

MUMMY'S MASK

The Pharaoh's Tomb

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: SHADOW OF THE SANDS 6 OF 6

"You're crazy," I said. "Completely off the path. I don't even know why we're talking about this."

Farhaan and I sat on a bench against the rail of our rented barge. A day had passed since we'd left Ipeq. Another bright, hot day met us at dawn, and now we sat baking in the sun and watching fish dart between the verdant reeds of the river.

"All I'm saying is that, technically, he belongs to me," Farhaan said.

"Not a chance. I'm the one that rescued him." I dipped a hand into the travel satchel to make sure Toothy's rag bed was sufficiently damp. "I'm the one who kept him safe this whole time. And he likes me."

"He's a crocodile. I don't think he's overly attached to anything but dinner."

"Not true." I peeked into the travel satchel. Toothy nosed the air, lifting his snout for scratches. I obliged. "See? He was never really yours anyway, he just hung out in your bar."

"I stand corrected. I have now seen the miraculous bond that can form between a human and a tiny crocodile."

I closed the satchel and turned my attention back to the river. My gaze drifted across the sere landscape beyond the green banks of the Sphinx. A pile of stones massed a dozen yards up the river, on the bank nearest us. Arrows, runes, and words still showed on their faces, eroded by time and sand but still legible. "What's that?"

"A waystone. They point travelers to settlements and camps. Some of them are thousands of years old."

One small rock's symbols seemed to be neither runes nor letters, but a series of slanted lines. Though I couldn't translate the markings, there was something familiar about them. I squinted as we drew nearer, trying to remember where I'd seen lines like that before.

When it hit me, it was almost too late. The river swept us along toward the waystone. I slid off the bench onto my knees and rested my chin on the railing.

"Uh, Nenet? Are you okay?"

I tilted my head slowly to one side, then the other, until I stared sideways down the length of the river. I cried out in triumph and scrambled to my feet. "Stop the boat!"

The nearest sailors gave me a curious glance, but most ignored me and went about their duties. I fumbled the travel satchel over my shoulder and pulled my pack out from under the bench. "Stop the boat!"

"They're not going to stop the boat." Farhaan caught my shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Sorry, I have to go," I babbled. "Good luck in Tephu."

"Nenet!"

The crew finally took notice as I backed up across the deck to gain a running start. As we sailed past the waystone I sprinted across the deck and vaulted over the railing.

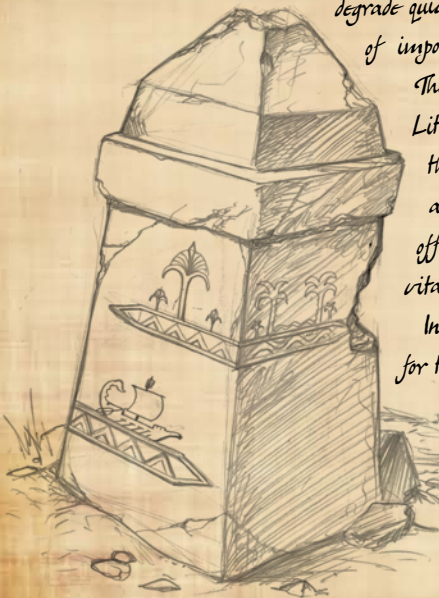
OSIRIAN WAYSTONES

In the desert, the travelers who know where to find water and shade are the ones who survive. Ordinary signposts degrade quickly in the blowing sands, so long-ago travelers devised a more permanent way of marking areas of importance.

The first waystones were etched on large stones found in the desert and pointed the way to nearby locations. Little more than the nature of the place indicated and a general direction were recorded. As waystones showed their usefulness, travelers began moving stones into central locations. Caravans would camp near waystones and add their own knowledge to the collection of stones. Cities rose in the desert, and soon governments sent officials to place, monitor, and update waystones. Because citizens' livelihoods often depend on trade, it was vital to ensure that visitors could reach a city without becoming lost among the rolling dunes.

