

Excerpt from the novel, *The Archaeologist* by Raven Oak.

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## PROLOGUE

*300 Miles from Alexandria, Egypt, 2243 A.D.*

The beast, with its wispy breath and haggard grey skin, floats by those closed-to-almost-all doors in this resting place, to tease the strong and frighten the weak. Claws cut out all but a single heart beat--the only sound echoing through the chasm.

She glanced up--I remember that--like she was looking at God--to God to save her, and asked, "Why? What is the nature of mortality? Is it you? Are you the one to bring me death?"

My mouth can't frown, not really, but she sensed my unease. She didn't gasp when my teeth were exposed for the world, which in this room, consisted only of her. Of me. The Nature of Mortality. The Collector. "Mortality is both fighting to live and wishing to die," I answered.

She smiled. "But I am neither. I no longer have the strength to fight, nor the will to wish anything."

She looked tired, as if time had picked her most horrifying moment and stopped on it--delaying the agony. And the relief. The crispness of her voice reminded me of dry leaves crackling, stepped on and marched over--as she had been. Marched over by many-a-lover. And many-a-people. How often in her ancient life had she been stumbled over, as if she were baggage? How often had other's feet trodden over her body in their attempt to win the race?

I remember standing there at her tomb as she smiled and whispered in my mind of days long past, thinking, "How could anyone disturb such immortality?"

Carvings upon carvings--reminders of a lifelong past--yet preservation of life itself.

And when I took her hand in mine that day, reading her name aloud, I felt myself let go in her distress and reprieve. And my own mortality slipped away in the ocean of life that was her. Cleopatra....

## CHAPTER ONE

*Kobuk Valley National Park, Alaska, 2253 A.D.*

Ten years. Ten years past that day in the crypt. When Cleopatra herself rose from the pilfered sarcophagus and smiled, lighting the room with a brightness not even the hot Egyptian sun could touch, and yet the memory of the event, however fuzzy it was at times when he tried to drink it away, the memory still lingered like the bitter taste of glue on an old envelope.

*Speaking of envelopes*, he thought, *I need to mail off that article to the Cambridge Archaeological Journal*. The shuffle of papers as he dug for said article reminded him of her bandages as they fell away from sun-darkened skin, revealing a body very much warm. Very much alive. He shuddered, eyes closed a moment as the memory swept over him again.

"Forget, forget, forget," he muttered, but the hardness beneath the crotch of his jeans spoke of his inability to forget that moment.

*Or forget her*, he thought, taking a deep, pained breath through clenched teeth.

For the past ten years, his discoveries dwindled down to pathetic pieces of arrowheads and pottery, swept almost unrecognizable by the harsh sands of the Sahara desert, and desperation drove him out of Egypt, out of Africa entirely and into the harsh bitter-cold of Alaska where the ever-present chill could freeze the fire of Her from his skin and bones. His research lacking, funding dwindled to nothing, he survived on the sympathies of the locals who shared supplies with him as he 'sought a lover beneath the sands of the past' as they put it.

"Inotowok," they called him. *Lost cause* in the native tongue. He was a joke amongst his peers.

"Cleopatra? They thought they found her tomb in 2010, you know. They still aren't sure if it's her, or if she's somewhere under the eastern harbor of Alexandria. How could you possibly think this bag of bones is her though? The Queen of the Nile in a tomb such as that?" they asked, eyes searching the barren room, plain of decoration and riches, and buried a good 300 miles from Alexandria proper in the middle of the desert.

No other tombs in site, and certainly too far for her body to have been dragged, only to be tossed in, half mummified and rotten, skin long pulled from the bones by dogs or some other scavenger. One moment, her hands were all over him, touching and searching for what he didn't know, and the next, the partially wrapped mummy lay on the floor as if thrown there, no life anywhere to be found. His eyes widened, and he shook his head, trying to make sense of the grim scene before him.

Darkness filled the cavern, his torch now as dead as the body beside him. His crew and fellow archaeologist, Brandon Temple, found him this way, lying lovingly beside the body of some long dead Egyptian, shouting "Cleopatra, come back!" into the darkness.

Not only a joke with archaeologists, now he was a joke with the local folks as well, and it rubbed. Thomas Belkes, once a leader in his field, now a mere shadow of what he'd been. He'd argued for hours that night with Brandon, convinced that not only was that half destroyed body the Queen of the Nile, but that she'd spoken to him, loved him, fire between them besides the torch in his hands.

"Are you really arguing with me that you...you made love to that...that thing?! Have you lost your mind, Thom?" Brandon shouted with a gesture that sloshed the bourbon in his shot glass. Eyes burning from the smoke of the lantern in his tent, of which he still hadn't adjusted to after four long months on site, he blinked hard a few times, staring at the pile of books and maps strewn across his desk. While Brandon continued to shout, just a little more than drunk as he tried to swallow down such a story, Thom waited him out.

