

THE SERPENT'S SHADOW

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SADIE

1. We Crash and Burn a Party

SADIE KANE HERE.

If you're listening to this, congratulations! You survived Doomsday.

I'd like to apologize straightaway for any inconvenience the end of the world may have caused you. The earthquakes, rebellions, riots, tornadoes, floods, tsunamis and of course the giant snake who swallowed the sun – I'm afraid most of that was our fault. Carter and I decided we should at least explain how it happened.

This will probably be our last recording. By the time you've heard our story, the reason for that will be obvious.

Our problems started in Dallas, when the fire-breathing sheep destroyed the King Tut exhibit.

That night the Texas magicians were hosting a party in the sculpture garden across the street from the Dallas Museum of

Art. The men wore tuxedos and cowboy boots. The women wore evening dresses and hairdos like explosions of candy floss.

(Carter says it's called cotton candy in America. I don't care. I was raised in London, so you'll just have to keep up and learn the proper way of saying things.)

A band played old-timey country music on the pavilion. Strings of fairy lights glimmered in the trees. Magicians did occasionally pop out of secret doors in the sculptures or summon sparks of fire to burn away pesky mosquitoes, but otherwise it seemed like quite a normal party.

The leader of the Fifty-first Nome, JD Grissom, was chatting with his guests and enjoying a plate of beef tacos when we pulled him away for an emergency meeting. I felt bad about that, but there wasn't much choice, considering the danger he was in.

'An attack?' He frowned. 'The Tut exhibit has been open for a month now. If Apophis was going to strike, wouldn't he have done it already?'

JD was tall and stout, with a rugged, weathered face, feathery red hair, and hands as rough as bark. He looked about forty, but it's hard to tell with magicians. He might have been four hundred. He wore a black suit with a bolo tie and a large silver Lone Star belt buckle, like a Wild West marshal.

'Let's talk on the way,' Carter said. He started leading us towards the opposite side of the garden.

I must admit my brother acted remarkably confident.

He was still a monumental dork, of course. His nappy brown hair had a chunk missing on the left side where his griffin had given him a 'love bite', and you could tell from

the nicks on his face that he hadn't quite mastered the art of shaving. But since his fifteenth birthday he'd shot up in height and put on muscle from hours of combat training. He looked poised and mature in his black linen clothes, especially with that *khopesh* sword at his side. I could almost imagine him as a leader of men without laughing hysterically.

[Why are you glaring at me, Carter? That was quite a generous description.]

Carter manoeuvred round the buffet table, grabbing a handful of tortilla chips. 'Apophis has a pattern,' he told JD. 'The other attacks all happened on the night of the new moon, when darkness is greatest. Believe me, he'll hit your museum tonight. And he'll hit it hard.'

JD Grissom squeezed round a cluster of magicians drinking champagne. 'These other attacks . . .' he said. 'You mean Chicago and Mexico City?'

'And Toronto,' Carter said. 'And . . . a few others.'

I knew he didn't want to say more. The attacks we'd witnessed over the summer had left us both with nightmares.

True, full-out Armageddon hadn't come yet. It had been six months since the Chaos snake Apophis had escaped from his Underworld prison, but he still hadn't launched a large-scale invasion of the mortal world as we'd expected. For some reason, the serpent was biding his time, settling for smaller attacks on nomes that seemed secure and happy.

Like this one, I thought.

As we passed the pavilion, the band finished their song. A pretty blonde woman with a fiddle waved her bow at JD.

'Come on, sweetie!' she called. 'We need you on steel guitar!'

He forced a smile. 'Soon, hon. I'll be back.'

We walked on. JD turned to us. 'My wife, Anne.'

'Is she also a magician?' I asked.

He nodded, his expression turning dark. 'These attacks. Why are you so sure Apophis will strike *here*?'

Carter's mouth was full of tortilla chips, so his response was, 'Mhm-hmm.'

'He's after a certain artefact,' I translated. 'He's already destroyed five copies of it. The last one in existence happens to be in your Tut exhibit.'

'Which artefact?' JD asked.

I hesitated. Before coming to Dallas, we'd cast all sorts of shielding spells and loaded up on protective amulets to prevent magical eavesdropping, but I was still nervous about speaking our plans aloud.

'Better we show you.' I stepped round a fountain, where two young magicians were tracing glowing *I Love You* messages on the paving stones with their wands. 'We've brought our own crack team to help. They're waiting at the museum. If you'll let us examine the artefact, possibly take it with us for safekeeping –'

'Take it *with* you?' JD scowled. 'The exhibit is heavily guarded. I have my best magicians surrounding it night and day. You think you can do better at Brooklyn House?'

We stopped at the edge of the garden. Across the street, a two-storey-tall King Tut banner hung from the side of the museum.

