1



All the stories start here.
Fire tests us. Truth transforms us.
The shadows never die.
They only change their name.
~From *The Lost Myth*

July 20, 1976

When the woman strolls by the Cairo Museum right in front of Noura Marquette, cool as a cucumber despite the heat, Noura is certain she's mistaken. The last time she saw her younger sister, Estelle was storming out of their father's Tel Aviv apartment, hurling a curse on Noura and her descendants...all sealed with the tiny bloody handprint smeared across Estelle's back.

As the lithe woman passes into a building's shadow, Noura's mind tangles in opposing desires to dart after the woman and to simply walk away as her sister had. And so she stands like some tragic statue, trembling, useless—the same paralysis she's fought her entire life to hide.

The woman emerges into sunlight slashing across her scarred arm. Petulant laughter lifts from the woman. So familiar she might have crawled from the twisted mire of the past. Noura shakes free of the image.

It's ridiculous. There is no way Estelle happens to be in Cairo at the same moment as her older sister.

Would Estelle want to blow Egypt to smithereens for killing their brother? Perhaps. But walk the streets laughing? Not a chance.

Taking a step away from the apparition is like slogging through quicksand. Yet Noura drags one foot and then another toward the museum steps, the basket on her head tottering with each step so that she has to steady it with a hand. She is nearly free from the blasted biological pull when she realizes what she's just thought.

Noura spins, fingers sparking from the slam of adrenaline. Blow Egypt to smithereens? Knowing Estelle's associates, bombs are indeed a possibility.

"Dr. Marquette?" Dr. Christine Lilyquist's call from the museum archway is muddy with concern. Noura winces. Here she is, dithering about on the street when she would normally be inside the museum already working.

"Coming," Noura answers her mentor, still half-facing the woman curving away.

Noura shades her eyes with a hand. The slope of the woman's nose isn't right. And dark hair escapes her scarf, not blond, right? And so thin. Noura can't help worrying about her sister...the woman...whoever she is.

The apparition disappears around the salmon pink museum building, and everything falls into its proper place—a street full of strangers. Noura steadies the basket and mentally stuffs the messy ache for her sister down with the rest of her childhood memories, and then bricks up that part of her soul. After all, you can't hurt stone.

"Are you all right?" The sun shimmers behind Dr. Lilyquist, turning her hair into a halo of gold. Appropriate since the Met's lead Egyptologist is a near goddess in their field.

"Thought I saw someone I knew." Noura slams down the last mental brick and smiles, exuding all that is harmonious. Her practiced submission is enough to make Dr. Lilyquist nod and then stride through the museum doors. Noura's shoulders relax. Dr. Lilyquist knows little of the festering trouble Noura's siblings caused. If she did, she might never allow Noura near theKing Tutankhamun artifacts destined to tour the US. Noura's career would be dead before it came to life.

As the pair ducks under the doorway's keystone sculpture of Aset,

Noura can't help but think of how the Egyptian goddess resurrected her slain husband. Powerful, unrepentant, and able to battle death itself. What Noura wouldn't do for such power.

Dr. Lilyquist trots down the few stairs into the sunken display area and strides between the sarcophagi, leaving Noura to scramble along in her mentor's footsteps. They pass one after another of Egyptian royalty laid out in mind-numbing repetition.

But as she passes the statue of the falcon-headed Horus, she shivers, feeling his eyes move with her, spreading his wings in request to help him repeat the miracle his mother, Aset, had made possible. Of course that only set off a rivalry between her son and Set, the god of chaos. Chaos and peace—the *isfet* of Set and the *ma'at* of Horus.

Apparently life thinks Noura needs her peace balanced . Even the thought of her chaotic sister has Noura's attention skittering sideways. Their father would laugh at the preposterous thought of gods or fate.

A pulse of anxiety zings down Noura's arms.

But Father is not here. And as Dr. Lilyquist trots up the back stairs, Noura shoves his accusations in with the walled-off detritus of the past. She braces her basket and scrambles to the second floor. Here, the items from King Tutankhamun's tomb are displayed, or rather, scattered about in horror-filling disarray. Noura itches to reorganize. She knows her place, however, and would never offend her Egyptian counterparts by presuming to know better.

In the front room, Noura slips past precise mountains of various archival packing materials. Behind the piles, one of the British packers lifts his utility knife in greeting and returns to measuring and cutting with focused, if slightly jocular, impunity.