Instead of writing out locations in words, most waystones display the locations in symbols or rebuses. This allows for travelers who speak many languages to make use of the stones. Tephui, for example, is often indicated by a papyrus reed. An arrow within a circle generally points the way to an oasis.

As cities became more established and trade routes developed, waystones became less important. Some were abandoned to the scouring desert wind. Some, particularly ones that pointed to out-of-the-way landmarks, remain in use. Travelers often come across waystones during desert treks, but these aren't always reliable, as their markings can be decades or even centuries out of date.



PYRAMID OF THE PHARAOH

For the second time this week I plunged into the crisp waters of the Sphinx.

At least I still had my daggers this time.

“You didn’t have to come with me,” I said for the twentieth time as Farhaan and I slogged across the desert. Again.

“This is more exciting than floating my way to Tephu,” he replied. “And you still have my crocodile.”

I’d been surprised—but not too surprised—when Farhaan had slogged up out of the river behind me. It took little time to explain why I’d abandoned our ride. When he tilted his head properly, he too saw the lines on the stone blend together to show a triangle, an owl, and an arrow pointing into the desert. It was a perspective puzzle, the same style as the one on my amulet.

It took longer to convince Farhaan that what I’d seen was in any way important.

“The sign could be pointing to anything,” he’d argued.

“It’s hidden the same way as the route to my ancestor’s tomb was,” I’d counter-argued. “Plus the owl on the image is the same as the one I saw above the door to the tomb in Wati.”

“Owls are popular. And whatever’s there could have crumbled away hundreds of years ago.”

“I have to look,” I’d replied. “When will I ever get this chance again?”

Now, hours later, night approached. I hoped whatever location the signs pointed to wasn’t too much farther into the desert. Though we’d passed two more stones marked with perspective-puzzle directions, it was easy to veer off course in the trackless sands.

I needn’t have worried. As the light failed, I saw a shadow against the horizon. I pointed. “I think that might be another waystone.”

Farhaan nodded. He trailed after me as I angled my course toward the shadow.

Before the sun disappeared completely and night overtook the desert, we got close enough to make out the shape in detail. I stopped short, and Farhaan whistled. This was no waystone.

It was a pyramid.

The pyramid loomed above us, framed against the sky by a thousand softly glowing stars.

It was smaller than those I’d seen in books, but now that I stood next to the thing, it seemed plenty big enough. Neither Farhaan nor I made a sound as we circled it. We returned to stand again before the ancient doors. They stood closed, an owl icon carved into each one.

“At times like this,” I finally said, “I think I begin to understand Kema a bit.”

“Then you’re wiser than I.”

“She works to protect Osirion’s history and treasures. At least, that’s what I gather from her rants. I’m an explorer, a cataloguer of sites. I didn’t understand at first why anyone would want to leave things buried, but...” I reached out to touch the cooling stones. “There’s a lot of weight to history. More than I realized.”

“Should we leave this place undisturbed, then?”

“Not on your life.” I smiled at Farhaan. “Let’s get these doors open. Pyramids don’t usually have them, do they?”

He shook his head. “Hidden entrances, if any. Be careful. There’s no way the builders left this tomb unguarded.”

We started by examining the area around the doors. Farhaan’s words showed their truth quickly enough. Half-buried in the sand before the door was a charred skull.

I jerked back in shock when I realized what I was seeing. Gingerly, I scraped away more sand. “The rest of the body is here, too. Looks like it was hit by lightning.”

“Or it triggered a ward. We might not be able to get in here, Nenet.”

