

THE ARTIFACT GUARDIANS
BOOK ONE

STOLEN THE PAPYRUS

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CHAPTER 1

They were going to take a bus to the Saqqara necropolis that morning—or so Leila had thought. Instead, she sat in the belly of a small helicopter with three others from her excavation team. The helicopter thrummed to life, stirring up a flutter of glee inside Leila’s chest. She’d dreamed of this since the moment her father put a trowel in her hand when she was a little girl, tagging along at one of his digs. She’d dreamed of it every day she studied for her bachelor’s in archaeology. Every day she sat in lectures and seminars for never-ending grad school.

It wasn’t a dream anymore. It was happening.

The pilot gave a thumbs up and the machine lurched. Leila ground her teeth together as the cracked asphalt shrank beneath them, tufts of grass whipping around in a churning cloud of sand. The machine hovered, rotated, then dipped forward as the pilot headed toward their first point of interest. Rippling sugar cane fields zipped by beneath them, and moments later, they were rising higher and higher over Cairo.

Dotted with white *felucca* sails, the Nile River cut through a brown-and-sand-colored Tetris board of buildings like a glittering blue snake. Lush green meadows hugged the winding Nile, giving way to yellow dunes that stretched to the horizon.

Leila held her breath as the Great Pyramids rose like golden mountains in the distance. She could only imagine their former glory over three thousand years ago when they were new, completely covered with polished white limestone that now only capped the top of Khufu's pyramid.

She couldn't help herself. She grinned. Here she was at last, on her way to excavate tombs and temples, to run her hands through the sand, to get the same dirt under her fingernails the ancient Egyptians once walked on.

"For the record," her coworker, Emmanuela Giovanni, blurted from her seat by the other window, "I want to be buried in a pyramid." Her melodic Italian accent sounded surprisingly clear on the headset, despite the permanent thumping from the rotating blades above them.

“You know, aliens built them,” Karl Tillman muttered from the middle seat. Though sitting in the helicopter was no trouble for Leila’s slim figure, Karl’s tall, rounded frame forced him to sit with his shoulders hunched and legs squeezed together.

“Yeah. They line up with Orion’s belt.” She lifted an eyebrow, shamelessly baiting him. Karl probably wanted to get into a discussion about a subject he was an expert in, like Star Trek.

“*Ja, genau,*” Karl said, his voice brightening. “Exactly!” He swiped a few strands of his ramen-noodle hair from his eyes. “That’s where the aliens live.”

“Karl,” Emma groaned, her face buried in her hands. “For the hundredth time, the ancient Egyptians weren’t aliens.”

“People didn’t believe Galileo when he said the earth revolved around the sun, either.” Karl shrugged and leaned back with his eyes closed. Clearly this conversation wasn’t going the direction he wanted.

“I’d hardly compare you to the father of modern science,” Emma scoffed.

“I heard that.”

With a shake of her head, Leila smiled and shifted her attention back to the window. The three of them had spent the last six weeks together at field school in Giza, where they received the mandatory instruction on archaeological excavation. After working with Karl and Emma every day in the trenches, she was used to their antics.

The flight south was only supposed to take half an hour, but the excavation leader pointed out more and more of the various archaeological sites from his place in the co-pilot seat. The pilot was more than happy to oblige, flying around each one for closer observation. Leila wasn't about to complain. The tombs and temples were as interesting from above as from below. From up here, she could see exactly how precise and deliberate the ancient Egyptian architects were with their building arrangements.

After an hour, they descended toward their destination. At the excavation leader's request, Emma snapped away with one of her cameras to get a few aerial shots of the excavation site.

They hovered over the Saqqara necropolis, a burial ground a few miles south of Cairo and much older than Giza. The area was pitted with trenches of varying depths from past and current excavations. Below them, archaeologists had already begun restoration work on crumbled stone walls.

Two rocky hills marked where ancient pyramids, prototype designs for the Great Pyramids farther north, once overshadowed the necropolis in their full glory. Trails wound around the pyramids and ruins, allowing easy access for the archaeologists and the tourists.

The paths lured her gaze to the massive 4,500-year-old Step Pyramid of Djoser situated on the northern end of the valley. Despite its crumbling façade, it towered over the dunes, casting a vast shadow over the site.