Once the storm settled into more of a tropical storm than a hurricane proper, he tried again. "It wasn't a thing. It was her. She was alive. I don't know what happened, but for a time, she was alive and she...she..."

"I can't do this," Brandon said, leaning at a twenty degree angle as he wobbled towards the tent's entrance. "If you want to drink yourself into stupidity and lose your career, you'll do it by yourself." The tent flap refused to open to his clumsy, drunken fingers until finally he just stumbled out the tent, almost bringing it down with him. Thom had watched in half horror, half amusement, the irony not lost on him as his friend fled.

*He'll change his mind come morning, come Cleopatra.*

During his argument, he'd worked out that part. The setting of the sun, and the mummy returned to near dust. Completely sober, Thom scribbled out the events in his journal and curled

up on the cot in the corner. His eyes open, he waited patiently for the sunrise that would decorate the shifting sands of Egypt.

But the following morning, nothing. No life. No Cleopatra. Just the bag of bones that Brandon had walked in on. And just as quickly, walked out on as he pulled the crew from the site and away from 'Mr. Self-Destruct.'

Thom remained until lack of supplies and the chaffing sand drove him back to Cairo. On his trip back to the hotel, he worried about leaving her body behind, promising to return and claim it once he'd secured a way to take it with him out of the country. But it was a choice he didn't have to make. Once he arrived at the Kempinski Nile Hotel, the manager informed him he'd been checked out weeks ago.

"No payment," the man sputtered in broken English. Not only was the entire excavation crew long gone, but Thom's belongings had been tossed into the streets, divvied up amongst the street rats of the city. Those weeks before his return to England had been harrowing. Especially once he'd returned to the dig site to find it empty. Her body, gone.

Locals claimed the military had seized the remains, while others yet swore thieves had appeared in the night to whisk away his find. But Thom knew better. *Brandon waited me out, waited for me to head back to the hotel, and then he took her. I know he did. But for what purpose? If he really believes it to be just another mummy, why take her from me?*

With no answers in his possession, he wired his office for an advance of money to fly home. When met with no response, he tried the direct approach--a phone call. "I'm sorry, Mr. Belkes, but the university has been instructed not to help you any further as you are...well, how to put it...no longer an employee of this establishment."

Thom sputtered a moment as he leaned his forehead against the glass of the pay phone booth. "Look, Marlene, I appreciate your circumstance. You're only doing your job after all, but Brandon has left me stranded in Egypt with no way home. The least the school could do is fly me home. Consider it my severance package."

"Hold one moment, please."

Sweat trickled down the back of his calves in the oppressive heat, and behind him, a woman cleared her throat several times before tapping him on the shoulder. He waved a hand at her, driving the phone into the side of his face all the harder as he waited.

"You still there, Mr. Belkes?" Marlene called.

"Yes, I've got nowhere else to go."

She paused a moment and then cleared her own throat. "Chancellor Reed says your severance funds have been wired to your account. Personal items not purchased with university funds have been boxed and await your pickup...."

*Which is a nice way of saying they kept all the personal treasures I've picked up through the years at dig sites. Damn.*

"....You will, of course, need to pick them up during normal hours so that someone is here to escort you through the university. Cambridge wishes you a good day, sir."

The rapid pulse of the dial tone caught him off guard and he jumped, dropping the receiver from his ear. It swung between his knees like a useless artifact, and the woman behind him shoved him aside, her fingers flying across the numbers before he'd done little more than inhale.



"Even if they think I'm crazy, I'm surprised they didn't allow me time to check into a clinic of some sort first before they fired me," he said, and the woman on the phone frowned, her disapproving eyes watching him a second more before she slid the phone booth door shut.

The walk to the nearest bank felt lengthier in the direct sun, and not even his full-brimmed hat protected him from swimming in sweat on his way to the financial institution where he pleaded with a cross old woman, ID in hand, for access to his funds.

"We do not dispense funds for other banks," she repeated for the fifth time, and he slammed his hand on the counter before her.

"I'm stranded...Ms. What-is-it? Oh, oh yes, Ms. Hansina. I realize you don't normally do this, but could you not do a bank to bank transfer? Something to give me enough money to get to Alexandria? Once I get there, the national bank--"

Back and forth they went until the line behind him wrapped around the corner and the manager intervened. Money enough to get him to Alexandria and then some, he fled the streets of Cairo. *I just want to get out of here. Without her, there is nothing for me in this city.*

Thom spent the trip to Alexandria in a pool of salt as not even the open windows of the overcrowded bus cooled the passengers as they bounced along to the divots of the bumpy road. He tried sleeping and failed, spending the two hour trip listening to the woman beside him chatter on about her son's new job. He spent the evening in a tiny hotel in Al Qabbari, his dreams plaguing him with images of half-rotten corpses following him as he ran through the streets, only to fall into the Mediterranean Sea.