I straightened and dusted my hands off on my trousers. “We can do it. My bloodline ties me to this place.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

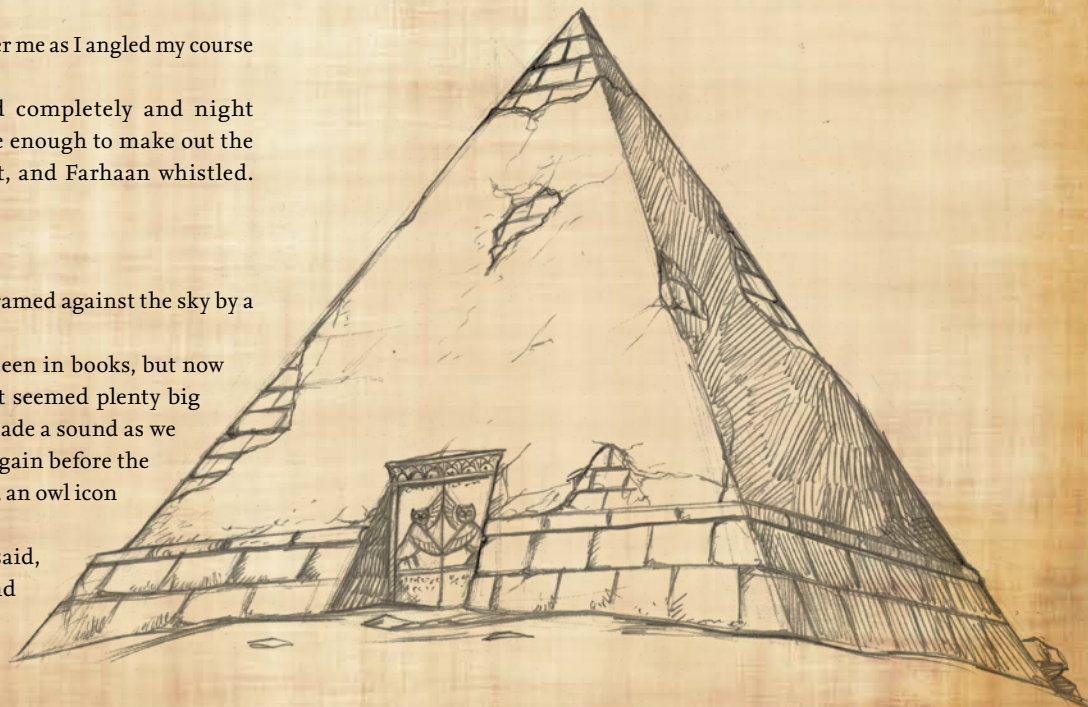
“Stand back and let me try.”

“Nenet—”

“Move, Farhaan!”

Farhaan backed away as I reached a hand toward the carved frame around the door. I held my breath, shoulders tight, as my fingers came in contact with the stone.

Nothing happened. I let my breath out with a sigh. Carefully I worked my way around the frame, searching for any sort of trap or hidden trigger for opening the door. The rough surface scraped against my fingertips as I worked through



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USHABTI SERVANTS

An ushabti is a special type of servant created for the afterlife. If the deceased's spirit is required to labor or suffer hardship after death, ancient Osirian legends say that an ushabti figurine steps in to perform the task for its master.

An ushabti might also serve the deceased's spirit directly by tending to any needs it might have.

Of course, the magic required to make an actual afterlife servant is immense. Such creations, called shabtis to distinguish them from their nonmagical counterparts, are rare to the point of mythical. Even in ancient Osirian, most wealthy individuals satisfied themselves with mundane figurines that honored the superstition without emptying the coffers. An individual's importance could often be measured by the number of ushabtis in a tomb, with pharaohs having hundreds or even thousands of ushabtis. The tradition of ushabtis in modern Osirian has mostly fallen out of fashion, but one or two small figurines might be added to a person's tomb for the sake of tradition.

Ushabtis look different based on the region in which they were created, but all share similar basic characteristics. The humanoid figurines stand no more than a foot tall and carry items to help with their tasks in the afterlife. Many carry a spear and a basket, but regional tastes may dictate other items for the ushabtis to carry.