Carter took out his mobile phone. He showed JD Grissom an image on the screen – a burnt-out mansion that had once been the headquarters for the One Hundredth Nome in Toronto.

'I'm sure your guards are good,' Carter said. 'But we'd rather not make your nome a target for Apophis. In the other attacks like this one . . . the serpent's minions didn't leave any survivors.'

JD stared at the phone's screen, then glanced back at his wife, Anne, who was fiddling her way through a two-step.

'Fine,' JD said. 'I hope your team is top-notch.'

'They're amazing,' I promised. 'Come on, we'll introduce you.'

Our crack squad of magicians was busy raiding the gift shop.

Felix had summoned three penguins, which were waddling around wearing paper King Tut masks. Our baboon friend, Khufu, sat on top of a bookshelf reading *The History of the Pharaohs*, which would've been quite impressive except he was holding the book upside down. Walt – oh, dear Walt, *why*? – had opened the jewellery cabinet and was examining charm bracelets and necklaces as if they might be magical. Alyssa levitated clay pots with her earth elemental magic, juggling twenty or thirty at a time in a figure of eight.

Carter cleared his throat.

Walt froze, his hands full of gold jewellery. Khufu scrambled down the bookshelf, knocking off most of the books. Alyssa's pottery crashed to the floor. Felix tried to shoo his penguins

behind the till. (He does have rather strong feelings about the usefulness of penguins. I'm afraid I can't explain it.)

JD Grissom drummed his fingers against his Lone Star belt buckle. 'This is your amazing team?'

'Yes!' I tried for a winning smile. 'Sorry about the mess. I'll just, um . . .'

I pulled my wand from my belt and spoke a word of power: '*Hi-nehm!*'

I'd got better at such spells. Most of the time, I could now channel power from my patron goddess Isis without passing out. And I hadn't exploded once.

The hieroglyph for *Join together* glowed briefly in the air:



Broken bits of pottery flew back together and mended themselves. Books returned to the shelf. The King Tut masks flew off the penguins, revealing them to be – gasp – penguins.

Our friends looked rather embarrassed.

'Sorry,' Walt mumbled, putting the jewellery back in the case. 'We got bored.'

I couldn't stay mad at Walt. He was tall and athletic, built like a basketball player, in workout pants and sleeveless tee that showed off his sculpted arms. His skin was the colour of hot cocoa, his face every bit as regal and handsome as the statues of his pharaoh ancestors.

Did I fancy him? Well, it's complicated. More on that later.

JD Grissom looked over our team.

'Nice to meet you all.' He managed to contain his enthusiasm. 'Come with me.'

The museum's main foyer was a vast white room with empty café tables, a stage and a ceiling high enough for a pet giraffe. On one side, stairs led up to a balcony with a row of offices. On the other side, glass walls looked out at the night-time skyline of Dallas.

JD pointed up at the balcony, where two men in black linen robes were patrolling. 'You see? Guards are everywhere.'

The men had their staffs and wands ready. They glanced down at us, and I noticed their eyes were glowing. Hieroglyphs were painted on their cheekbones like war paint.

Alyssa whispered to me: 'What's up with their eyes?'

'Surveillance magic,' I guessed. 'The symbols allow the guards to see into the Duat.'

Alyssa bit her lip. Since her patron was the earth god Geb, she liked solid things, such as stone and clay. She didn't like heights or deep water. She *definitely* didn't like the idea of the Duat – the magical realm that coexisted with ours.

Once, when I'd described the Duat as an ocean under our feet with layers and layers of magical dimensions going down forever, I thought Alyssa was going to get seasick.

Ten-year-old Felix, on the other hand, had no such qualms. 'Cool!' he said. 'I want glowing eyes.'

He traced his finger across his cheeks, leaving shiny purple blobs in the shape of Antarctica.

Alyssa laughed. 'Can you see into the Duat now?'

'No,' he admitted. 'But I can see my penguins much better.'

'We should hurry,' Carter reminded us. 'Apophis usually strikes when the moon is at the top of its transit. Which is –'

'*Agh!*' Khufu held up all ten fingers. Leave it to a baboon to have perfect astronomical sense.

'In ten minutes,' I said. 'Just brilliant.'

We approached the entrance of the King Tut exhibit, which was rather hard to miss because of the giant golden sign that read KING TUT EXHIBIT. Two magicians stood guard with full-grown leopards on leashes.

Carter looked at JD in astonishment. 'How did you get complete access to the museum?'

The Texan shrugged. 'My wife, Anne, is president of the board. Now, which artefact did you want to see?'

'I studied your exhibit maps,' Carter said. 'Come on. I'll show you.'

The leopards seemed quite interested in Felix's penguins, but the guards held them back and let us pass.

Inside, the exhibit was extensive, but I doubt you care about the details. A labyrinth of rooms with sarcophagi, statues, furniture, bits of gold jewellery – blah, blah, blah. I would have passed it all by. I've seen enough Egyptian collections to last several lifetimes, thank you very much.