She nods at John, then ducks through an archway into the back alcove. At a table near the far wall, the two conservators bend over a three-thousand-year-old object, painstakingly repairing a crack in the ancient blue paint made from ground glass. Theodore Fabre glances up from his work with a roguish wink, and Noura prays Dr. Lilyquist didn't notice either the wink or Noura's stupid flushed cheeks.

A quick glance tells Noura her mentor is blessedly ignorant as she strides out the door, frowning over a document.

Noura stomps out the interest flickering in her middle and paces to

her tiny desk wedged into the front corner. Theo may be a talented conservationist with a dogged willingness to help her rifle through the souks for the only type of pencil the other conservator, Mr. Frank Caddel, will use. But Noura doesn't have a permanent job in the Egyptology department at the Met. Since professional women don't have the luxury of appearing weak, she will not get sacked for flights of romantic fantasy.

Theo's sparkling brown eyes included.

Noura deposits the basket of provisions onto the floor, unwraps the dull brown scarf from her hair, then sets the supplies on a shelf and the bag of food out of the way of the antiquities. The team will nibble at the snacks until they can take a dinner break well after dark.

For now, she unearths her notebook from under the neat stack of fifty-five card files. One file for every artifact Dr. Lilyquist and the Met's director selected for the tour to the US.

When Noura ducks into the alcove to assess where the others are on today's duties, she realizes what the conservators are working on—the necklace with the vulture pendant. Acrid panic explodes through her at how far behind they are.

Noura taps her leg in a semi-useless attempt to scrape away the corrosion eating her muscles. "Still working on the pendant?" She is pleased to hear the complete absence of bite in her tone.

"It needed more repair than we expected." Mr. Caddel doesn't even look up. "And Hoving is on a mission."

Thomas Hoving is the brilliant Metropolitan Museum of Art director with a shifting wish list that sometimes leaves everyone on his team without solid foothold. Noura crosses her ankles and leans a nonchalant hip against the table, but she still has a death grip on the notebook clutched to her chest. "I'm afraid to ask."

"He wants Selket's statue," Theo says.

"Is that all?" Noura laughs. "The Egyptians will never let us have her." They'd consider it a sacrilege to dismantle the chest containing Tutankhamun's organs.

"And yet, Mr. Hoving won't leave without the statue."

Theo is right. The team will be tasked with the impossible.

Feet, Noura thinks, meet the cliff over which your career will plummet.

"It's your fault, you know." Mr. Caddel adjusts his reading glasses so he can glare at her in full 20/20 vision.

"My fault?" If only her notebook could ward off Mr. Caddel's evil eye. That look is one of the many reasons she refuses to call the man Frank like everyone else.

"Ignore him." Theo positions his brush in its holder and rests his forearms on the worktable. "We'll be finished soon, and the leopard head won't take long."

Unfortunately, Theo's support doesn't stop Noura's thoughts from tumbling. Selket is compelling, as is the scorpion perched on the goddess's linen headscarf. With her long neck curved so she stares over her shoulder, you can practically hear her dare you to take what isn't yours. She is the goddess with a scorpion's power over snakes, who guards the pharaoh, who paralyzes and tightens the throat. She is both the goddess of death and the goddess of healing.

Noura walks the perimeter of the room. Changing the list now, while Mr. Hoving's prerogative, makes the weight of responsibility press heavier. The goal of the actual exhibit—with the clamor of excitement and captivated people—seems a marathon away...and she has never run for anything but danger in her entire life.

She makes a note in her notebook and grimaces as her fingers leave wet marks on the page. Under the stress of the show and heat of construction lights she scrounged from the market, she's now sweating enough to make anyone think she's run that marathon. She flutters the front of her linen shirt, wishing for more than the small reprieve.

"Think New York January cold," Theo says with a sardonic backhand to his voice.

Noura bites her lip to keep in the snort of laughter. She's not certain if he's talking to her or himself or Mr. Caddel, who has yet to stop grumbling under his breath. Though Mr. Caddel's temper is as hot and unpredictable as the stereotypical red-headed Bostonian he is, Theo can rib his friend into better humor.

"Snowmen?" Theo's voice soars louder to trail her across the room. "Skiing? Icicles?"

"New York can keep its January cold." The rejoinder leaves Noura's lips before she remembers her resolve. No relationships. She is stone. She flees through the archway. There will be no sparkling eyes for her.

