



# **TOMBQUEST**

## **THE FINAL KINGDOM**



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**SCHOLASTIC INC.**

**For the readers:  
To all the awesome TombQuesters  
who've followed me through every  
twist and turn (and chase and trap  
and spell) of this epic adventure,  
this one is definitely for you.**

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## Prologue

Making mummies is an ancient and grisly business, but business was good once again. The bodies lay on low stone tables beneath the timeless sands of Egypt, lit only by flickering torchlight.

Half a dozen acolytes in ancient dress gathered their implements nervously, the jewels and glass beads of their thick collar necklaces glinting, and the light linen of their shendyt kilts shining a pure, audacious white. They began with the body on the highest platform. For while all men may be created equal, all mummies are not. This body was taller than the others, and broader in the shoulders, with skin the color of wet sand, a hawklike nose, and sharp features that seemed determined even in death.

The acolytes dipped their cloths in a bucket of cool well water, wrung them out, and got to work washing the corpse.

Their hands trembled slightly as they put down their rags and picked up their blades. They were nervous as they made the first cuts: Everything had to go perfectly. The blood was

drained from the man's body and taken out in buckets. Once that was done, the internal organs were removed, one by one. Only the steadiest hands made these cuts. The others busied themselves packing the carefully culled pieces into sacred canopic jars for the trip to the afterlife. Only the man's heart was left in his body: the most vital organ, the home of the soul.

The clay lid clinked into place on the last of the jars.

The workers washed their hands in the water buckets and then rubbed the body with natron salt to preserve and dry it. They packed the hollowed-out frame with still more natron and plugged the skull with linen.

By now, the acolytes' foreheads and bare chests glowed with sweat. They anointed and sealed the body with a thick, sticky resin. They lifted its shoulders from the stone — the broad torso not nearly so heavy now, filled only with salt — and wrapped it in strips of fresh linen.

Finally, they placed a heavy mask on the man's head, transforming his own sharp features into those of an Egyptian vulture. Solid gold, except for the sharp, iron point of the cunning predator's beak.

The acolytes repeated their grim work with methodical care, and one by one, the bodies were transformed. As they neared completion on the fifth, blood-spattered and exhausted, a chorus of voices rose in the chamber behind them. Beneath the largest of the torches, a group of three men, priests of The Order, chanted words not heard for

millennia. They were reading from the Lost Spells of the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, legendary incantations of unimaginable power.

The priests released their final lines with full-throated fervor, then stood winded and wide-eyed in the sudden silence, in thrall to the unearthly power they'd felt surging through them.

The priests watched intently. The acolytes barely dared to blink.

*Had it worked?*

*Had the ancient Spells accomplished their dark task?*

These were no idle questions. Far more than a day's work was at stake here. The figures on these slabs had bet their lives on it. They had died for this.

But they had no intention of staying dead for long. Nor did they intend to remain in these frail human forms. There were other forms waiting for them in the afterlife — if they could get there.

## A World Walled and Dark

“Ren!” called Alex, and then, softer, “Ren?”

Nothing. No response, just like the last time — and the hundred times before that. It was clear that no one could hear him down here. At least no one who felt like responding. He took one last look out the small, square opening in the door and then took his hands off the grimy bars and retreated back into the darkness of his cramped cell.

He sat on his cot, the only furniture in the room, unless you counted the bucket that served as a bathroom and the small electric lamp that cast a weak yellow glow on the hard sandstone floor. A beam of stronger light from the hall was cut into three even slices by the bars on the door, and Alex watched a bug the size of a D battery skitter diagonally across them, like a winning move in tic-tac-toe.

*Not totally alone after all*, he thought as the insect disappeared into the darkness.

Alex got up and went to the door again. This time he called out for the person he’d traveled halfway across the world to find, whom he’d lost again in the blink of an eye.

“Mom!” he called. “Mom!”

He remembered how she had looked, her face overwhelmed with emotion, when his hunt for her and the Spells had finally come to an end in that desert village. He remembered the despair on her face when they were captured by The Order, the Spells stolen from their grasp. Even though he feared the answer, he wondered again: *What would the ancient cult do with such awesome power?*

Suddenly, a sound broke through his muddled thoughts: footsteps. It was the guard again. Alex walked over and flicked off his lamp, then returned to the door.

“Stand back from the door, stupid boy,” called the guard in heavily accented English, “or you get no food.”

Alex crouched down beside the door. He was hoping that the guard would open it this time and he could catch him by surprise. He flexed his hands, ready for a fight.

But once again, he was disappointed.

*Flink* went the slot in the bottom of the door as it opened. *Sbhish* went the empty tray from the day before as it was pulled out into the corridor. *SHHUNNKK* went the new tray as it slid across the floor. In the little slice of light, he saw a single piece of the Egyptian pita bread known as *aish baladi*, a cup, and a handful of dull, shriveled dates.

The little slot slapped closed again, leaving the tray in darkness. Leaving Alex alone.

“Wait!” called Alex. “Come back! My bucket needs to be emptied!”

Which was true — every inch of the small cell stank with

its contents. But it was also an excuse, one more attempt to get the door to open, to give himself a fighting chance.

The guard seemed to understand that, too. A laugh, joyless and cruel, rose in the hallway only to fade along with the slap of the guard's sandals.

Silence.

Darkness.

Alex flicked the lamp switch again, but it wouldn't turn back on. With a sigh, he reached down and felt around for the tray. He grabbed the cup and lifted it to his dry, cracked lips. Two big swigs later, it was empty.

He squatted down in the darkness and reached around for the bread. It moved under his hand and he let out a screech that would have been embarrassing if there was anyone to hear him. The bug had gotten there first. But he needed his strength: He knew he should eat the bread, anyway — the bread and probably the bug.

He split the difference, shaking the bug loose. It landed with a clack on the floor behind him. It skittered off, but the silence didn't return.

Footsteps.

Alex held his breath and froze in the darkness by the door.

Because these footsteps were different.

They were coming from *inside* the cell.