A tangled mess wrapped itself around his feet, and he kicked out, desperate in his attempt to rise again to the surface, but the fabric pulled him further into the darkness until he was wrapped and bound, another nameless mummy at the bottom of the sea.

He awoke with the dire need for more sleep, which he fell into before his plane took off from the runway. It was raining when he landed in Cambridge, and he skirted the university altogether, bee-lining straight for Brandon's flat in Chesterton. The archaeologist ignored Thom's knocks and when the door pushed open with little intimidation, Thom found his former-friend sprawled across the couch, his clothes ragged and hair unwashed. The smell of liquor and piss burned Thom's nose, and he nudged take-out bags to the side as he waded to Brandon.

"What happened, man? And you called me the drunk," Thom said, removing empty glasses and bottles from the chair to sit. His friend winced at the clinking glass sound, but otherwise gave no indication that he was aware of Thom's existence.

"Tell me what happened to bring you to such a state," said Thom, shaking his friend on the shoulder.

Brandon whispered inaudibly, and Thom moved closer to the slurred speaking lips.

"What's that? Say again?"

"Cleopatra."

Thom froze, a warmth flushing across his skin. "Where?"

Brandon's hand moved to the table beside him and thrust a pamphlet into his hands. Thom's eyes moved across it rapidly before settling at the bottom. "So you *were* the one who stole her!" He lunged forward, hands reaching out for Brandon when his friend smiled, a goofy grin similar to the one Thom knew he wore that day, when Cleopatra held him, his head nestled between firm breasts that echoed with a heartbeat of one very much alive.

"She told me to take her," whispered Brandon.

"You saw her then? You believe me?" Thom waved his hands in the air at no one in particular. "Where is she?" he asked, and when Brandon only nodded stupidly, Thom shook him by the shoulders, his voice rising loud enough to draw a few knocks from the neighbors in the flat next door. "Where is she? If you presented a lecture on her, you had her here. Where?"

"The museum. The museum...seized her after..after..."

"After you made a fool of yourself as I did, shouting how she was alive to a room of archaeologists?"

He giggled, a sound more akin to a hyena than a human as his lips smeared across his face in an goofy grin, and Thom flinched at the harshness of the sound. *If that's how I sounded, it's no wonder people believed me mad.* "Come on, Brandon. Time to sober up," he said, striding into the kitchen where he rifled through the cupboards for a coffee grinder and beans.

"Why should I?" Brandon muttered, his hand holding the side of his head as he winced at the light streaming in through the one loan window. His jaw tensed as Thom set to grinding the beans, the noise not all that loud, and yet he held on to his ears in obvious pain. "Must you make that noise?"

Thom chuckled. "You need coffee, man. As I said, time to sober up."

"Why?"

"We've got a Queen to find," said Thom, starring across the living room cluttered with old smells. *But none as old as that tomb. We will find you, my Queen. You were alive! I know it. And now Brandon knows it, too.*

Thom's face flushed as he recalled her touch, and then jealousy spread through his veins like hot sauce across the tongue. *I found her first. She's my discovery. She's mine!*

Brandon touched his elbow, his gaze staring at the coffee machine. "Not so keen on sobering me up now, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Now that it's dawned on you."

Thom released the grinder, setting it on the counter before he turned to face Brandon, who looked much more sober than moments before as he stood mostly upright, though his hip leaned casually against the counter. "Now that what's dawned on me? Speak plainly, man."

"If we both look for her, who gets her? Are you willing to share her?" When Thom blanched, Brandon ignored him, dumping the coffee into the machine. "I thought not. Archaeologists have never been good at sharing discoveries, much less women."

"I suppose we'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Thom answered, his blue eyes locked on to Brandon's brown.

Both men stood, staring at one another while the coffee dripped, and once done, neither moved to retrieve a cup. Neither needed the aid to be sober. "Where do we begin?" Brandon asked, his mouth askew to show crooked teeth.

"Cambridge. The museum. Though I'm not sure how we'll gain access as they've let me go, I'm afraid."

"You have anything against breaking and entering?" Brandon asked him, and he laughed at the old joke. Archaeologists. The world's oldest burglars and thieves. Preservers of history and robbers of graves.

Thom was never a fan of the last bit, preferring instead to think of himself as the former rather than the later, but he smirked at the joke anyway.

"Not a thing, friend. Not a thing. Now let's get going, shall we?"