"How about ice cream?"

Noura hears a scraping of wood upon wood and turns to see Theo standing. He meanders toward her and raises an eyebrow. He is definitely asking her.

His sloppy grin and tapping of his fingers against his leg have her heart screaming *yes!* How do you say no to such reckless adorableness?

"If I remember," he says in a voice low enough only she hears, "you love mango ice."

Heaven knows she does. What she wants crashes into the reality of her position, and the riptide drags her into a murky pool. "I...that is—"

"We have work to do, gentlemen." John's staid British voice saves Noura from replying.

Turning her back to the conservators, Noura hides her flaming cheeks by peering over the molds John and his coworker are assembling. If she didn't know better, she would believe they're a madman's three-dimensional puzzle tumbled into foam boxes. John numbers a knob of foam, then marks the bit on a schematic of the crate. The two Brits have a method to their madness. Behind her, she hears Theo walking back to his station.

"If those two stop complaining about the temperature long enough to finish," John says, "we will be ready for the piece."

"We'll need photos of the repairs before we pack it."

From John's bored nod at Noura's reminder, he's far less ruffled than she is to be in Egypt, packing ancient burial treasures. She covers her faux pas by checking the stock of materials and then frowning, making sure to note absolutely nothing on her pad of paper.

Like a novice oaf, she can't quite believe she, or any of the American team, is in Cairo. The tour of King Tut's artifacts is not just archaeological magic. It is a political sleight of hand as well. Until a few months ago, Egypt was on the US's "strained relations" list. And yet, here they are, using the tour to court the country that murdered Noura's brother.

The memory of bombs jars the marrow of her bones. Her muscles ache remembering the strain to keep her body from flying into a million

frantic pieces. Estelle's whimper from a needle stick, the slam of the door behind Maman, and Noura's attempt to finish homework under the barrage. And all of that before the final war.

Noura grips the edge of the foam container and sucks in air, inhaling, desperate to extinguish the firestorm erupting in her chest.

"Are you quite all right, Dr. Marquette?" John says from too close behind her.

"Of course."

His bushy gray brows squish together. It's a kind, fatherly gesture that can destroy her career in a smothering, dismissive concern for her suitability.

"Do you need anything?" Noura's words are over-bright as she ushers the bumbling hero away from her carefully constructed walls.

John's attention slides from her to the others, pondering their huddled conversation, and then back in decision. "Provided you've brought a decent goat cheese, I'm right as rain."

Noura wipes the relief from her face. "I have your favorite."

"You never fail to amaze me," he says. "Though I shouldn't be surprised. You conjured construction lights that didn't cost the entire budget. Of course you found dill-spiked cheese."

From John, a fellow expert in the art of market negotiation, this is high praise, and Noura grins her thanks.

"Hooray for the best vittles this side of the Nile," Mr. Caddel shouts from the other room, as if she's only good for grocery shopping.

Noura bites off the urge to put the pejorative-slinging man in his place and instead smiles at John. "You'll have the crate ready by tonight?"

"Of course."

The waving hand of Mr. Caddel beckons Noura toward his station on the far side of the room. "We're nearly out of polyvinyl acetate." He nods to the bowl of glue-like paint.

Noura flips through her list. "The hotel courier should have brought it this morning."

In a country that moves with the speed of careful respect, it will take time to track down the delivery. And the list of today's tasks is longer than the Mississippi River. "Do you have enough for today?"

"Maybe." Mr. Caddel tips the pot toward Theo.

Noura can't read the silent communication flying between the two men, but Theo grinds to his feet. Apparently she and Theo are going to locate the paint now.

"I'm headed to the hotel for a shipment." She tells the disinterested room before grabbing her bag. "Try to get the leopard head's condition report started before the end of the night."

Theo's already holding the door for her, his tie askew under his five o'clock shadow. Noura resists the urge to straighten the silk and instead trundles into the museum proper.

Noura can almost hear her sister grumble about Noura hiding away behind a rambling walk and her meek hesitations. Why can't Noura straighten a handsome man's tie and flirt a little? But then Estelle, who is the stereotypical American blond bombshell, never followed the rules and got away with her demands because everyone, including Noura, bent around her.

Until Noura couldn't anymore.

The fact that Noura is in Cairo is proof she isn't who she used to be. So maybe Noura can flirt a little. Especially with the one coworker who seems to view her as both a desirable woman and a talented curator.

