved the treasures and returned again to the temple.

Similar scenes appeared over and over.

"What does this have to do with me?" Dr. An-wala asked.

"Your ancestor tried to stop the last defiler of the tomb. He died saving the ka of Imen-potek. Unakumun wishes to reward you. Our duty is over."

"What do you mean?"

Unakumun appeared. "You have done well, my children, and earned eternal rest." He raised his staff. Rashida and Mushafa disappeared. Then he turned to An-wala. "You have earned the pharaoh's gratitude. A new personal guard is needed and the pharaoh has chosen you." Unakumun raised his staff. Dr. An-wala screamed and backed away as ghost-like temple priests materialized and pulled him into the darkness.

THE END

*A regular participant in the LVW Flash Fiction contests, **Cindy Bartolotta** enjoys the challenge of capturing a complete story in 1,000 words or less. The only drawback, she says, is losing backstory to keep within the word count. Cindy had two short stories published in the Tribune Review's Focus magazine, won several minor prizes in the 24-Hour writing contest, and had three stories published in anthologies. Cindy also creates a monthly word search puzzle for the Senior Times and is currently working on several novels. She resides in the Monongahela Valley.*