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WARNING

This is a transcript of an audio recording. Carter and Sadie Kane first made themselves known in a recording I received last year, which I transcribed as The Red Pyramid. *This second audio file arrived at my residence shortly after that book was published, so I can only assume the Kanes trust me enough to continue relaying their story. If this second recording is a truthful account, the turn of events can only be described as alarming. For the sake of the Kanes, and for the world, I hope what follows is fiction. Otherwise we are all in very serious trouble.*



1. Fun with Spontaneous Combustion

CARTER

Carter here.

Look, we don't have time for long introductions. I need to tell this story quickly, or we're all going to die.

If you didn't listen to our first recording, well . . . pleased to meet you: the Egyptian gods are running around loose in the modern world; a bunch of magicians called the House of Life is trying to stop them; everyone hates Sadie and me; and a big snake is about to swallow the sun and destroy the world.

[Ow! What was that for?]

Sadie just punched me. She says I'm going to scare you too much. I should back up, calm down, and start at the beginning.

Fine. But personally, I think you *should* be scared.

The point of this recording is to let you know what's really happening and how things went wrong. You're going to hear a lot of people talking trash about us, but we didn't cause those deaths. As for the snake, that wasn't our fault either.

Well . . . not exactly. All the magicians in the world *have* to come together. It's our only chance.

So here's the story. Decide for yourself. It started when we set Brooklyn on fire.

The job was supposed to be simple: sneak into the Brooklyn Museum, borrow a particular Egyptian artifact, and leave without getting caught.

No, it wasn't robbery. We would have returned the artifact eventually. But I guess we did look suspicious: four kids in black ninja clothes on the roof of the museum. Oh, and a baboon, also dressed like a ninja. *Definitely* suspicious.

The first thing we did was send our trainees Jaz and Walt to open the side window, while Khufu, Sadie, and I examined the big glass dome in the middle of the roof, which was supposed to be our exit strategy.

Our exit strategy wasn't looking too good.

It was well after dark, and the museum was supposed to be closed. Instead, the glass dome glowed with light. Inside, forty feet below, hundreds of people in tuxedos and evening gowns mingled and danced in a ballroom the size of an airplane hangar. An orchestra played, but with the wind howling in my ears and my teeth chattering, I couldn't hear the music. I was freezing in my linen pajamas.

Magicians are supposed to wear linen because it doesn't interfere with magic, which is probably a great tradition in the Egyptian desert, where it's hardly ever cold and rainy. In Brooklyn, in March—not so much.

My sister, Sadie, didn't seem bothered by the cold. She

was undoing the locks on the dome while humming along to something on her iPod. I mean, seriously—who brings their own tunes to a museum break-in?

She was dressed in clothes like mine except she wore combat boots. Her blond hair was streaked with red highlights —very subtle for a stealth mission. With her blue eyes and her light complexion, she looked absolutely nothing like me, which we both agreed was fine. It's always nice to have the option of denying that the crazy girl next to me is my sister.

"You said the museum would be empty," I complained.

Sadie didn't hear me until I pulled out her earbuds and repeated myself.

"Well, it was *supposed* to be empty." She'll deny this, but after living in the States for the last three months, she was starting to lose her British accent. "The Web site said it closed at five. How was I to know there'd be a wedding?"

A wedding? I looked down and saw that Sadie was right. Some of the ladies wore peach-colored bridesmaid dresses. One of the tables had a massive tiered white cake. Two separate mobs of guests had lifted the bride and groom on chairs and were carrying them through the room while their friends swirled around them, dancing and clapping. The whole thing looked like a head-on furniture collision waiting to happen.

Khufu tapped on the glass. Even in his black clothes, it was hard for him to blend into the shadows with his golden fur, not to mention his rainbow-colored nose and rear end.

"Agh!" he grunted.

Since he was a baboon, that could've meant anything from

Look, there's food down there to *This glass is dirty* to *Hey, those people are doing stupid things with chairs*.

"Khufu's right," Sadie interpreted. "We'll have a hard time sneaking out through the party. Perhaps if we pretend we're a maintenance crew—"

"Sure," I said. "'Excuse us. Four kids coming through with a three-ton statue. Just going to float it up through the roof. Don't mind us.'"

Sadie rolled her eyes. She pulled out her wand—a curved length of ivory carved with pictures of monsters—and pointed it at the base of the dome. A golden hieroglyph blazed, and the last padlock popped open.

"Well, if we're not going to use this as an exit," she said, "why am I opening it? Couldn't we just come out the way we're going in—through the side window?"

"I told you. The statue is *huge*. It won't fit through the side window. Plus, the traps—"

"Try again tomorrow night, then?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Tomorrow the whole exhibit is being boxed up and shipped off on tour."

