

THE GREAT PYRAMID ROBBERY

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extract from chapter 1

Senu sat cross-legged in the shade of an awning on the river bank with the other children from the hemutiu village, a limestone slate balanced across his sunburnt knees, a reed pen clutched in one sweaty hand. It was far too hot for serious work. The stink of open sewers and raw fish blew down from the plateau, mosquitoes swarmed, and dust from the building site got into everything. Yet old Batahotep had decided that the last day of school before the long Akhet holiday was the perfect time to give his class their most important test of the year.

"Don't try so hard," Red whispered invisibly from the air. "You won't pass, anyway."

Senu kept working. True, he'd failed the apprenticeship exam every year since he'd been old enough to sit it. But the nightmares had stopped now. All his friends had already done apprenticeships during the holidays, and this particular test was to decide who would be allowed to help the craftsmen decorate Lord Khafre's river temple. Senu's father was Chief Artist at the Place of Truth. If Senu didn't pass this year he'd shame Tefen before the entire site. Worse still, his failure would be quoted as yet another reason he should cut his ka-tail.

"Go away, Red, he muttered under his breath. "Can't you see I'm trying to concentrate?"

"Your father's ka said you've got to fail," Red insisted.

"What?"

This was so unexpected, Senu committed the greatest sin in their teacher's eyes. He looked up from his slate.

Batahotep had erected the awning so his pupils couldn't see the activity beyond Amun's Wall. Less distractions that way. In front of Senu, neat rows of heads bent over their work. The younger pupils who didn't have to worry about the outcome of the test still wore their hair in ka-tails like Senu's that hung over their ears. But everyone else of Senu's age now wore their hair in the all-over adult style that indicated they'd given up their kas and were ready to start work.

Luckily, no one seemed to have noticed his exclamation. Batahotep lounged on his stool in the coolest spot where palm leaves shaded the awning, watching a huge granite slab being unloaded from its barge by a gang of thirty sweating, bare-chested mertu labourers. As the men strained at the ropes, their teacher picked at a loose thread in his wig and yawned. Red remained invisible.

Senu stole a look at Reonet. Her regrowing hair was just long enough to be confined in a turquoise clip. She crouched over her slate, chewing her lower lip as she completed Batahotep's glyphs. They'd be perfect, he knew. He considered asking his ka to sneak across for a look, then shook his head. He'd promised himself he wouldn't cheat this year.

"That's not funny, Red! This isn't easy for me, you know."

He bent back over his work, spat on his slate and carefully wiped off a line. He chewed the end of his reed, dipped it into the soot and began again.

"That bit's not right," said Red unhelpfully.

Senu scowled. "I *know*."

"You need a steadier hand. Here, let me-"

There was a shimmer at the corner of Senu's eye as his ka's semi-transparent body became visible against the reeds. As usual, it was like looking at his own reflection, only the right way around. Gangly limbs that had grown too fast for the rest of him, knobby knees, frizzy red ka-tail... even his squint from being kept behind too many times after school copying old Batahotep's glyphs in the fierce afternoon sun.

A shiver went through him as Red's otherworldly fingers rested upon his hand. There was the familiar crackle of intense *longing* that still, after all these years, made him want to throw his arms around his ka and cry. The next thing he knew, a jagged line had appeared across his slate, ruining the only three glyphs he'd completed so far.

He threw his pen at his ka's chest in frustration. "Oh, why don't you go jump in the river?"

Because kas were not solid, the pen went right through Red and landed in Iny's lap. The boy, who sat next to Senu not out of choice but because Batahotep had told him to, yelped as he dropped his slate. Then he seemed to remember he was supposed to act

grown-up now he'd cut his ka-tail. The snooty look he gave Senu as he retrieved his work and dusted it off would have been worthy of a priest.

Batahotep's head snapped up. He heaved himself to his feet and adjusted his wig with a sigh. "Senu son of Tefen, our class joker! I might have known. Come here. Bring your slate."

Senu clutched the precious slate against his chest. A whole morning's sweaty, finger-cramping work! He wondered if he could pretend not to have heard. The site was noisy with preparations for the huge influx of labourers who would come up from the fields over the next few days. Some of them were here already, building temporary huts outside the village walls.

"Now, Senu. Is there something wrong with your ears? Shall I send for the doctor?"

The last thing he needed was a dose of the site doctor's hippopotamus-blood-and-cat-hair paste. He clambered quickly to his feet. Reonet peered at him through her fringe and pretended to continue with her work. The rest of the class fidgeted in anticipation. Whispers passed around the awning. "Bet he'll get a beating!"... "Yeah, five lashes." ... "No, ten!" ... "Not on the last day, silly. Even old Batahotep wouldn't do that."

Iny added loudly, "No point him doing the test, anyway. Everyone knows babies who bring their kas to school aren't allowed in the temple. It's bad luck."

"Why don't you grow up?" Senu hissed back, which only earned him splutters of mocking laughter.

Their teacher clapped his fleshy hands. "Settle down, all of you! Or the whole class will be staying after school. And I'll be taking the awning down, so you can sit out here and get sunstroke. I mean it." He glowered at them from under thick black brows.

The class quietened at once. No one wanted to miss the first afternoon of the holidays.

Senu approached Batahotep's stool, trying to look as if he didn't care. Beatings were nothing compared to the shame he'd feel tonight, when he had to admit to his father he'd failed yet again. Maybe if he apologized he'd be allowed to stay after school and finish the test?

"Sir, I-"

"Quiet. A boy your age should have more respect for his materials. You're a hemutiu craftsman, not an uneducated mertu! One day your work might adorn the walls of Lord Khafre's ka-temple, and it's my job to make sure you don't disgrace his name. This punishment is for your own good."

Senu's heart sank. But Batahotep did not reach for his rod, simply held out one pudgy hand. Reluctantly, Senu passed his slate into it. Batahotep considered his work in silence. He raised a surprised eyebrow. "Not bad," he said. But even as Senu's heart stirred in hope, the teacher took a crumpled cloth from his waistband, spat on the slate and rubbed out every last line of his hard won glyphs.

"No..!" He'd taken half a step forward, fists clenched, before Red's hand touched his shoulder. Very lightly, flooding his body with a confusion of love and sympathy.

"Don't," his ka whispered. "Or he'll beat you as well."

The class had gone still. Even Reonet had stopped working, her wide kohl-lined eyes fixed on Senu's face. He quickly looked away and set his jaw. Without a word, he took the slate back from Batahotep.

"Now, go sit out the back and start again," Batahotep said. "I won't be recommending you to help in the temple this year because you obviously lack the required concentration. But if you can show me twelve glyphs of a similar standard by sunset, I'll consider putting your name forward next year. You can use the holiday to say good-bye to your ka. I've no idea what your father means by letting you keep him so long." He looked meaningfully at the air behind Senu.

Under different circumstances this might have been funny, because Red had already rippled from under the awning and was doing handstands on an abandoned slab of cracked limestone, pulling faces at their teacher. Behind the ka, high above Amun's Wall, the golden apex of Khufu's pyramid dazzled against the sky.

Senu blinked hard and looked away. The one time in his life he'd actually tried to do something right, and his own ka had betrayed him.

Why did Red make Senu fail the test? Find out more in "The Great Pyramid Robbery"!