The Hungry Gods Go to the Escape Room

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I booked it in July, which is when you book things if you're the one who books things. Lost Hour Escape Rooms, Langley, a Thursday in October, 4:00 p.m., The Pharaoh's Curse, up to eight players, sixty minutes. Team-building for the back office of Fraser Valley Home Lending. There were seven of us. I made T-shirts. They were teal, which is our Q3 colour, and they said WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER on the front, and on the back they said ESCAPE ROOM 2026, and on Gary's they said GARY, because he's the branch manager and he asked.

The man at the front desk had a lanyard that said CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He had our waivers on a clipboard, all seven, and he went through them one at a time while we stood there in our shirts.

"Darren," he said.

Darren is in Underwriting. He put his hand up.

"You've signed this 'Tutankhamun.'"

"It's themed," said Darren.

The Conscience-Keeper gave him a new waiver and a pen and waited, and it was not a long wait, but it felt long, and Darren signed it Darren.

Then phones. Phones go in the lockers, because of photos, because of spoilers. Trevor put his phone in a locker. The Conscience-Keeper looked at him. Trevor put his other phone in the locker.

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The game master was a tall man with a headset whose name tag said SEEKER, and he took us down a hallway to a black curtain and stood us in front of it and gave the briefing.

I'll be honest. I didn't hear the briefing. I was taking a group photo on the Lost Hour camera so we'd have a before, and Priya from Closing wanted to be on the end, and Gary wanted to be in the middle, and they were both right. I heard him say nothing above shoulder height was part of the game. I heard him say not to force anything. I heard him say something about the door, and then Gary said "Let's GO, team," the way he says it at the quarterly, and we went in, through the curtain and a door behind it, and the door shut.

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The Pharaoh's Curse is a tomb. It's a good tomb. There's sand on the floor, real sand, and torches that flicker, and a sarcophagus in the middle with a lid on it, and the walls are stone, or something that looks so much like stone that when Gary leaned on one it didn't move. There's a big carved door at the far end with a scarab on it. That's the way out. The clock was on the wall above it, in red, at 60:00, and then 59:59.

The first puzzle was hieroglyphs. There's a wall of them and a chart of what they mean, and you work out a word.

We did not work out a word. We worked out, for eight minutes, whether the Oilers' power play had been bad this year or very bad. This started because one of the hieroglyphs looked like a hockey stick, which Trevor said, and Priya said it was obviously a crook, as in a shepherd's crook, as in a pharaoh's, and Trevor said that's what he meant, a hockey stick, and then it was about the power play.

I said, "Team." Nobody heard me. I was wearing the same shirt as them.

At 51:20 the intercom crackled.

"Would you like a hint?" said the Seeker.

"Yes," said Gary.

"The answer may be in the sarcophagus," said the Seeker. "I can't confirm that."

We looked at each other.

"Can't, or won't?" said Priya.

"Can't," said the Seeker. "I didn't design the puzzle. I've seen teams find it in the sarcophagus. I've seen teams find it elsewhere. I can tell you where I'd look."

"Where would you look?"

"In the sarcophagus."

* * *

The lid of the sarcophagus weighed what a stone lid would weigh. It took four of us. Inside there was a mummy, and the mummy had a scroll, and the scroll had the word, which was

KHEPRI, which is the beetle who rolls the sun across the sky, which Darren knew, because, he said, of the waiver.

Also in the sarcophagus there was a key.

It wasn't a gold key or an old key. It was a regular brass key with a tag on it, and the tag had a biohazard symbol and said ZOMBIE LAB – CABINET 3.

"Ooh," said Trevor.

We spent the next twenty minutes on that key.

We tried it in the canopic jars. We tried it in the box under the torch. We tried it in a crack in the wall that turned out to be just a crack in the wall. Priya found a keyhole on the bottom of a statue of a cat, and we were sure, and it wasn't the right key for the cat, and we kept trying it in the cat anyway, in case.

Once, around then, I looked back at the door we'd come in through. It was a plain white door. It wasn't Egyptian, so I didn't count it.

At 31:40 a door I hadn't noticed opened in the corner, and a young man came in carrying a ladder. His name tag said CHAOS-WEAVER. He looked around the room the way you'd look around your own kitchen.

"Sorry," he said. "Light's out in Zombie Lab. I need this."

He saw the key in Gary's hand.

"Oh, that's mine," he said, cheerfully, and left with the ladder, and not the key.

* * *

"Does the vase matter?" Gary said, into the intercom, at 24:10.

There is a vase on a plinth by the scarab door. It has a cobra on it. We had been looking at it for a while.

"It's from the HomeSense in Coquitlam," said the Seeker. "We bought it in 2023. Twenty-four ninety-nine."

"But does it matter? For the puzzle?"

"It was on clearance," said the Seeker.

There was a pause.

"I'm going to say no," said the Seeker. "But I'd want you to know where it came from."

We left the vase alone. I want to say that was teamwork.

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The rest of it went fast. Priya got the cat. She'd been staring at it for twenty minutes because of the key, and at 22:00 she said, "Wait, it's looking the wrong way," and it was. You don't use a key on the cat; you turn its head, and inside its head is a number. The number goes in the scales. The scales need a weight you get from the jars. Darren did the jars, alone, in silence, like a man defusing something, and nobody talked about the Oilers once. Trevor held the torch so Darren could see. Gary read every clue out loud, twice, which in a group of seven is useful about once.

At 0:41 we put the last weight in the scales and there was a loud click from the scarab door, the sound of a magnet letting go of something heavy.

Everybody cheered. Gary said, "Let's GO."

The door did not move.

We pushed it. We pushed it harder. Seven people in teal shirts with our shoulders against a carved stone door and our shoes going sideways in the sand, and it moved, I would say, not at all.

0:20.

The corner door opened again, and an older man came in. He had sawdust on his sleeves and a tag that said HAND, and he looked like the man who had built the door, because he was.

He didn't push it. He put his palm low on one side of it, about knee height, and lifted, a little, the way you lift a door that's dropped on its hinges, and then he pushed, and it swung open as easy as a fridge.

"It's heavy," he said. "It's meant to be."

It was 0:02 when we came out.

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They take a photo for the leaderboard. You hold signs. Ours said WE ESCAPED and BEAT THE CURSE, and Gary held one that said TEAM, which wasn't a Lost Hour sign, which he had brought.

It was while we were giving the signs back that I asked the Seeker. I don't know why. I think I wanted to know how close it had been.

"What happens if a team doesn't make it?"

"They go out the way they came in," he said.

"Which way?"

He pointed down the hallway, to the black curtain. Behind it was the door we'd come in by, the plain white one. On the

inside it had a push bar and a little green EXIT sign. I had looked right at it.

"It isn't locked," he said. "It's never locked. The fire marshal was through in March, and it wasn't locked before that either." He thought about it. "I did say. At 4:02."

I looked at Gary. Gary looked at the sign that said TEAM.

The Conscience-Keeper had our phones out of the lockers and lined up on the counter, all eight, and he would not release them until each of us had signed out. Trevor signed for two. Darren signed out Darren. I checked.

On the way to the cars I looked at the leaderboard on Trevor's phone. We were fourteenth of fifteen teams that week.

The fifteenth had used the door.