

IMHOTEP

A NOVEL BY JERRY DUBS

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Prologue

Waja-Hur, Reckoner of Times and Seasons, was confused.

Holding a charcoal drawing stick in his hand, he stood halfway down the tomb's unfinished hallway. He wiped his hand against his white linen kilt, leaving behind a black smudge.

His frail body quivered slightly as he stretched himself to examine the hieroglyphs drawn along the top edge of the wall. His own hand had drawn them, he was sure. He was, after all, Scribe of the Company of Gods, high priest for the god Thoth. He had been drawing hieroglyphs all of his life. He recognized his work.

But the hieroglyphs were wrong.

Where he had meant to draw the symbol for eternity, he had instead drawn the hieroglyphs for a hundred lifetimes.

Waja-Hur shook his head.

A hundred lifetimes was a long time, a very long time. One lifetime was proving to be too long and wearisome for him. There was no one left alive from his youth. His children had grown old and passed on. Their children were growing old now, and still he lingered in The Two Lands, a tired old man ready to make the final journey to Khert-Neter.

He sighed.

A hundred more lifetimes would be enough for him, but the Book of the Dead called for eternity, and Kanakht, vizier to King Djoser, ruler of The Two Lands, deserved nothing less.

The inscription over the false door must invite Kanakht to pass through it to The Fields of Reeds for eternity, not for a hundred lifetimes. As they were drawn now, the symbols created a doorway that would open after the passage of five thousand years.

What had he been thinking?

He picked up a rag to wipe away the incorrect symbols.

Down the long hallway, at the entrance to the tomb, the boy who was holding the reflecting disk sneezed. The polished brass plate the boy was holding jiggled, making the sunlight that angled into the tomb swirl.

Waja-Hur gave a small gasp at the illusion of motion. Putting his hand on the wall to steady himself, he dropped the rag. As he bent to pick up the dirty cloth, he felt a wave of dizziness, as if he were spinning like a dancer at one of Re's festivals.

Squatting, he leaned against the wall and waited for the feeling to pass. These moments of unease had started several floods ago. At first he had thought they were harbingers of his own passage to The Fields of Reeds, like ibises flying before the great flood, but they had proven to be merely another annoyance, another burden added to the weight of his long life.

Breathing slowly and deeply, he waited for the world to stop spinning around him. Then he stood, charcoal-smudged cloth in hand, and tried to remember what he had been doing. It had seemed important, but now it was gone.

Shaking his head in frustration, he turned to walk toward light.

Disappearance at Saqqara

Tim Hope abandoned his fight against the sand.

It coated his sandals and feet; it had worked its way into his backpack. It was in his hair and in the webs between his fingers. Sitting with his back propped against the remains of a wall that once had formed the southern border of King Djoser's funerary complex, Tim was surrounded by Egypt's desert sand.

He put his pencil down and rubbed his hands together, trying to brush away the gritty sand.

A series of shadows crossed over him as a khaki-dressed guide led a ragged line of tourists past him. Their legs moved awkwardly as they took exaggerated high steps to keep sand from trickling into their shoes.

Tim watched them pass and then turned his attention back to the notebook propped against his knees. He added finishing lines to a pencil sketch of his bare feet, crossed at the ankles, sandals dangling loose. In the background of his drawing, desert dunes stretched off to a cloudless western horizon. Off to the east, behind his feet, the rough, pitted blocks of the Step Pyramid rose, angling off the edge of his paper.

In the top left corner of the drawing he wrote, "Addy, There's sand between my toes, under my fingernails and in my hair. I hate it. I hate the way it finds its way into every piece of clothing. I hate how dirty it is. I hate how gritty it feels."

He reread the words he had written to his fiancée. He thought about erasing the angry words and replacing them with something more upbeat, but it was hot, he was tired, and he missed her terribly. The sand was annoying, but he knew that his anger was really aimed at Addy's absence.

"That's Djoser's Step Pyramid off to my right. It's less impressive than it should be because there's nothing here to compare it to. I know it's huge, but not compared to the sky and the endless desert. And all this . . ." he paused, searching for the right adjective, then gave up and wrote simply "sand."

He closed the journal and held it off his lap so he could stretch one leg and then the other. The tourists had gathered around the base of the pyramid. The interior of the ancient tomb was no longer open to the public, so they listened to a description of passageways, chambers and shafts that lay beneath King Djoser's burial monument. When he finished his memorized recitation, the guide directed them around to the north side of the pyramid to see a statue of the long-dead king.