They circled for a few minutes until the excavation leader signaled to the pilot then pointed to a spot for him to land. Leila hardly noticed when the machine touched the ground.

A man ran up to their landing spot, waving his arms wildly, screaming at the helicopter. Leila couldn't understand a word, but it probably had something to do with the miniature dust storm the helicopter created. The man's hat flew off and he was left with only his aviator sunglasses to protect his face from the onslaught of sand.

Soliman, the excavation leader, threw the door open and jumped out, pausing at the door to help the others exit. The blades began to slow and the machine growled into silence.

Leila hopped down and, even though there were four-and-a-half feet between the top of her head and the blades, hunched her back and hurried away from the rotorcraft, dark strands of hair whipping around her face. Once a safe distance, she straightened. A pungent diesel-like odor lingered in her nostrils as she took in her first ground-view look of Saqqara through a yellowish haze. Workers had already begun to remove tarps from the trenches, thrown down in haste at the helicopter's approach. A group of a dozen tourists in sunhats and hiking gear gathered at the foot of the Djoser, pointing at its six colossal steps.

At the sound of yelling behind her, she wheeled around as their greeter descended on the pilot.

“You daft?” The British man’s shirt was covered in a light coating of sand and dirt. “D’you think this looks like a blasted airport? You could have warned us! Even a ten-minute warning? No? Well, now you’ll have fun digging everything back up.” He spread his arms for emphasis.

Leila narrowed her eyes. Something about him seemed familiar. Did they once have classes together? Sit next to each other on a plane? Emma and Karl joined her to watch the spectacle, exchanging bewildered glances.

“Where’s the popcorn when you need it?” Emma whispered.

“I would have landed farther out, but there weren’t any opportunities,” the pilot argued, ripping off his headset. He gestured with them toward the helicopter, his face showing anything but amusement at the man’s outburst. “I had to choose the flattest spot.”

Leila stole another glance at the area. The light covering of dust wasn’t as awful as the British guy made it sound. An actual sandstorm would have been worse.

“I want that hideous thing gone,” the Englishman demanded.

The excavation leader approached him. “*Sabahu al-khair*, Harrison,” he said in greeting, wiping his spectacles on the front of his shirt. “That’s enough.”

The man rounded on him then came to a stop. “Oh. Professor,” he said, raking his fingers through his hair. “It’s you. I thought you were coming by bus?”

“We got a more adventurous offer,” Soliman explained, patting his forehead with a folded handkerchief before slipping his glasses back on. He smiled warmly,

close-lipped. “Let me introduce the final installment to our team. Emma Giovanni, Karl Tillmann, Leila Sterling”—he sighed and gestured to the pilot, who still glowered at the grumpy archaeologist—“and Neal Coleman, our all-purpose sponsor, whom you have already so kindly welcomed.”

Soliman faced the group and waved a hand at their new colleague. “And this is Alexander Harrison.”

“This guy is going to be so much fun to work with,” Karl muttered, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

But Leila wasn't listening. She couldn't. It felt like someone had just punched her in the gut. Not Xander Harrison. Anybody but him. Memories flashed before her eyes, full of echoing laughter and suffocating cries.

Her stomach lurched as he greeted them, his mouth set in a straight line. To her horror, his gaze lingered in her direction with a slight twitch of his jaw.

Oh no. Oh no, no, no.

After eight years, his lanky, boyish frame had developed into a more mature, well-built physique. Under the dust, his brown hair was cut shorter than she remembered. And judging by the shadow over his rectangular jaw, he also hadn't bothered to shave for at least a week. But he was definitely the same person. And the way his mouth had slightly dropped told her everything she needed to know. He remembered her too.

She swallowed. The dig was ruined.

“I see the *mastabas* are in phase,” Soliman said to Xander. “What do you have on site so far?”

“Right.” Xander immediately snapped out of the trance between them and whipped his head away from Leila. He clapped his hands once, sending a puff of dust into the air. “I’ll get to that. First, allow me to take you on the grand tour.”

This can’t be real. Someone tell me I’m dreaming.

Her mind continued to whirl, her legs refusing to follow after the group as it dispersed toward the excavation. A vision of running back to the helicopter, jumping in, and zooming off played in her head. Except she had no idea how to fly a helicopter. She was stuck.



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