




BOOK OF THE DEAD



# **TOMBQUEST**

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**SCHOLASTIC INC.**

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**For S.S.G., eventually.**  
**— M.N.**



## Prologue

Deep in the Egyptian night, the crypt was once again alive with activity.

Black candles cast an orange glow on the sandstone walls of the burial chamber, where row after row of ancient images and carved hieroglyphs detailed a history of trickery and triumph. A mix of beetle shells and bird feathers smoldered in a bronze pot. Animal hair and shed snakeskins burned slowly in another. A harsh, burnt smell filled the air. It was the stuff of life giving off the stink of death.

For thousands of years, the same secret organization had gathered here. It was where powerful people went to avoid detection, to discuss — or to do — the unthinkable.

The members of this secret society assembled around a massive stone sarcophagus. The ancient corpse entombed within was their founder. Everything they did was to serve him. Everything they did was to bring him back.

One by one, they began a low chant in his honor.

The first to start wore a dirty gray robe. It hung heavily on his angular frame, as if weighed down by grease. On his head was a mask in the shape of a fly's head. Two large eyes bulged out from the sides and glistened in the candlelight. His voice was jittery and uneven.

The next to pick up the ominous chant wore a flowing blue-green robe. His mask was the heavy iron image of a crocodile. Together, the robe and mask showed the powerful predator emerging from its hiding place beneath the Nile.

The next chanter was so thin under her crimson robe that she might have only been a skeleton. Her voice was dry and scratchy. On her face was the pale image of a lioness, carved from bleached bone.

The last to join in was a towering figure, a good foot taller than the others. His robe was as black as a starless sky and his mask was the stuff of nightmares. An Egyptian vulture: Part scavenger, part predator, it was a creature that dealt in death and wasn't picky about the details. The beak turned from gold to iron as it hooked down to a brutal, deadly point.

The vulture's voice was strong, clear — and utterly without emotion.

As the chanting reached a crescendo, the faintest traces of other voices chorused in. Raspy whispers played on a light breeze that had no place in the sealed underground chamber.

The four stopped chanting abruptly. The phantom voices hung on half a beat longer, then faded back into the shadows.

The meeting began. They didn't bother with the usual topics: the grim business of disposing of a body, or the intricacies of expanding their vast wealth. There was only one topic tonight, something so legendary that it made everything else seem trivial.

"They have them," said the man in the fly mask.

"Yes," said the lioness. "They found them when we could not, in all our years of searching."

"They have *something*," said the crocodile. "How do we know it's really —"

"I know!" the vulture cut in. The others fell silent. "The Lost Spells have been found. Now all that's left is to get them ourselves. And use them."

The others shot quick, nervous looks at the sarcophagus. It was the lioness who spoke next. "They plan to keep them in plain sight; they have no idea how powerful they truly are," she rasped. "Only the woman knows."

"We need someone there when they arrive," said the fly.

The vulture-headed man looked around the chamber, pinning each acolyte in place with his gaze. "It has already been arranged," he said. "Al-Dab'u is there."

The leader raised his hand and closed it, and the black candles went out with an angry hiss. The lioness, the crocodile, and the fly melted away in the darkness. Back to the surface, back to the desert night.

Once they were gone, the vulture stood motionless in the

dark tomb. He'd sensed something in the room, practically tasted it on the air. Fear. These were his top lieutenants, carefully selected for their brutal efficiency. But now that the Spells were so close, even they were scared of what was to come.

He rested his hands on the cold stone of the sarcophagus.

*They should be afraid*, he thought.

Everything they had done until now had been practice.

But this — this was the real test.

The doorway between worlds would soon be opened. The power of the dead was within his reach.



# A Deadly Secret

Alex Sennefer was about to die for the first time.

He was in the Arms and Armor section of The Metropolitan Museum of Art when the pain hit. The stabbing sensation was so sharp and sudden that for a moment he thought he must have accidentally walked into one of the medieval spears. The museum had closed an hour earlier, and as he stumbled forward, the slap of his sneakers on the polished tile floors echoed through the deserted room.

He'd run out of medicine, and there was no one around to help him.

Summoning all his remaining strength, he pushed through the wing's dimly lit main hall, heading for the elevator that would take him to his mom's office. He'd felt this way before, but never this bad.

The pain that had started as a sharp stab in his center fractured into a million pinpricks, spreading out into his limbs. Along the walls, six-hundred-year-old suits of armor

watched his struggle through empty eyeholes. A troop of knights gazed down on him from replica horses, immobile, indifferent.

He shook his arms out and tried to breathe deeply, tried to relax and let the pain pass through him. Sometimes the doctors said the problem was his circulation; sometimes they said it was his digestion. But the truth? Nobody knew what was wrong with him.

With every step, he was afraid another wave of pain would come and level him. He slowly entered the American Wing and saw the elevator.

*Almost there, he thought.*

*Breathe.*

He'd been stupid not to ask his mom to order more medicine as soon as he'd run out. But he'd thought he could bear it, and he was afraid his mom would get worried and take him to the hospital. He hated the hospital. HATED it. And his mom was seriously stressed out with work this summer. The last thing she needed was to have to worry more about him.

That seemed unavoidable now, though. He needed the spare bottle of meds that she kept for an emergency.