As the tourists shuffled away, three of them hesitated, then turned and walked quickly in Tim's direction. The shortest of them, an Arab wearing a blue-and-white-striped galabia, led the way. The other two appeared to be an American couple.

She wore blue jeans and a white T-shirt with a picture of Sylvester the Cat. Instead of the leather sandals most natives wore, she wore hiking shoes. Thin, with red hair beneath a straw hat, she had a complexion that the Egyptian sun, even now, at the end of winter, could burn through in an hour. Tim hoped she was wearing a heavy sun block.

The man wore sunglasses and a Boston Red Sox baseball cap, a loud Hawaiian shirt with large flowers, khaki shorts and black and red high-top sneakers. Tall and powerfully built, he walked with the loose, graceful gait of an athlete.

As they passed by him, Tim saw that the woman was frowning. Her eyes darted from the guide to her friend and then to the uneven sand. She seemed worried and upset, as if she didn't want to be here. Something about her – her size, her demeanor or perhaps just her frown – made Tim worry about her.

The man was smiling around a large wad of gum, which he chewed energetically. He paused every few steps to scan the tomb site. During one pause, he raised his sunglasses and, looking straight at Tim, winked and then, with long easy strides, he caught up with the guide and the woman.

They seemed an unlikely couple.

Addy and I probably seemed like an odd couple, Tim thought.

Addy was tall and slender with blonde hair, usually pulled back in a tight pony tail. Her eyes were bright and questioning. Tim was short and dark skinned with curly black hair. He had a sleepy look that made people think he was too relaxed, perhaps even a little slow.

We probably looked like strangers, he thought, thrown together by chance.

The guide led the Americans past Tim to a small, mud-brick guardhouse that stood over the entrance to the Tomb of Kanakht. Tim knew that, like the Step Pyramid, the tomb was closed to the public; he had tried to talk his way past the guard just an hour ago.

As they got closer to the tomb, the guide called out a greeting in Arabic. He and the tourists waited by the gate. The guard, who had been resting in the shade behind the building, walked slowly around the corner, wiping sand from his hands onto his uniform pants.

The guard and the guide spoke quietly. American dollars changed hands. The guard opened the iron gate, and the guide and the couple disappeared inside the dark doorway.

As soon as they were out of sight, the guard shut the gate and returned to the shady side of the building.

Tim had heard that you could gain entrance to a “closed” tomb with the right bribe. His problem was that he didn’t know how large the bribe had to be to work. Addy just would have confronted the guard and demanded to know how much money he wanted. Tim thought that such a direct approach wouldn’t work here in Egypt where train schedules were viewed as gentle suggestions and prices were hints written in chalk.

When he had talked with the guard earlier Tim hadn’t raised the subject of a bribe. He thought there had to be an etiquette about it, but it wasn’t covered in any of the guidebooks he’d read. At least now he knew that American dollars, not Egyptian pounds, were the correct currency.

Tim opened his journal and pulled out a sketch he had made of the layout of the Saqqara complex.

The small pyramid of Unis, not much more than a crumbling mound of limestone blocks, lay behind him and off to his left, just beyond the southern wall. He had passed it on his way in to the courtyard of the Step Pyramid. To the north was the Serdab, a small chamber in which the only known statue of Djoser had been found.

That’s where the rest of the tourists probably are, he thought.

They would be taking turns peering through a small spy-hole in the enclosure to look at the statue. The real statue was in Cairo; the face that stared back at the tourists was a reproduction.

He had seen the Serdab earlier that day when he was making his sketch of the grounds. Now he was waiting until the tourist buses departed so that he could spend uninterrupted time sketching the long-dead king. He had dismissed the cab that had brought him the fourteen miles from Cairo to Saqqara. If he couldn’t catch a ride with a late-arriving tourist, he would walk the short distance into Memphis and find a ride there.

Tim got to his feet and stretched. Opening his backpack, he put his notebook map away, took a drink from one of the water bottles in his pack and then swung the pack onto his shoulder. Just then the guard reappeared from behind the building and shouted through the iron gate at the entrance of Kanakht’s tomb.

Pulling the gate open, the guard leaned into the doorway as if listening to someone. He jerked back as the guide rushed out of the tomb.

