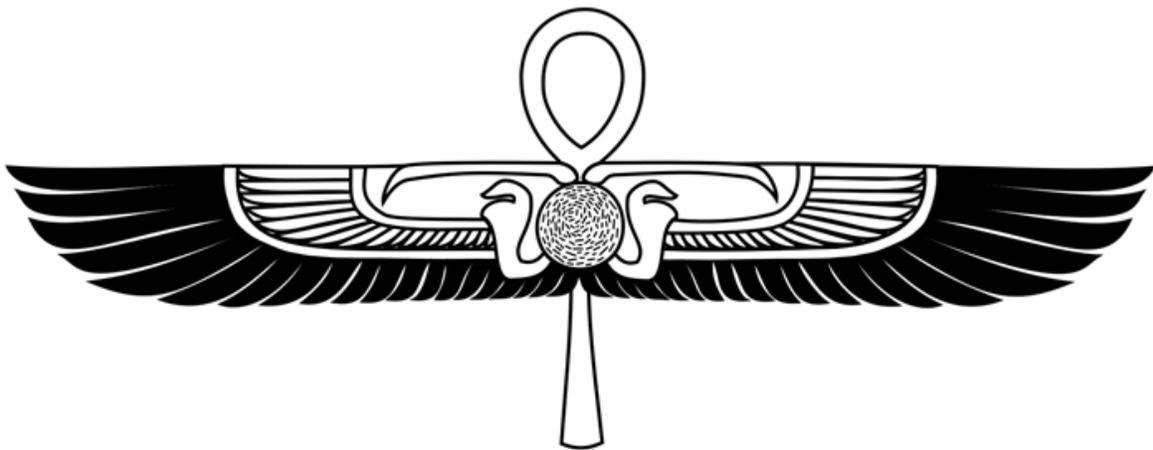


Act 1 – An Eventful Event

Welcome to Egypt! You have been collecting ancient artifacts for quite some time now, and your collection has only continued to grow. The items you have acquired obviously fall well short of what might be found at the Louvre in Paris, or the British Museum in London, but when it comes to private collections, yours is easily one of the most impressive sets of antiquities in the world, filled with very high quality specimens, all ethically obtained according to local laws and customs.

Among your many artifacts is a six-foot-long golden staff, embossed with ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. You consider this the “dark horse” of your collection. It was listed at auction as simply “ancient staff with glyphs,” just like hundreds of others you've seen over the years. However, among the many recognizable glyphs etched into the surface of this one sits an unusual symbol you have never seen before or since:



The Winged Sun Disk represents Horus of Edfu, and divinity in general. The Ankh symbolizes life. You have seen a lot of Egyptian artifacts over the years, and in all that time you have never seen two distinct symbols merged together in this way. However, you know that if a symbol was used once in antiquity, it was probably used again, so you are always on the lookout for anything else that might contain this symbol.

Your instincts about the staff seemed to pay off very quickly. While cleaning the artifact, you felt a piece rattle on the surface, as if it had been resting in place waiting to be moved. A few minutes of experimentation later it slid aside to reveal a six-digit lock. Each number wheel contained the numbers

from one to 15 (being the product of 3 and 5 – two sacred numbers in Egyptian mythology).

Unfortunately, six sliders with 15 options meant there were over 11 million possible combinations, and even with your immense patience that was too many to consider brute-forcing. And so the staff has sat in your collection, idle and locked.

That staff is the reason you now find yourself at an auction house in Thebes. Last week an antiquities broker you're familiar with sent you an auction catalogue, and among the available items was a piece of papyrus that appears in its photograph to bear that very same Winged Ankh symbol.



You arrived in Thebes two days before the auction. Once the items were open for viewing it became immediately apparent that this was not a page from antiquity. For starters, there is clearly a Sudoku grid drawn on it, and that is a puzzle type that was not invented until the 20th century.

On top of that, the writing at the bottom of the papyrus is in a modern Arabic script – not the hieroglyphs used in Ancient Egypt. The material seems to be genuine, but its contents cast doubt on not only its own authenticity, but also that of the golden staff you have held in your collection for years. After all, if this papyrus document bearing the mysterious symbol is less than 100 years old, how old could the staff actually be?