She raised her eyebrows in that annoying way she has. "Perhaps if someone had given us more *notice* that we needed to steal this statue—"

"Forget it." I could tell where this conversation was going, and it wasn't going to help if Sadie and I argued on the roof all night. She was right, of course. I hadn't given her much notice. But, hey—my sources weren't exactly reliable. After weeks of asking for help, I'd finally gotten a tip from my buddy the falcon war god Horus, speaking in my dreams: *Oh, by the*

way, that artifact you wanted? The one that might hold the key to saving the planet? It's been sitting down the street in the Brooklyn Museum for the last thirty years, but tomorrow it leaves for Europe, so you'd better hurry! You'll have five days to figure out how to use it, or we're all doomed. Good luck!

I could've screamed at him for not telling me sooner, but it wouldn't have made any difference. Gods only talk when they're ready, and they don't have a good sense of mortal time. I knew this because Horus had shared space in my head a few months ago. I still had some of his antisocial habits—like the occasional urge to hunt small furry rodents or challenge people to the death.

"Let's just stick to the plan," Sadie said. "Go in through the side window, find the statue, and float it out through the ballroom. We'll figure out how to deal with the wedding party when we get that far. Maybe create a diversion."

I frowned. "A diversion?"

"Carter, you worry too much," she said. "It'll be brilliant. Unless you have another idea?"

The problem was—I didn't.

You'd think magic would make things easier. In fact, it usually made things more complicated. There were always a million reasons why this or that spell wouldn't work in certain situations. Or there'd be other magic thwarting you—like the protective spells on this museum.

We weren't sure who had cast them. Maybe one of the museum staff was an undercover magician, which wouldn't have been uncommon. Our own dad had used his PhD in Egyptology as a cover to gain access to artifacts. Plus, the

Brooklyn Museum has the largest collection of Egyptian magic scrolls in the world. That's why our uncle Amos had located his headquarters in Brooklyn. A lot of magicians might have reasons to guard or booby-trap the museum's treasures.

Whatever the case, the doors and windows had some pretty nasty curses on them. We couldn't open a magic portal into the exhibit, nor could we use our retrieval *shabti*—the magical clay statues that served us in our library—to bring us the artifact we needed.

We'd have to get in and get out the hard way; and if we made a mistake, there was no telling what sort of curse we'd unleash: monster guardians, plagues, fires, exploding donkeys (don't laugh; they're bad news).

The only exit that wasn't booby-trapped was the dome at the top of the ballroom. Apparently the museum's guardians hadn't been worried about thieves levitating artifacts out of an opening forty feet in the air. Or maybe the dome *was* trapped, and it was just too well hidden for us to see.

Either way, we had to try. We only had tonight to steal—sorry, *borrow*—the artifact. Then we had five days to figure out how to use it. I just love deadlines.

"So we push on and improvise?" Sadie asked.

I looked down at the wedding party, hoping we weren't about to ruin their special night. "Guess so."

"Lovely," Sadie said. "Khufu, stay here and keep watch. Open the dome when you see us coming up, yeah?"

"Agh!" said the baboon.

The back of my neck tingled. I had a feeling this heist was *not* going to be lovely.

"Come on," I told Sadie. "Let's see how Jaz and Walt are doing."

We dropped to the ledge outside the third floor, which housed the Egyptian collection.

Jaz and Walt had done their work perfectly. They'd duct-taped four Sons of Horus statues around the edges of the window and painted hieroglyphs on the glass to counteract the curses and the mortal alarm system.

As Sadie and I landed next to them, they seemed to be in the middle of a serious conversation. Jaz was holding Walt's hands. That surprised me, but it surprised Sadie even more. She made a squeaking sound like a mouse getting stepped on.

[Oh yes, you did. I was *there*.]

Why would Sadie care? Okay, right after New Year's, when Sadie and I sent out our *djed* amulet beacon to attract kids with magic potential to our headquarters, Jaz and Walt had been the first to respond. They'd been training with us for seven weeks, longer than any of the other kids, so we'd gotten to know them pretty well.

Jaz was a cheerleader from Nashville. Her name was short for Jasmine, but don't ever call her that unless you want to get turned into a shrub. She was pretty in a blond cheerleader kind of way—not really my type—but you couldn't help liking her because she was nice to everyone and always ready to help. She had a talent for healing magic, too, so she was a great person to bring along in case something went wrong, which happened with Sadie and me about ninety-nine percent of the time.

Tonight she'd covered her hair in a black bandanna. Slung

across her shoulder was her magician's bag, marked with the symbol of lion goddess Sekhmet.

She was just telling Walt, "We'll figure it out," when Sadie and I dropped down next to them.

Walt looked embarrassed.