Outside the doorway, the guide stopped and looked around. His eyes swept the area, resting for a moment on Tim. Turning back to the guard, he waved his arms as he talked. He pointed at the open doorway and moved closer to the guard, talking and shaking his head in disbelief at the guard’s shrugs of denial.

When he shook an accusing finger too close to the guard’s face, the guard pushed him away.

Surprised, the guide staggered backward, swinging his arms to keep his balance. He caught himself and then leaned forward to rush back at the guard, but stopped when he saw that the guard had drawn a billy club from his belt and was waiting with it cocked in his hand.

Drawing himself up to the little height that he had, the guide extended his arms toward the guard, his hands unclenched, apologizing. The guard shook his head and waved the billy club, shooing him away.

The guide walked off, glaring back over his shoulder at the guard. After a few steps he stopped and, changing direction, approached Tim, who was still standing by the wall.

“Excuse me, ’cusez-moi. English, Français?” he asked.

“English,” Tim said. Although he knew some Arabic, he thought the guide’s English would probably be better.

“A mistake,” the guide said, indicating the guard with a slight tilt of his head.

Tim waited.

“You saw us into the tomb, yes?”

Tim nodded. “Yes.”

“Where did they go?”

“I’m sorry?” Tim said.

“The man, the woman. The tall man, the woman with the hair red. You saw them. Where they went? Which way?”

“I didn’t see them come out.”

The guide looked ready to lose his temper, but he forced a smile. “You didn’t see? No? You are playing funny with the policeman?” He nodded again at the guard.

Tim shook his head. He hadn’t been watching the tomb, but he was sure that he would have seen the couple leave.

“No,” he said. “No joke, no funny. I’m sorry, I didn’t see them come up. I think they are still in there.”

“No, no, not there.” The guide dismissed the idea. “You are a mistake. They came up.”

Tim almost smiled at the guide’s English, but he saw that beneath his bluster the man was worried; he hated to see tourists and their American dollars disappear.

Tim held up his hand. “Honest. I did not see them come up. And anyhow, where would they have gone? The bus is still here.” He pointed to the parking lot. He saw that a taxi cab was sitting beside the bus. He hadn’t noticed it before, but his back had been to the lot.

“Yes, where?” the guide said. Then he suddenly whirled in a circle, as if expecting the couple to be sneaking up behind him. “Always the funny. Here ... not here.”

“Maybe they are in the taxi,” Tim suggested.

The guide shook his head. “My taxi.” He pulled keys from the pocket of his robe and dangled them in front of Tim. The guide bounced from one foot to the other, thinking. Then he said, “You tell them Hamzah gone without them. They walk to Mena House. Very funny. Yes.”

The guide walked to his cab, his head turning to look around the complex, expecting the Americans to suddenly reappear. Tim looked over at the Tomb of Kanakht. The guard was watching him.

Tim shifted the weight of the backpack and then looked back up at the guard, who continued to watch him. Then he remembered the worried look on the woman’s face and a sense of unease stole over him.

Something happened down there, he thought to himself. Something happened and the guide and guard are trying to cover it up. Their shoving match was just a distraction staged for me.

He stood there for a moment wrestling with his conscience and then he heard Addy’s voice telling him what to do. Reluctantly, he approached the guard.

“I didn’t see them come up either,” Tim said as he approached the guard.

“No English.”

Earlier he and the guard had talked in English for fifteen minutes. Tim wondered if he laughed now and made a joke of the guard’s stiff response, would the guard relax and laugh with him? But the man’s face was pinched and angry.

“Right,” Tim said under his breath as he tried to compose his thoughts in Arabic.

“No English,” the guard repeated.

Tim switched to Arabic: “I didn’t see them go.”

“Closed to public,” the guard answered in English.

Tim stayed with Arabic. “The man and woman didn’t come out. Are they there?” he pointed to the tomb entrance. “Should we see?”

“No one there. Closed to public.”

Tim shook his head. “They went in. Not come out,” he said in Arabic. He felt like he was negotiating the price of a counterfeit tomb relic.

“No one there. Closed to public.” The guard’s hand played with the billy club. He blinked and his right leg started to bounce.

“We should see,” Tim insisted.

The guard shook his head. “No one there.”

“Can we see?”

“No one there. Closed to public.”

Off to his right, Tim heard voices as the group of tourists, finished staring at Djoser’s statue, emerged from behind the Step Pyramid and began walking toward him headed for the Pyramid of Unis. He watched them high-step carefully through the sand. Then he looked down at the sand by the entrance to the Tomb of Kanakht. It was filled with footprints leading into the tomb.