Still, your thirst to know more drives you to win this item. Surely the obvious signs of foul play must be clear to everyone present; hopefully that means nobody else will bid on this piece. It is listed as auction item 38, sandwiched between a cracked Canopic Jar with a jackal head, and a jade Ankh with thick proportions. After waiting patiently for almost two hours for the item to come up for bid, you calmly raise your paddle to open bidding on it.

And then another paddle goes up on the other side of the room. You furrow your brow in frustration and bid again: 2,000 Egyptian Pounds, approximately 70 US dollars. The other paddle raises that to 3,000 Pounds. You bid 4,000. The paddle across the room bids 5,000. You raise the bid to 10,000 and then lean to one side to get a look at the person bidding against you, and when the offending paddle goes up again it is being held by a slender woman with long black hair and a facial expression that suggests that she is as committed to leaving with that piece of papyrus as you are.

Whispers percolate through the room as you and the mysterious woman take turns outbidding each other. Everyone else seems to think this is enormous fun, but as you and your opponent lock eyes it is clear that you have become mortal enemies, here to drag each other to the depths of the underworld if that is what it takes to leave with the prize. Having finally had enough, you jump the bid to a number you think she will not contest: 1,000,000 Egyptian Pounds, roughly 34,000 US dollars.

The entire auction hall fills with muttering voices, some of them impressed at the size of your bid, and others undoubtedly thinking you a fool for overbidding on a clear fabrication. You stare holes into the other bidder's head, willing her not to raise her paddle. She turns to converse with the man next to her, and finally waves off the auctioneer. The gavel falls. The item is yours. You breathe a sigh of relief and rise to leave the hall for some lighter air.

As you stand in the center of the lobby to gather your thoughts, the woman approaches and stands in front of you, with her companion to her left. Now that you're out in the open with her you are able to get a better look at her. She is almost as tall as you, with an olive complexion and a narrow, angular face. Her black hair has been pulled back into a ponytail, where you can now see it transitions

to strawberry blonde. Her eyes are dark and almond-shaped, and she bears just a hint of an old scar across her forehead. She is dressed in black pants and a red button-front shirt with the top two buttons open, and there is a clear diamond stud in each of her earlobes.

After taking a moment to look you up and down, she says in a light Eastern European accent, “You have made a serious mistake.” Her voice is lower than you would have expected, and her tone is sincere – and a little bit threatening.

“Given how much you seem to want this particular piece, I don't think I have,” you calmly reply. Jealous losers are a common occurrence at these auctions. You've seen this scenario play out a hundred times: she'll talk a lot, make a big show of being upset, and ultimately slink away never to be heard from again.

Her associate, a bear of a man with a beard and expression to match, takes a deliberate step forward. He towers over you, but you hold your ground. The woman places a hand on his chest to stop him, instructing, “Now, now, let us conduct ourselves with class.” She then leans closer to you herself and whispers into your ear, “You'll be seeing me again.”

You turn your head to meet her eyes and whisper back, “I'm looking forward to it.”

Without another word, she and her companion walk out the door into the warm Egyptian evening.

You glance about the room to see if anyone was witness to the exchange. It is with no small amount of relief that you spot your friend Simon exiting the auction hall. “I don't suppose you know who that was?” you ask him.

“I've seen her at a number of these auctions,” he replies, “but she never bids on anything.”

“Until now.”

“Yes, until now.”

“Do you know anything about her?”

“I've heard someone call her Delilah. Aside from that, I'm in the dark.”

“Delilah,” you repeat. “She said I haven't seen the last of her.”

“Do you think she meant it?”

“I hope not.”

With that, you excuse yourself to visit the restroom, and when you return, the lobby is once again empty. You take your seat in the auction hall and wait patiently for the last item to sell – a collection of gold scarabs – so that you can collect your prize. You secure the papyrus inside a secret pocket in your shirt and depart.

The walk back to your hotel is crowded but uneventful. Your room, however, is a catastrophe.

It looks like a bomb went off inside it. The mattress has been flipped and torn open; the drawers have been removed and dropped haphazardly onto the floor; the contents of your luggage have been tossed; pages have been torn out of every book. You're surprised the windows aren't broken.

You race down to the hotel lobby, give the receptionist your room number, and ask him, "Has anyone been in my room today?"