Some tombs contain enchanted ushabtis that animate to protect the deceased's body or manifest other powers. Enchanted ushabtis are usually imbued with the power to serve their bearers in some way, whether by healing wounds, making burdens lighter, or hastening travel times. Such ushabtis are frequently taken from tombs by robbers to be sold and resold, and as a result can be found in many marketplaces across Osirian.



every crevice. I tore off the tip of my nail trying to pry open what I thought was a hidden panel but which turned out to be just a crack in the stone. I stuck my bleeding fingertip in my mouth and glowered at the doorframe.

When I finished my examination of the frame, I looked back at Farhaan. "I don't see any traps. I'm going to try the door."

"Be careful," he called again.

The engraved owls seemed to watch me as I turned my attention to the doors. Runes I couldn't read hid among the surface decorations. They could be prayers to the dead, magical wards, or graffiti for all I knew.

Finally I reached out to touch the door. Excitement and fear warred within me; I was poised, ready to run, even though the skeleton near my feet told me that by the time I realized I had triggered a trap, it would be too late.

My fingertips touched the door. A thunderous crack like a bolt of lightning split the still desert air.

I screamed and stumbled back. Farhaan yelled my name and charged forward.

He grabbed my arms as I gasped for breath and tried to still my crazily beating heart. "I'm okay," I managed. "I'm okay. Look!"

The dark line between the two doors had widened. My touch had unlocked them and opened the way.

"I told you," I whispered, exultant. "I'm meant to be here!"

Together, we stepped inside the ancient pyramid.

We'd only had the funds for minimal equipment in Ipeq, so we explored the pyramid the old-fashioned way, with a

torch. Farhaan held the flickering brand as we crept through the ancient rooms.

Beyond the entrance we found an antechamber filled with clay statuettes. The figures stood no higher than my knee and clustered in the corners of the room. I paused to examine their faces. "These are the servants meant to accompany the entombed into the afterlife, right?"

Farhaan nodded. "They tend to the spirit's needs after death. This must have been an important person."

"Any chance we'll find a couple of once-living servants down here?"

Farhaan shrugged. "Some families walled living servants in with their dead, in the belief that they would serve better than the ushabti statues. Some left secret entrances so that living servants could enter the pyramid years or even decades after the original burial to ensure the deceased rested safely. Who knows what we'll find here?"

"Let's hope that if there are dead people here, they sleep peacefully."

A dark archway showed the path onward. Beyond the archway, to the left and right, stone slab doors blocked the passages a dozen feet in. Directly ahead of us, stone double doors displayed a marvelous image of an owl. A thin seam of gold outlined the owl's body, its tufted ears and sweeping wing. A round chip of lapis lazuli formed its staring eye. Its triangular beak gleamed silver in the torchlight.

"We should do this properly," I said. "Examine every inch of this place. I want to make a sketch of all the rooms."

He nodded sagely.

"After we look behind this door."

PYRAMID OF THE PHARAOH

Farhaan grinned.

Like the first door, this one cracked open beneath my touch. Together Farhaan and I pushed one slab in far enough for a person to slip through. My heart seemed liable to beat out of my chest, and my fingertips were icy cold with excitement. "I want to go in first," I said.

Farhaan handed me the torch. "The way it should be."

I wriggled my way past the door, eyes closed. Once through, I stood still for a moment, collecting my thoughts, savoring the moment. When I was ready, I opened my eyes and took in the room all at once.

The shine of gold seemed even brighter reflected off the walls of the small chamber. Heaps of artifacts—precious ewers, gilded clay vessels, piles of dusty coins—spilled from every corner of the room. Jewels glinted from the depths of a chest. A mosaic mural gleamed on the far wall, a scene of the flowing Sphinx with a pyramid in the distance. Before the mural, a stone platform held a shining gold sarcophagus.

"It's incredible," Farhaan whispered. I hadn't even heard him follow me in.

"I never thought... I never even dreamed."

We stepped to the center of the room, both of us spinning slowly to take in everything.

When we'd had our fill of looking, I hung the torch in a sconce on the wall and moved up to the sarcophagus. Hieroglyphs marched along the coffin's golden edge. I traced them with my fingers. "I wish I could read these."