The guard followed Tim’s gaze and saw the footsteps. He scuffed at the sand, wiping out the prints, and then stood in front of the gate, his arms folded across his chest.

“Closed to public.”

Tim and the guard stared at each other for a moment, and then Tim shook his head and looked out to the parking lot.

Hamzah and the taxi were gone.

It’s possible, Tim thought, that the couple came out of the tomb while the guard was around back. I had my head down writing in my journal. They could have slipped past me and went to hide in the back of the cab. Maybe they are heading back to Cairo with Hamzah now. He remembered the playful smile on the American’s face. Perhaps he had planned to play a joke. Or maybe the girl felt ill and they had gone to the taxi for her to rest.

Or they could have crossed over to the colonnade, walked back to the Step Pyramid and could be wandering around the northern courtyard. But they might still be in the Tomb of Kanakht. But why?

Tim didn’t think the Americans were hurt, he couldn’t imagine the little guide being able to overpower the big American. Still.

He looked around for another official, but didn’t expect to see one. The antiquities department was understaffed and the idea of guarding a huge mound of stones that had been around for thousands of years was a low priority.

Back home Tim would have called 9-1-1 and let the police sort it out. He hadn’t bothered to bring his cell phone on the trip. Even if he had it, he had no idea who he would call, perhaps the embassy.

And tell them what?

Following the ruins of the colonnade that ran along the eastern edge of the complex, Tim walked away from the Tomb of Kanakht and the angry guard. He reached the northern end of the pathway and scanned the area for the Americans.

The Step Pyramid now lay between him and the Tomb of Kanakht. He walked across the courtyard toward the pyramid, unsure of what to do.

He stopped by a large rectangular hole dug into the sand. A path, wide enough for three people to walk side-by-side, led from the edge of the hole down a gentle sandy slope and into a dark tunnel that angled toward the pyramid. Tim knew that it led to a central subterranean shaft, which in turn led down to the granite-plugged vault where Djoser's mummy had once rested.

The tunnel was big enough to hide the two tourists.

He took a few steps into the tunnel and then forced a cough; he didn't want to interrupt the couple if they had found a hiding place for a more personal reason.

As he stepped into the tunnel and out of the sunshine, the contrast between the bright sand outside and the shadows took his sight away. He pinched his eyes shut, hurrying his pupils to dilate. Then he took only a few more steps before the tunnel ended at an iron gate.

No one else was in the tunnel.

He pushed on the gate, expecting it to be locked. It was.

But there is no guard, he realized. So why is a guard assigned to a small, nearly unknown tomb out in the open while the antiquities department trusted an unattended gate at the end of a dark tunnel to keep tourists out of the Step Pyramid?

Tim pressed his face between the bars of the iron gate, but the darkness inside the tomb was too complete.

"Hello! Anyone in there?" he called. He pulled on the gate. There was no give to it, as if it were not just locked shut, but welded in place.

He called again, expecting at least a hollow echo of his voice to come back to him from the ancient room that lay out of sight.

"Anyone? Hello!" he shouted louder.

The reality of the tomb suddenly struck him: its age, how it had been carved from the desert rock by hundreds of men using primitive tools, how a flesh-and-blood king with the power of life and death over an ancient kingdom had been entombed here amid chanting and incense and songs and prayers.

He closed his eyes and imagined the tomb lit by torches. He pictured the rough, granite walls alive with shadows cast by a procession of priests in sheer white linen robes led by Anubis, jackal god of the underworld, and Thoth, ibis-headed scribe of the gods, and the goddesses Ma'at and Hathor. He imagined the sounds of keening mourners, the hollow rattling of sacred sistrums, the shuffling of pall bearers carrying the royal mummy prepared for an eternal life of joy in Khert-Neter, the Field of Reeds. He could almost smell the sharp tang of incense spread to sanctify the chamber, the perfumes of the men and women of the king's court, the dryness of the desert.

With his face pressed against the iron bars, Tim waited for the vision to fade, for the echo of his calls to answer him. But the air in the granite chamber, compressed by the weight of thousands of stones and the stillness of thousands of years, seemed too dense for his words to penetrate.

“Or there’s no one here,” he said to himself, shaking off the vision.