"Just your wife," he says. "She forgot her watch."

Your heart sinks as you realize Delilah is not just any sore loser from an auction. You thank the receptionist and return to the scene of the crime to start setting it right again. She was clearly searching for something. Reflexively you pat your shirt for the papyrus – it's still there, of course. You turn the desk chair upright and drop onto it, trying to come to terms with what happened here.

It doesn't take you long to come to a frightening realization: if Delilah was that interested in the page, surely she must know about the staff. Is that what she was looking for here? Does she know where you live to look for it there? Your passport is on your person, but there's no telling what information she might have gotten about you from elsewhere.

You had planned on staying here for the rest of the week, but this is too important to wait. You toss your belongings into your suitcase, pay for the room, and hail a cab to the airport. The flight home feels like the longest one you've ever been on. When you finally open your house's front door, everything is right where you left it, in perfect order. You chide yourself for panicking – of course she doesn't know where you live, she doesn't know anything about you! Exhausted from the flight, and feeling slightly embarrassed, you head to the bedroom and drop directly into bed.

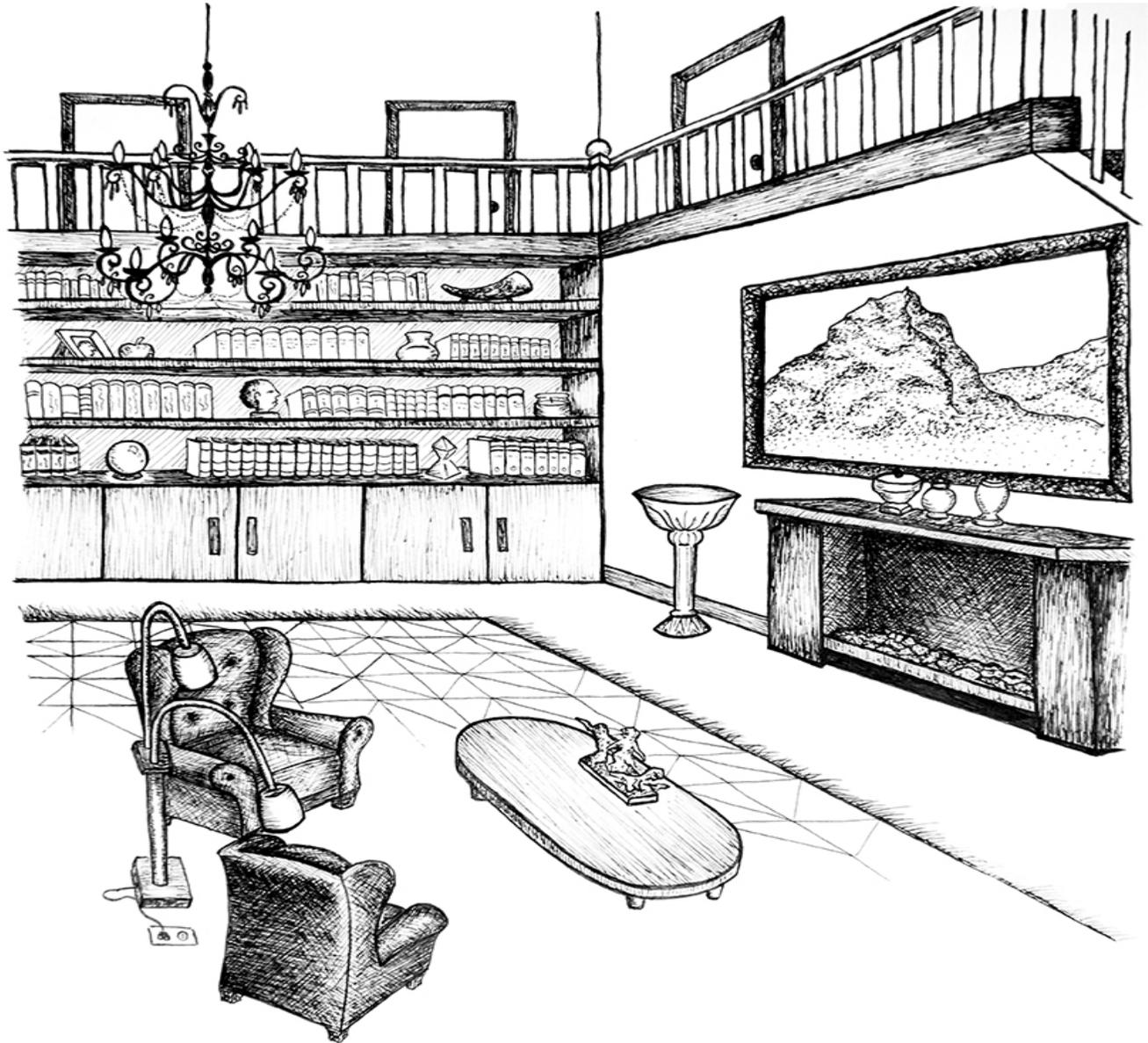
Sleep does not come easily this night. Every time you're even a little bit into a dream, you awaken just enough to be frustrated at yourself for not staying asleep, and then return to slumber. Eventually you reach the point where your eyes refuse to stay closed on their own, so you get up and take a shower to finish waking up. Once your brain is working properly again you unpack your suitcase, pull out the papyrus page, and head downstairs.