"My Ancient Osirian's rusty," Farhaan said, "but I can make out a couple of phrases. That one looks like a prayer for the spirit of the deceased. It's common in funerary writings. I don't understand this part." He pointed to a series of wavy lines interspersed with animal icons. "And over here—"

"That's my name!" I exclaimed. "These two symbols. They represent the name of my family. I've seen them on some old documents of Grandfather's."

"Then that means this..." Farhaan trailed off, his brow furrowed. "Wait, that doesn't make sense."

"Why not? If this is my ancestor's tomb, it should have his name on the coffin."

"The entombed usually have their names on the lids, though. Your name is in a—well, a different position."

"What do you mean? What sort of position?"

"I'm not an expert—"

"Just tell me what you know."

With an apologetic shrug, Farhaan pointed to the symbol before my family name. A humanoid, shorter than the other symbols. "This is the image of an ushabti."

"One of the clay figures."

"Yes, but also more generally a servant. For your name to appear here, near this image... it may mean your family was..."

I blinked. "Are you saying we were the pharaoh's *servants*?"

"I was trying very hard not to say it, actually. But yes. That's what I think."

I stared at my family name.

Farhaan spoke hastily. "Since it's your family name, I imagine it wasn't just one of your ancestors who served here, but many. Probably a sacred duty passed on from generation to generation."

"We were a family of servants." I looked again at the gleaming coffin. A person of importance lay within, no doubt, but not an ancestor of mine.

"Sorry, Nenet. I know this isn't what you expected."

Before I could answer, the walls shook with a deafening boom. We spun around. I scanned for the source of the sound, imagining undead defenders, picturing the most defensible position in the room.

It took only a moment for me to realize the gravity of our situation. The door to the chamber stood closed.

Farhaan and I bolted toward the door. We struggled together to find a handle, a seam to dig our fingers into, anything. But this side of the door was smooth and unmarked.

A voice, muffled but distinct, spoke from the other side.

"And now I have you."

I gaped at the door. This was harder to accept than my family's lineage.

"Kema?" Farhaan sputtered.

"How did you find us here?" I shouted through the door.

"The gods of old Osirion approve of the actions of my order," she said. "They grant us aid. I can track the desecrators of tombs through a sandstorm at night when I call on my faith."

"That's how you knew we'd gone to Ipeq, too," I realized. I'd wondered how she'd known to follow us against the river's current.

"And now you're... what? Going to let us starve to death in here?" Farhaan kicked at the door.

There was an uncomfortably long silence from Kema.

"I haven't decided," she finally said. "You've eluded me more than once. If you will not submit, perhaps the tomb you intended to rob should become your own."

"We're not here to rob this place!" I said. "Kema, you may not believe me, but I'm only here to find out more about my ancestors. I'm an explorer, not a thief."

"And you may believe yourself, but I know too well the type of man who stands next to you."

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Farhaan shouted.

"I did what I could to save Janar. But it wasn't my fault!"

"Wasn't it? Do you swear by the ancient gods of our land? Do you swear on her memory that you were blameless?"

Farhaan rested his brow against the door and said nothing.

I heard a faint shuffle from the other side of the door. "Kema?"

No response.

"Kema?" I couldn't keep the panic from my voice. I called her name again, and again, to no avail.

MUMMY'S MASK

We were alone.

Farhaan sank cross-legged to the floor. "I'm sorry, Nenet."

"She'll be back." I tried to sound more confident than I was.

"This is my fault. In so many ways."

I sat next to him. "Tell me."

He stared at the ground, tracing patterns in the dusty floor as he spoke. "We were there to clear out the restless dead that had been plaguing the necropolis. We weren't supposed to take anything. Our group became scattered after a nasty assault, and as I tried to regroup with the others I ran into Janar—Kema's sister. She had found a burial chamber, something like this one."

"And full of treasure?"

"She was stuffing ornaments into her pack. She called to me when she saw me. 'We can carry more together! I should have told her to put it back immediately. Instead, I let her sway me. I was weak.'"