He walked back up the slope to the surface and was surprised to see that the afternoon had given way to dusk. A tour bus engine started in the distance and he realized that unless he ran through the courtyard and waved the bus to a stop, he would have to make the hike to Memphis or spend a night sleeping by the tomb.

Unless I catch a ride with my buddy, the guard, he thought.

Suddenly he understood why a guard had been assigned to an insignificant tomb that few tourists knew existed: because the lock on the tomb gate was broken.

Until the lock was repaired, a bureaucrat in the department of antiquities could assign someone — a friend or a cousin or a nephew — to guard the tomb. The guard would accept bribes to permit guides to get their guests into the “secret” tomb. The guide would earn a hefty tip from the impressed tourist. The guard would split the bribe with the bureaucrat and so three families would have additional income, all from one broken lock.

Which meant that if he waited until the guard left for the night, Tim could enter the Tomb of Kanakht, satisfy himself that the Americans really had sneaked out of the tomb and, more importantly, spend hours sketching tomb drawings undisturbed by other tourists.

He went back down the sandy tunnel to the Step Pyramid gate. Shrouded by the darkness, he removed his backpack and sat against the cool granite stone to wait for night to fall.

This is the kind of thing Addy would have done, he thought as the dusky light soaked into the sand. Before Addy, he never would have broken rules by staying somewhere after closing. He never would have considered sneaking into a tomb that wasn’t open to the public. He would have returned to his hotel and called the embassy. Let them handle it.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Addy would have said.

He could almost hear her voice. He missed her more than he ever imagined he could.

They had been planning this trip to Egypt for more than a year. They had researched all of the archaeological sites, studied Egyptian history and bought a language course to teach themselves Arabic, laughing over whose accent was worse.

She had bought a large National Geographic map of Egypt, which they had hung on a wall in their small apartment. As they had decided which sites to visit, they had pinned notes to the map. They had

used red yarn to track their travel plans, even bringing the yarn into Cairo, their starting point, from off the map.

An orange pin marked Cairo. “Four days” was underlined on the note the pin held. Beneath the heading they had listed: Giza: Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure; Bazaar: cartouche necklace saying ‘life and love;’ an ankh; Alabaster mosque.

Abu Simbel, Aswan and Kom Ombo were marked with yellow pins, signifying day trips.

The longest notes, held by red pins, had been stuck on the map at Saqqara and Luxor. They had planned to stay a week at each of the sites, plenty of time for him to sketch the pyramids of the Old Kingdom at Saqqara and the temples of the New Kingdom built at Luxor. It would have given Addy time to talk with camel drivers, laborers, farmers, shop clerks and policemen.

They had planned to create a book of Tim’s pencil sketches, capturing the ancient feel of the country, and intimate profiles Addy would write about the ‘real people’ of the country, not the leaders and the fads.

They had limited themselves to three weeks, because that was all their credit cards could absorb.

Tim had agreed to the trip to satisfy her; he would have been happy to simply hide in their apartment during their vacation and sketch and make love to her.

“That’s a typical weekend, Tim,” she had told him. “We need an adventure. You need an adventure. We’ll remember this all of our lives.”

He leaned back against the tunnel wall, closed his eyes, and cried.

Into the Tomb of Kanakht

The night was darker than he had expected.

Tim swung his backpack off his shoulder and set it on the ground by the tunnel entrance. Using his flashlight, he searched through his backpack for extra batteries. He put the spares in his pants pocket, flicked off the flashlight and pulled the backpack onto his shoulders.

There were no electric lights at Saqqara. A crescent moon hung low in the sky casting indistinct shadows that stretched from low standing walls, half-rebuilt pillars and mounds of debris from recent excavations. Tim squinted at the Step Pyramid and it seemed to magically disappear, its existence marked only by the absence of stars where its form pushed into the night. He opened his eyes wide and allowed the grainy texture of the exterior to take form, giving the pyramid substance again.

It was a trick of the light. Tim loved it because it gave shape and form to the darkness.

He walked to the Serdab. Through the small opening he saw the shadowy face of Djoser, dead five thousand years, staring back at him through the darkness. He reached through the opening to touch the statue and suddenly imagined the king's stone arm coming to life and grabbing his wrist in its dead grasp.

He yanked his arm quickly out of the hole, breathing deeply through the unexpected rush of adrenaline.

His arm was intact, untouched by the inanimate stone. He laughed at his panic. Still he was cautious as he put his hand back into the hole and traced the contours of the king's face with his fingers.