You have done very well for yourself in the business world, and your house is large enough to prove it. The ground floor has all the usual rooms – living and dining rooms, kitchen, bathroom – but the main attraction is the great room: a large central area that's two storeys tall with an elaborate chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

The first storeys of three of its walls are lined with shelves holding books and artifacts and souvenirs from your travels. The floor is covered with a deep green carpet with a red geometric pattern repeating across it. Two large navy blue armchairs sit facing a low oval-shaped coffee table, its farther edge adorned with small sculptures of Greek mythological figures, tastefully arranged. A bifurcated

floor lamp stands between the chairs, extending a reading light over each one.

The wall on the right, opposite the chairs, is bare of shelves. Instead there is an electric fireplace below a mantle holding an assortment of decorative urns. Above these hangs a large oil painting of a blue mountain set in an ornate wooden frame. The left corner of this wall contains a large glass bowl supported by a three foot tall glass pedestal, and in the other corner is the bottom of a mahogany staircase that ascends along that wall from right to left up to the second storey.



The stairs level off above the mountain painting into a mezzanine hallway which extends around the entire length of the back wall and overlooks the great room from behind a banister. The

hallway provides access to five rooms: the bathroom which exits above the painting, and four bedrooms. The one next to the bathroom you have made into your study, which is basically a scaled-down version of the great room. It has an elaborate wooden desk with a chair to match, shelves against one wall, filled with history and reference books, and a large globe in one corner. The window frames your chair, and cream-coloured drapes frame the window.

The master bedroom is at the far end of the mezzanine. The other rooms have been made up as guest quarters, although they seldom see any use. Across from this open hallway is a large second-storey window – the only one the great room has – with dark green faux drapes hanging on either side of it. Very little direct sunlight comes through that window, but it is enough to provide a nice warm light during the day.

Right now, in the mid-morning, the sunlight coming through that window is just enough to illuminate the room without any other lights needing to be turned on. You rest the staff across one of the armchairs, settle down into the other one, and begin examining the papyrus that's caused you so much trouble already.

The first thing you set your mind on is the Arabic writing at the bottom:

لقد قتلت على يد أخي
قامت زوجتي بإحيائي
لقد انتقم ابني الذي لم يولد بعد
أطالب عرشي الجديد

You don't read or speak Arabic, but the internet does. You pull out your phone and upload a picture of it to Google Translate. What it gives you back is a poem:

Killed by my brother

Revived by my wife

Avenged by my unborn son

I claim my new throne

You're not sure what that signifies, but you do know for certain that you're going to figure it

out. The only other thing to see there is the Sudoku, which appears to contain a code of some sort:

	V	A	B		
C	D	E	F	G	V
H	I	J	K	L	M
N	O	P	Q	R	S
	T	U	V	W	X
○		Y	Z		●

You wonder aloud what this 6x6 grid might have to do with the staff.

Note: this puzzle has an anti-knight constraint

F-puzzles: https://dimono.ca/puzzle/Osiris_The_Staff_FPuzz

SudokuPad: https://dimono.ca/puzzle/Osiris_The_Staff_SPad

The password for Act 2: _ _ _ _ _