"Then what happened?"

"I was in the corner of the room, trying to fit a golden statue of a cat into my bag, when she screamed. An undead serpent hidden under a pile of coins bit her when she tried to collect them. It had some kind of necrotic poison. It killed her and then reanimated her." His face twisted in pain. "I had to fall back, find the others. Together we were able to... put her to rest. When the priests of Pharama rewarded us with artifacts from the tomb, I sold them as quickly as possible." "And you never told Kema the truth?"

"How could I? To know her sister was a tomb robber... it would taint all the memories she has. If she'd even believe me."

I put my hand on Farhaan's shoulder, and we sat in silence for a time. Finally, I stirred. "She'll be back," I said again. "Probably. In the meantime, we should try to find a way out of here."



"I don't think we'll get through those doors," Farhaan said. "And I don't see any other likely exits."

"Since my family served the line of whoever's lying in that coffin, maybe they expected us to return here. You said that happens. So the builders would make sure any servants who came to visit could get out again, right?"

"Maybe they expected the servants to be smart enough to wedge the door open."

"Come on, start exploring."

It took almost half an hour of searching the increasingly smoky chamber for us to find the loose stone. My heart leaped with sudden hope. Farhaan pried the stone out of the wall, but all that lay behind was another stone, this one carved with an ushabti icon.

"Well that's helpful," Farhaan said.

I slumped against the wall. "I should have just sailed on to Tephu."

"How exciting would that have been? A calm boat ride, a last argument in Tephu as I reclaimed Toothy, and then we'd have gone our separate ways. Not much of a story to tell."

"At this rate, we'll never tell our story to anyone." I flipped open the travel satchel. "And Toothy belongs to me. Speaking of which, I should probably feed him. He'll probably outlive both of us."

Toothy rose up, looking for scratches. I reached down to oblige, and to my surprise he snapped at my fingertips.

"Hey!"

"So much for the bond between human and tiny crocodile." Farhaan smirked.

I examined my hand. "He didn't mean it, he's just hungry. Probably my scab tempted him. I wrecked my nail opening that first—" I broke off as an idea flashed through my head. "I cut myself opening the first door!"

"You sound more excited by that than you should."

"What if that's *why* the door opened? What if there's a reason no one broke in here before?"

"It wasn't your touch." Farhaan's eyes gleamed. "It was your blood."

"And the way was opened." I closed the travel satchel and stepped over to the ushabti icon on the wall. "The owl is the symbol of my family's masters," I said, picking the scab off my forefinger. "The ushabti is the symbol of my family." I pressed my bloody fingertip to the icon.

With a groan and a puff of dust, a crack appeared between the door slabs.

Farhaan let out a whoop that turned into a cough. The smoke was getting really bad. Using our daggers to widen the crack, we pried a door open.

We escaped into the corridor with relief. The archway before us led to the ushabti room, where torches now blazed on the wall. In the center of the room, two robed figures knelt. A third had scrambled upright and turned to face us.