Besides, everywhere I looked, I saw reminders of bad experiences.

We passed cases of *shabti* figurines, no doubt enchanted to come to life when called upon. I'd killed my share of those. We passed statues of glowering monsters and gods whom I'd fought in person – the vulture Nekhbet, who'd once possessed

my gran (long story); the crocodile Sobek, who'd tried to kill my cat (longer story); and the lion goddess Sekhmet, whom we'd once vanquished with hot sauce (don't even ask).

Most upsetting of all: a small alabaster statue of our friend Bes, the dwarf god. The carving was eons old, but I recognized that pug nose, the bushy sideburns, the potbelly and the endearingly ugly face that looked as if it had been hit repeatedly with a frying pan. We'd only known Bes for a few days, but he'd literally sacrificed his soul to help us. Now, each time I saw him I was reminded of a debt I could never repay.

I must have lingered at his statue longer than I realized. The rest of the group had passed me and were turning into the next room, about twenty metres ahead, when a voice next to me said, 'Psst!'

I looked around. I thought the statue of Bes might have spoken. Then the voice called again: 'Hey, doll. Listen up. Not much time.'

In the middle of the wall, eye-level with me, a man's face bulged from the white, textured paint as if trying to break through. He had a beak of a nose, cruel thin lips and a high forehead. Though he was the same colour as the wall, he seemed very much alive. His blank white eyes managed to convey a look of impatience.

'You won't save the scroll, doll,' he warned. 'Even if you did, you'd never understand it. You need my help.'

I'd experienced many strange things since I'd begun practising magic, so I wasn't particularly startled. Still, I knew better than to trust any old white-spackled apparition who

spoke to me, especially one who called me *doll*. He reminded me of a character from those silly Mafia movies the boys at Brooklyn House liked to watch in their spare time – someone's Uncle Vinnie, perhaps.

'Who are you?' I demanded.

The man snorted. 'Like you don't know. Like there's *anybody* who doesn't know. You've got two days until they put me down. You want to defeat Apophis, you'd better pull some strings and get me out of here.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' I said.

The man didn't sound like Set the god of evil, or the serpent Apophis, or any of the other villains I'd dealt with before, but one could never be sure. There was this thing called *magic*, after all.

The man jutted out his chin. 'Okay, I get it. You want a show of faith. You'll never save the scroll, but go for the golden box. That'll give you a clue about what you need, if you're smart enough to understand it. Day after tomorrow at sunset, doll. Then my offer expires, 'cause that's when *I* get permanently –'

He choked. His eyes widened. He strained as if a noose were tightening round his neck. He slowly melted back into the wall.

'Sadie?' Walt called from the end of the corridor. 'You okay?'

I looked over. 'Did you see that?'

'See what?' he asked.

Of course not, I thought. What fun would it be if other

people saw my vision of Uncle Vinnie? Then I couldn't wonder if I were going stark raving mad.

'Nothing,' I said, and I ran to catch up.

The entrance to the next room was flanked by two giant obsidian sphinxes with the bodies of lions and the heads of rams. Carter says that particular type of sphinx is called a *criosphinx*. [Thanks, Carter. We were all dying to know that bit of useless information.]

'*Agh!*' Khufu warned, holding up five fingers.

'Five minutes left,' Carter translated.

'Give me a moment,' JD said. 'This room has the heaviest protective spells. I'll need to modify them to let you through.'

'Uh,' I said nervously, 'but the spells will still keep out enemies, like giant Chaos snakes, I hope?'

JD gave me an exasperated look, which I tend to get a lot.

'I *do* know a thing or two about protective magic,' he promised. 'Trust me.' He raised his wand and began to chant.

Carter pulled me aside. 'You okay?'

I must have looked shaken from my encounter with Uncle Vinnie. 'I'm fine,' I said. 'Saw something back there. Probably just one of Apophis's tricks, but . . .'

My eyes drifted to the other end of the corridor. Walt was staring at a golden throne in a glass case. He leaned forward with one hand on the glass as if he might be sick.

'Hold that thought,' I told Carter.

I moved to Walt's side. Light from the exhibit bathed his face, turning his features reddish brown like the hills of Egypt.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Tutankhamen died in that chair,' he said.

I read the display card. It didn't say anything about Tut dying in the chair, but Walt sounded very sure. Perhaps he could sense the family curse. King Tut was Walt's great-times-a-billion granduncle, and the same genetic poison that killed Tut at nineteen was now coursing through Walt's bloodstream, getting stronger the more he practised magic. Yet Walt refused to slow down. Looking at the throne of his ancestor, he must have felt as if he were reading his own obituary.

'We'll find a cure,' I promised. 'As soon as we deal with Apophis . . .'