If he could even make it to her.

Alex reached the elevator and palm-smashed the DOWN button. After what felt like fifteen years, the elevator arrived. He fell into it. The words STAFF ONLY were printed alongside

the button for floor G, but he flipped through his keys and found the little one that unlocked the elevator. He crumpled against the wall as it began to move. The cool metal felt good against his flushed face.

Alex didn't pass a single person on the way to his mom's office. It was a beautiful summer evening, and no one wanted to work late unless they had to.

*I have to tell Mom*, he thought. He couldn't see any way around it now. The hum of pain in his body made it hard to focus, but thoughts of the hospital flashed through his head: the tests, the needles the size of Magic Markers, and the stupid paper robes. They'd been poking and prodding him for all twelve years of his life.

There was the name tag outside his mom's office: DR. MAGGIE BAUER. The door was open. The lights were on.

"Mom?" he said . . . but she wasn't there when he walked in.

Panic shot through him. The thoughts came one after another:

*The museum is huge.*

*She could be anywhere.*

*I need the medicine now!*

Just as he began to turn back around, he saw her purse on a chair and felt a massive surge of relief.

He tore the purse open. A wave of nausea made him squeeze his eyes shut, but he pushed his hand around inside,

feeling for the smooth plastic sides of the bottle of meds she always carried for him.

*Got it!*

His fingers closed and he tugged the familiar orange bottle out of the purse. His stomach clenched and fluttered in anticipation. He twisted the cap off and threw two pills into his mouth — no time for water. He put the cap back on, shoved the bottle back down where he'd found it, zipped the purse, and sank to the floor, exhausted.

*Breathe.*

*Breathe.*

*Breathe.*

For about ten minutes, all his body could do was

*Breathe.*

*Breathe.*

*Breathe.*

"How long have you been here?" said his mom from the doorway.

*Don't let her know.*

*Don't let her see me like this.*

Alex pushed himself to his feet, ignoring the pain that remained.

"Couple minutes," he said, trying to sound casual. He ran his hand through his hair, using the gesture to wipe some of the sweat off his forehead.

"Are you okay?" his mom asked.

Alex shrugged.

She looked at him closely, not convinced. Alex made glancing eye contact and regretted it immediately. His mom's eyes were an intense blue gray, still penetrating and clear despite all the days she spent reading dense academic papers. Alex knew she could read him just as easily. He shifted his gaze and stared blankly at the pile of dark brown hair on the top of her head. It was pulled up and back severely. Dr. Maggie Bauer had no time to worry about her hair.

"Why're you down here, hon? Do you need something?" she asked.

"Nope," he said. He tried to think of some way to change the subject. "How much longer are you going to be?"

"A while," she said. "I've got to head back to the Egyptian wing. The dead are very demanding, you know."

"Are you working on the Stung Man?" he asked, genuinely interested despite his lingering dizziness. The sarcophagus of a famous mummy known as the Stung Man was the first part of a special new exhibition his mom was curating. Alex was fascinated by it.

"No, something new," his mom answered vaguely. She usually loved to tell him all about her new projects.

"Can I come?" The Egyptian wing was Alex's favorite — not just the new show but all of it: the tightly wrapped mummies, the stone tombs, the statues of animal-headed humans and of human-headed animals, the gold and jewels

and all the other treasures the ancient Egyptians thought they could bring with them to the afterlife. It was the only place in the museum where he never got bored.

His mom thought about it. “Not today,” she said. “Go find Ren.”

“Ren’s here?” said Alex, his mood improving enormously.

“I just saw her,” said Alex’s mom. “I think she’s on the second floor.”

“Okay, cool.” He looked down at his feet and considered the level of pain in his body. “Oh yeah,” he said. “Almost forgot. Can you order me some more medicine?”

His mom’s radar clicked back on, her X-ray eyes refocused. “Did you go through it all already? Didn’t we just —”

“No, no, I think I lost it.” The excuse popped out of his mouth.

“You lost it?” She frowned. “You have to be careful. Just because you feel okay now . . .” He could tell she was trying to get him to realize how important the pills were without worrying him. It was a game they both played, each trying to spare the other.

He knew he should tell her what had just happened, but he couldn’t. That was the other thing about her eyes: They were ringed with dark circles and surrounded by deeply etched lines. That wasn’t from all the reading; that was him. His energetic, adventure-loving mom deserved a kid who could walk through the park in the summer without passing out from the heat.

Anyway, he was sure the pains would stop. They had before. He just needed a little more medicine until then.

“I know,” he said. He reached up and knocked on his head, as if it were made of wood. As if he’d just done something really dumb.

But then another wave of pain pushed through the medicine and made his head swim. His mom could see the pain in his expression, he was sure, and she would realize how sick he was —

There was a knock at the door frame.

Oscar, one of the museum guards, poked his head in. His usual relaxed smile was replaced with a look of grim concern. “Hey, Dr. Bauer. Mr. Duran says they need you right away in the Egyptian wing. Sounds like it’s pretty important.”

His mom spun around. “Thanks, Oscar. Alex, you’ll hang out with Ren, right?” And then she was gone.

So he wouldn’t have to tell her. It would be his secret.

His own deadly secret.