He was . . . well, how do I describe Walt?

[No thanks, Sadie. I'm not going to describe him as *hot*. Wait your turn.]

Walt was fourteen, same as me, but he was tall enough to play varsity forward. He had the right build for it—lean and muscular—and the dude's feet were huge. His skin was coffee-bean brown, a little darker than mine, and his hair was buzz cut so that it looked like a shadow on his scalp. Despite the cold, he was dressed in a black sleeveless tee and workout shorts—not standard magician clothes—but nobody argued with Walt. He'd been our first trainee to arrive—all the way from Seattle—and the guy was a natural *sau*—a charm maker. He wore a bunch of gold neck chains with magic amulets he'd made himself.

Anyway, I was pretty sure Sadie was jealous of Jaz and liked Walt, though she'd never admit it because she'd spent the last few months moping about another guy—actually a god—she had a crush on.

[Yeah, fine, Sadie. I'll drop it for now. But I notice you're not denying it.]

When we interrupted their conversation, Walt let go of Jaz's hands real quick and stepped away. Sadie's eyes moved back and forth between them, trying to figure out what was going on.

Walt cleared his throat. "Window's ready."

"Brilliant." Sadie looked at Jaz. "What did you mean, 'We'll figure it out?'"

Jaz flapped her mouth like a fish trying to breathe.

Walt answered for her: "You know. The Book of Ra. We'll figure it out."

"Yes!" Jaz said. "The Book of Ra."

I could tell they were lying, but I figured it was none of my business if they liked each other. We didn't have time for drama.

"Okay," I said before Sadie could demand a better explanation. "Let's start the fun."

The window swung open easily. No magic explosions. No alarms. I breathed a sigh of relief and stepped into the Egyptian wing, wondering if maybe we had a shot at pulling this off, after all.

The Egyptian artifacts brought back all kinds of memories. Until last year, I'd spent most of my life traveling around the world with my dad as he went from museum to museum, lecturing on Ancient Egypt. That was before I knew he was a magician—before he unleashed a bunch of gods, and our lives got complicated.

Now I couldn't look at Egyptian artwork without feeling a personal connection. I shuddered when we passed a statue of Horus—the falcon-headed god who'd inhabited my body last Christmas. We walked by a sarcophagus, and I remembered how the evil god Set had imprisoned our father in a golden coffin at the British Museum. Everywhere there were pictures

of Osiris, the blue-skinned god of the dead, and I thought about how Dad had sacrificed himself to become Osiris's new host. Right now, somewhere in the magic realm of the Duat, our dad was the king of the underworld. I can't even describe how weird it felt seeing a five-thousand-year-old painting of some blue Egyptian god and thinking, "Yep, that's my dad."

All the artifacts seemed like family mementos: a wand just like Sadie's; a picture of the serpent leopards that had once attacked us; a page from the Book of the Dead showing demons we'd met in person. Then there were the *shabti*, magical figurines that were supposed to come to life when summoned. A few months ago, I'd fallen for a girl named Zia Rashid, who'd turned out to be a *shabti*.

Falling in love for the first time had been hard enough. But when the girl you like turns out to be ceramic and cracks to pieces before your eyes—well, it gives "breaking your heart" a new meaning.

We made our way through the first room, passing under a big Egyptian-style zodiac mural on the ceiling. I could hear the celebration going on in the grand ballroom down the hallway to our right. Music and laughter echoed through the building.

In the second Egyptian room, we stopped in front of a stone frieze the size of a garage door. Chiseled into the rock was a picture of a monster trampling some humans.

"Is that a griffin?" Jaz asked.

I nodded. "The Egyptian version, yeah."

The animal had a lion's body and the head of a falcon, but its wings weren't like most griffin pictures you see. Instead of bird wings, the monster's wings ran across the top of its

back—long, horizontal, and bristly like a pair of upside-down steel brushes. If the monster could've flown with those stubby things at all, I figured they must've moved like a butterfly's wings. The frieze had once been painted. I could make out flecks of red and gold on the creature's hide; but even without color, the griffin looked eerily lifelike. Its beady eyes seemed to follow me.

"Griffins were protectors," I said, remembering something my dad had once told me. "They guarded treasures and stuff."

"Fab," Sadie said. "So you mean they attacked . . . oh, *thieves*, for instance, breaking into museums and stealing artifacts?"

"It's just a frieze," I said. But I doubt that made anyone feel better. Egyptian magic was all about turning words and pictures into reality.

"There." Walt pointed across the room. "That's it, right?"

We made a wide arc around the griffin and walked over to a statue in the center of the room.