The cheekbones were higher and broader than in portraits of kings from later dynasties, especially the religious rebel Ahkenaten. Djoser wore a ceremonial beard, a long and narrow goatee. His ears were pushed forward by the royal nemes head cloth that covered a thick traditional wig. His eyes, even in this reproduction, were empty sockets, the crystals stolen long, long ago and left out of this reproduction.

He pulled his arm out and looked through the opening again, recalling what he remembered about Djoser.

He had been the first Egyptian king to claim that he was divine, giving himself the royal name of Horus Netjerikhet: "Divine of Body." He had been king during a disastrous seven-year famine when the Nile had failed to flood its banks and leave behind the rich soil carried down from central Africa that the ancient Egyptian farmers depended on. And despite his royalty and power, Djoser's memory had almost been overshadowed by his physician and architect, the famous Imhotep.

Tim sat back on his haunches and stared at the Serdab and beyond it at Imhotep's most famous work, the Step Pyramid.

It had been built five thousand years ago.

Easy to say, so hard to grasp, Tim thought.

My grandfather's father fought in World War I, just a hundred years ago, but that's so distant in the past that it might as well have been fought by Roman legions. No one alive now actually remembers it. In another hundred years it will be as distant to people living then as the Civil War is to me, he thought. And in nine hundred years, it will be as distant as "Beowulf" or the crusades is now.

Another thousand years and I'm back to Christ, back before the Dark Ages, before the plague, before people understood that the planets circled the sun. The world was small and flat.

And I'm not even halfway to Djoser and Imhotep.

He stood, grabbed his backpack and headed around the pyramid for the southern wall where the Tomb of Kanakht was waiting, had been waiting for five thousand years.

The area was deserted; the parking lot dark and empty. No one was standing guard at the tomb. Tim put his hand on the iron bar of the gate and pulled. It swung open easily. He nodded to himself. He had been right about the broken lock.

Stepping past the gate, he stopped for a moment listening and calming himself.

He clicked on the flashlight.

He was standing on an iron grate. Two steps ahead, it disappeared. Tim took one step and looked down. An open, narrow staircase spiraled underground. There was no banister, just a central post or newel to provide a handhold. He grabbed the newel and began his descent. The iron lattice work of the staircase steps scattered the flashlight's beam into pale shards of light that were quickly eaten by the heavy darkness.

I should have counted the steps, he thought after what seemed a full minute of climbing down the narrow stairs. When he paused to shine the flashlight around him, he saw that he was near three pale beige walls. The entrance above him was beyond the reach of his flashlight's beam. A few more steps brought the sand-covered floor into view.

He stepped off the staircase and bent down to look closely at the floor. There were smudged footprints, but the sand was too loose to hold anything well defined.

Two of the walls of the chamber were painted with scenes typical of tombs for high officials. One held a mural of men hunting hippos from a reed boat, the other showed Kanakht and his wife seated before an array of naked dancers at a banquet. The scenes were not completed, Tim realized. In some areas the

painting gave way to line sketches as if the artist had not had time to finish the work. Apparently Kanakht had died before the tomb was complete.

Other than the stairwell there was only one exit from the chamber. Walking toward it, Tim played his flashlight on the floor, watching the smudged footprints. The lintel of the doorway smacked hard against the top of his head. He stepped back and brought his free hand to his scalp to check for bleeding. Although he was not tall for a modern American, he was about half an inch taller than the mourners for whom the doorway had been built.

Tim rubbed his forehead and thought about the tall tourist. His head would almost have touched the low ceiling.

The next chamber also was empty. Unfinished murals edged the top of the walls; the ceiling was painted dark blue with stars. A sketch showed that the sky goddess Nut was to be painted supporting the ceiling. In the corners of the room sat round spotlights, placed there when the tomb had been open to tourists.

Tim entered the next chamber, careful to duck as he passed through the doorway.

A huge granite sarcophagus lid, much larger than Tim remembered from other tombs, took up the center of the room. Tim moved the flashlight's beam around the walls, which were more fully decorated than the previous chambers. Diagonally from him, there was another opening, a hole more than a doorway; probably the entrance robbers had used thousands of years ago. It wasn't surprising, almost all the tombs had been raided. That was why King Tutankhamun's tomb was so unusual; ancient thieves had overlooked it and the treasures buried with the boy-king had been found intact.