He looked at me, and my voice faltered. We both knew our chances of defeating Apophis were slim. Even if we succeeded, there was no guarantee Walt would live long enough to enjoy the victory. Today was one of Walt's *good* days, and still I could see the pain in his eyes.

'Guys,' Carter called. 'We're ready.'

The room beyond the criosphinxes was a 'greatest hits' collection from the Egyptian afterlife. A life-sized wooden Anubis stared down from his pedestal. On top of a replica of the scales of justice sat a golden baboon, which Khufu immediately started flirting with. There were masks of pharaohs, maps of the Underworld and loads of canopic jars that had once been filled with mummy organs.

Carter passed all that by. He gathered us round a long papyrus scroll in a glass case on the back wall.

'This is what you're after?' JD frowned. 'The Book of

Overcoming Apophis? You do realize that even the best spells against Apophis aren't very effective.'

Carter reached in his pocket and produced a bit of burned papyrus. 'This is all we could salvage from Toronto. It was another copy of the same scroll.'

JD took the papyrus scrap. It was no bigger than a postcard and too charred to let us make out more than a few hieroglyphs.

'"Overcoming Apophis . . ."' he read. 'But this is one of the most common magic scrolls. Hundreds of copies have survived from ancient times.'

'No.' I fought the urge to look over my shoulder, in case any giant serpents were listening in. 'Apophis is after only one particular version, written by this chap.'

I tapped the information plaque next to the display. '"Attributed to Prince Khaemwaset,"' I read, '"better known as Setne."'

JD scowled. 'That's an evil name . . . one of most villainous magicians who ever lived.'

'So we've heard,' I said, 'and Apophis is destroying only *Setne's* version of the scroll. As far as we can tell, only six copies existed. Apophis has already burned five. This is the last one.'

JD studied the burned papyrus scrap doubtfully. 'If Apophis has truly risen from the Duat with all his power, why would he care about a few scrolls? No spell could possibly stop him. Why hasn't he already destroyed the world?'

We'd been asking ourselves the same question for months.

'Apophis is afraid of this scroll,' I said, hoping I was right.

'Something in it must hold the secret to defeating him. He wants to make sure all copies are destroyed before he invades the world.'

'Sadie, we need to hurry,' Carter said. 'The attack could come any minute.'

I stepped closer to the scroll. It was roughly two metres long and a half-metre tall, with dense lines of hieroglyphs and colourful illustrations. I'd seen loads of scrolls like this describing ways to defeat Chaos, with chants designed to keep the serpent Apophis from devouring the sun god Ra on his nightly journey through the Duat. Ancient Egyptians had been quite obsessed with this subject. Cheery bunch, those Egyptians.

I could read the hieroglyphs – one of my many amazing talents – but the scroll was a lot to take in. At first glance, nothing struck me as particularly helpful. There were the usual descriptions of the River of Night, down which Ra's sun boat travelled. Been there, thanks. There were tips on how to handle the various demons of the Duat. Met them. Killed them. Got the T-shirt.

'Sadie?' Carter asked. 'Anything?'

'Don't know yet,' I grumbled. 'Give me a moment.'

I found it annoying that my bookish brother was the combat magician, while *I* was expected to be the great reader of magic. I barely had the patience for magazines, much less musty scrolls.

You'd never understand it, the face in the wall had warned. *You need my help.*

'We'll have to take it with us,' I decided. 'I'm sure I can figure it out with a little more –'

The building shook. Khufu shrieked and leaped into the arms of the golden baboon. Felix's penguins waddled around frantically.

'That sounded like –' JD Grissom blanched. 'An explosion outside. The party!'

'It's a diversion,' Carter warned. 'Apophis is trying to draw our defences away from the scroll.'

'They're attacking my friends,' JD said in a strangled voice. 'My wife.'

'Go!' I said. I glared at my brother. 'We can handle the scroll. JD's *wife* is in danger!'

JD clasped my hands. 'Take the scroll. Good luck.'

He ran from the room.

I turned back to the display. 'Walt, can you open the case? We need to get this out of here as fast –'

Evil laughter filled the room. A dry, heavy voice, deep as a nuclear blast, echoed all around us: '*I don't think so, Sadie Kane.*'

My skin felt as if it were turning to brittle papyrus. I remembered that voice. I remembered how it felt being so close to Chaos, as if my blood were turning to fire and the strands of my DNA were unravelling.

'*I think I'll destroy you with the guardians of Ma'at,*' Apophis said. '*Yes, that will be amusing.*'

At the entrance to the room, the two obsidian criosphinxes

turned. They blocked the exit, standing shoulder to shoulder. Flames curled from their nostrils.

In the voice of Apophis, they spoke in unison: 'No one leaves this place alive. Goodbye, Sadie Kane.'



THE SERPENT'S SHADOW

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