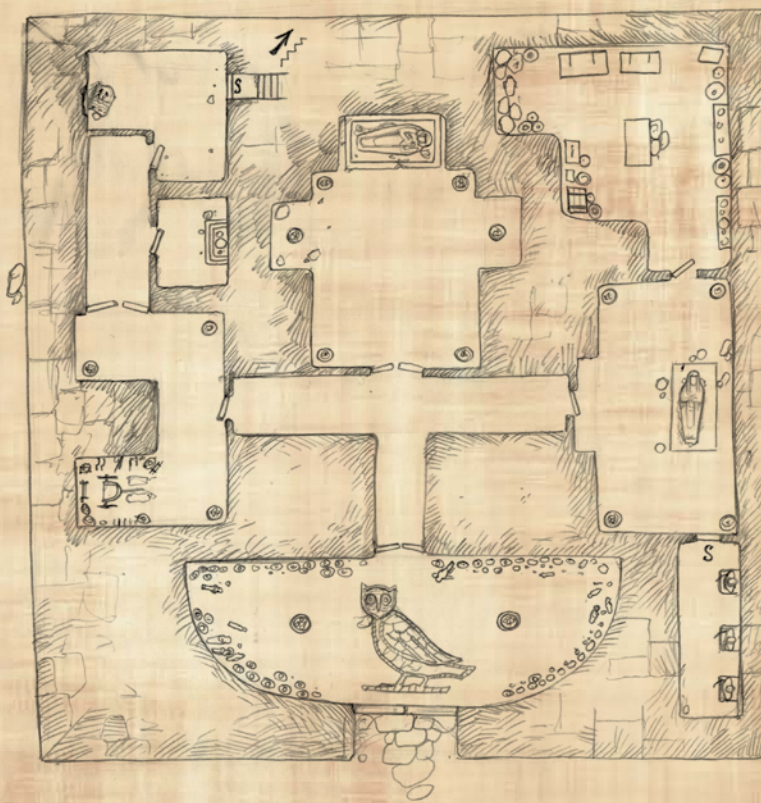
"Kema." I held up my open hands. "Wait. We need to talk."

PYRAMID OF THE PHAROAH



Years later, I was able to return and explore the rest of the pyramid's chambers. In addition to the central chamber for the pharaoh, there was also a side chamber for his consort, a shrine, and heaps of supplies for the afterlife.

There were also quite a few construct guardians, particularly in the hidden treasure chamber upstairs. Good thing my blood marked me as a servant...



"I think we passed that mark long ago," she said. Her guards rose, drawing their swords.

"We can keep doing this," I said. I could sense Farhaan tensing next to me and shot him a warning look. "We can keep fighting, if you want. But if so, let's at least take it outside. I don't want to shatter all these little servants."

"So I can play into your hands? You're slipperier than a river eel."

"Look, I understand why you've come after us. You're concerned with protecting the legacy of our ancestors, and I respect that. I might not always have, but I do now." I lowered my hands to my sides. "I want to know what your purpose is in all of this. What's your plan for us?"

"To bring you to our sanctum. There the gods of Old Osirion will hear our prayers and judge you accordingly."

That sounded like a whole lot of fun. "You said before that you believed I believed I had a right to be here. I do. My family served this pharaoh's line. That's how I was able to bypass the wards and enter this place."

"But he—"

Farhaan spoke before I had a chance to. "I'm not guilty of tomb robbing," he said. "But I might be guilty in other ways. I tried to keep the truth from you and it hasn't worked out so well." He put a hand on my shoulder. "Let's leave Nenet out of this and return to Wati together. We can go to the Temple of Phasasma and I'll tell the story of what really happened."

Kema didn't agree right away. She sent her guards outside on patrol to make sure Farhaan and I didn't have a trap

waiting. She examined the sarcophagi where I showed her my family name by the ushabti symbol and demonstrated how I'd opened the door. Finally, she nodded. "Very well."

"Thank you," I said. "Perhaps someday I'll return and tell you my story as well."

"Perhaps." Wariness still lurked in her eyes, but I saw interest there as well.

Farhaan and I bade each other goodbye in front of the pyramid while Kema and her group made their preparations to leave. "Have a safe trip back to Wati," I said.

"And you a safe trip home. Are you disappointed with what you found here?"

"A little. But Grandfather'll be pleased to know the truth—the real truth. And I'll record our history so it's never forgotten again."

"You said to Kema you might return one day. If you do..."

"I'll be sure to visit." I glanced down at the travel satchel. "Toothy will be glad to see you again."

Farhaan laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. "You're tenacious as a crocodile yourself. Very well, take care of the beast. Keep him warm."

"I'll make a bath for him by the fireplace in winter."

Kema called that they were ready. We struck out again into the desert, headed for the river where we would part ways, and I would leave this land of sand and shadows. I wasn't sure how the trip to Wati would go for Farhaan and Kema, but I hoped it would end in peace for both of them.

It seemed we all came to difficult truths in our own time.