The sarcophagus lid had been raised and then swung to the side to allow the modern grave robbers, calling themselves archaeologists, to remove the body. The lid was raised about a foot above the floor, balanced on two rough stones under opposing corners. Tim could see that the bottom half of the stone coffin, sunken into the floor, held an opening shaped to receive a mummy. He knelt to look more closely, to be sure that it didn't hold the two American tourists.

It was empty.

He stood and started to walk around the sarcophagus toward the other doorway. His face became entangled in a spider's web and as he brought his hands up to wipe away the threads, he stepped backward. Instead of solid floor, his foot found emptiness where the sarcophagus lid had been swung aside. Falling backward into the void, his foot dropped to the bottom of the lower stone coffin, throwing him off balance. He lurched forward in panic, and his kneecap hit the edge of the stone opening.

He yelped and spread his hands to catch his fall. The flashlight clattered across the tomb floor. Misjudging the angle of the sarcophagus lid, he hit his shoulder against the stone. He twisted away from the pain and found himself falling.

When he stopped moving, he slowly flexed his left arm and reached across his body to rub his right shoulder and arm. Nothing seemed broken. He sat up in the darkness and hit his head hard against the sarcophagus lid.

“Jesus Christ,” he swore as he realized that he was now lying in the mummy-shaped opening where Kanakht’s body had once lain. Above him the massive stone lid was supported only by two, uneven corner props. He waited silently, listening for a grinding sound that would precede the falling of the lid, sealing him in the granite coffin.

He heard his heart beat, he heard air pass in and out of his lungs, but there was no sound from the stones.

A dim glow from the edge of the opening told him that his flashlight was still working. Gingerly he reached up and touched the stone lid. His other arm found the edge of the opening and he rolled gently toward it. He pulled himself through it and stood up.

The low light from the flashlight cast an ominous shadow from the sarcophagus lid against the wall. Tim pictured its crushing weight falling back into place, trapping him beneath it. His legs suddenly felt rubbery and he sat on the tomb floor, his back against the wall, his eyes on the lid and the narrow opening through which he had fallen.

The flashlight lay just beyond his reach, its yellow light aimed at the stone crypt. He rolled on his side and reached out for it. When he picked it up the beam went off. He shook it. The light came back on and then flickered away leaving him sitting in complete darkness.

Forcing himself to stay calm, Tim unscrewed the flashlight lens and checked the bulb. It seemed to be seated firmly in the socket. He pushed the power button forward. Nothing happened. Shifting to his left, he reached into his pocket and removed the fresh batteries. He unscrewed the bottom of the flashlight and carefully slid the batteries out onto his lap. Then he put the fresh ones in, tightened the bottom and tried the light.

Nothing.

He decided that a contact inside the flashlight body must have snapped during the fall. It was damage he couldn’t repair.

He put the flashlight and the old batteries in his backpack. In the front pocket of the pack he had stored a handful of wooden matches. He pulled them out now, put them in his pants pocket, saving one, which he ignited.

Getting to his feet he walked to the doorway. Before he passed through it, he glanced across the room at the hole he had seen earlier.

“Anybody over there?” he shouted.

The match burned close to his fingers. He shook it and dropped it. He pulled out another match. There were five remaining. He lit the match and walked quickly toward the damaged door, his free hand shielding the small flame from the air created by his movements. He swept the opening at the doorway with his hand to clear away cobwebs, but the area already was clear.

He pushed the match through the doorway and leaned in behind it.

“Hello?”

There was no answer. He saw an empty hallway that ran as far as the light from his match reached. The match burned low and he dropped it. The falling, failing flame briefly illuminated footprints in the sand beyond the opening.

The Americans could have hidden behind this wall, he thought, and waited until the guide had left. They could have emerged while I was on the other side of the pyramid complex. Or maybe they had left while I was looking at the map. Either way, they aren't here now.

He lit another match and then followed it back around the sarcophagus and through the doorway. It took one more match to reach the winding stairs. He climbed in darkness, both hands on the center post, his feet feeling their way up the steps.

Outside the tomb, he turned and pushed the gate shut.

The site was still deserted; the moon still lay just above the horizon.

Back at the tunnel by the Step Pyramid, Tim used another match to find a smooth resting spot, and then he laid his head on his backpack and tried to sleep.

He thought of the granite lid that could have fallen back in place and sealed him in the tomb. He doubted if his screams would have been heard by anyone unless they were in that room.

He had never felt so scared or so alive.