The god stood about eight feet tall. He was carved from black stone and dressed in typical Egyptian style: bare-chested, with a kilt and sandals. He had the face of a ram and horns that had partially broken off over the centuries. On his head was a Frisbee-shaped crown—a sun disk, braided with serpents. In front of him stood a much smaller human figure. The god was holding his hands over the little dude's head, as though giving him a blessing.

Sadie squinted at the hieroglyphic inscription. Ever since she'd hosted the spirit of Isis, goddess of magic, Sadie had had an uncanny ability to read hieroglyphs.

"KNM," she read. "That'd be pronounced *Khnum,* I suppose. Rhymes with *ka-boom*?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "This is the statue we need. Horus told me it holds the secret to finding the Book of Ra."

Unfortunately, Horus hadn't been very specific. Now that we'd found the statue, I had absolutely no idea how it was supposed to help us. I scanned the hieroglyphs, hoping for a clue.

"Who's the little guy in front?" Walt asked. "A child?"

Jaz snapped her fingers. "No, I remember this! Khnum made humans on a potter's wheel. That's what he's doing here, I bet—forming a human out of clay."

She looked at me for confirmation. The truth was, I'd forgotten that story myself. Sadie and I were supposed to be the teachers, but Jaz often remembered more details than I did.

"Yeah, good," I said. "Man out of clay. Exactly."

Sadie frowned up at Khnum's ram head. "Looks a bit like that old cartoon . . . Bullwinkle, is it? Could be the moose god."

"He's not the moose god," I said.

"But if we're looking for the Book of Ra," she said, "and Ra's the *sun* god, then why are we searching a moose?"

Sadie can be annoying. Did I mention that?

"Khnum was one aspect of the sun god," I said. "Ra had three different personalities. He was Khepri the scarab god in the morning; Ra during the day; and Khnum, the ram-headed god, at sunset, when he went into the underworld."

""That's confusing," Jaz said.

"Not really," Sadie said. "Carter has different personalities. He goes from zombie in the morning to slug in the afternoon to—"

"Sadie," I said, "shut up."

Walt scratched his chin. "I think Sadie's right. It's a moose."

"*Thank* you," Sadie said.

Walt gave her a grudging smile, but he still looked preoccupied, like something was bothering him. I caught Jaz studying him with a worried expression, and I wondered what they'd been talking about earlier.

"Enough with the moose," I said. "We've got to get this statue back to Brooklyn House. It holds some sort of clue—"

"But how do we find it?" Walt asked. "And you still haven't told us why we need this Book of Ra so badly."

I hesitated. There were a lot of things we hadn't told our trainees yet, not even Walt and Jaz—like how the world might end in five days. That kind of thing can distract you from your training.

"I'll explain when we get back," I promised. "Right now, let's figure out how to move the statue."

Jaz knitted her eyebrows. "I don't think it's going to fit in my bag."

"Oh, such worrying," Sadie said. "Look, we cast a levitation spell on the statue. We create some big diversion to clear the ballroom—"

"Hold up." Walt leaned forward and examined the smaller human figure. The little dude was smiling, like being fashioned out of clay was awesome fun. "He's wearing an amulet. A scarab."

"It's a common symbol," I said.

"Yeah . . ." Walt fingered his own collection of amulets. "But the scarab is a symbol of Ra's rebirth, right? And this statue

shows Khnum creating a new life. Maybe we don't need the entire statue. Maybe the clue is—"

"Ah!" Sadie pulled out her wand. "Brilliant."

I was about to say, "Sadie, no!" but of course that would've been pointless. Sadie never listens to me.

She tapped the little dude's amulet. Khnum's hands glowed. The smaller statue's head peeled open in four sections like the top of a missile silo, and sticking out of its neck was a yellowed papyrus scroll.

"*Voilà*," Sadie said proudly.

She slipped her wand into her bag and grabbed the scroll just as I said, "It might be trapped!"

Like I said, she never listens.

As soon as she plucked the scroll from the statue, the entire room rumbled. Cracks appeared in the glass display cases.

Sadie yelped as the scroll in her hand burst into flames. They didn't seem to consume the papyrus or hurt Sadie; but when she tried to shake out the fire, ghostly white flames leaped to the nearest display case and raced around the room as if following a trail of gasoline. The fire touched the windows and white hieroglyphs ignited on the glass, probably triggering a ton of protective wards and curses. Then the ghost fire rippled across the big frieze at the entrance of the room. The stone slab shook violently. I couldn't see the carvings on the other side, but I heard a raspy scream—like a really large, really angry parrot.

Walt slipped his staff off his back. Sadie waved the flaming scroll as if it were stuck to her hand. "Get this thing off me! This is *so* not my fault!"

"Um…" Jaz pulled her wand. "What was that sound?"
My heart sank.
"I think," I said, "Sadie just found her big diversion."