As Theo opens the door to the street, Noura does her best to sashay up the steps, where she slips her hand into his elbow. Her fingers tingle at the strength in his biceps, and her knees shake at her audacity. To her delight, he rewards Noura's boldness with a golden grin—the sun god, Ra, waking for the morning—and no one could miss Theo's little hop-skip as they stroll from the building. His tailored suit and square jaw scream that he's far too mature for his goofy nature and the wild crook in his nose. There's a story behind the dichotomy that tempts her curiosity enough to distract from her normal catastrophizing.

The Nile Hilton, where the paint should be, is across the street and down a smidgen. Noura forces herself to match Theo's unhurried steps, even when he stops to pluck a tiny rose from a bush in the front garden. Somehow, despite how warm she is already, her neck flushes further.

"Do you mind diverting a bit?" Theo twirls the delicate pink blossom in his fingers as he plucks the thorns from the slender stem. His lashes bow, penitent, across his cheek.

"Oh, I don't mind." Noura's voice is as soft as she imagines the petals are.

"Good." He toys with the flower until she tears her attention from the safety of the rose to the man standing a breath away.

"Noura." Her name sounds long and round in his mouth. Theo waits, seeking permission, something few have ever done for her.

She swallows, vainly searching for her professionalism.

At some unbidden signal from her, his knuckles coax back the edge of Noura's headscarf, and he slips the rose behind her ear. Her entire soul is now nestled obediently in the man's palm.

"A beautiful flower for a beautiful woman," he says, and she stiffens as the words circle, a writhing snake of memories plucking her from her comfortable nest and plunging her back two decades.

Noura's father, talking to Maman. When they'd been happy. Before a pale-faced Maman almost evaporated, and Grandmere swept her away. Noura shakes her head, dragging herself from the memory. It's a common enough sentiment.

"Thank you." She touches the edges of the fragile flower, reminding herself that she, like a rose, is not without protection.

Theo's brows curve in quizzical confusion.

"Sorry," Noura says, scrambling for explanation. "Got pricked."

His expression clouds.

"From a thorn?" Her voice lifts stupidly, like she's asking his permission to lie.

He doesn't seem to catch the odd tone and holds his elbow out for her. His lips slide into a hopeful quirk, and she's stunned to realize that this hardworking, cheeky man is nervous. She makes him nervous. The idea unbends her, and she shakes off the tentacles of the past and the relentless crush of the onrushing future.



By the time Theo purchases a mango ice for her and they wander toward the hotel, the sun reclines below the roofline. Though Noura is exhausted, Theo's puppy enthusiasm makes her forget herself for the first time in years. As they arrive at the hotel steps, she bats her

eyelashes as Grandmere demanded she do for Charles. In contrast to her ex-fiancé's laughing response to the one time she tried, Theo's crooked smile blooms in response.

Theo opens the door for her, and they whisk into the hotel reception, full of expected success.

"I am sorry, miss." The desk clerk twists his hands. "The delivery was sent this morning. Perhaps you misplaced it?"

"I didn't misplace it." She grits her teeth as the entire charade crumbles under the earthquake of understanding. It's one thing to use unfortunate events to court her or even to contrive for time alone, but quite another to lie and make her look like an incompetent fool who can't keep a delivery schedule straight.

Noura bows to the clerk, then spins on her heel, striding through the lobby and out the doors before launching into Theo. "Why did you let me ask for the paint when you knew it was already at the museum?" The nerve of the scheming man. Charles was right. She's a romantic fool.

"I didn't...that is..." Theo extends his hands in entreaty, brows pinched together.

She backs out of his reach, hating the impotent shake in her arms and the churning sound of tears and anger in her voice, and despising her confounded heart for hoping that her mind is wrong.

"I didn't..." Theo sucks in a breath, considering.

Again. Noura let herself be fooled again. "But you guessed."

At the inclination of his head, Noura stalks across the street. Perhaps she was wrong about Maman's selfishness. Maybe she abandoned them because Father belittled Maman's intelligence one too many times. Theo dogs her footsteps, but Noura's determined to arrive first, to control the narrative.

As she rounds the corner onto the narrow sidewalk of Nile Corniche, the same woman she'd glimpsed earlier materializes from the shadow of a palm tree. This time, she stops square on the pavement. A challenge tied to Noura's very blood. Then the woman's attention flicks to Theo, who is bustling to catch up. The woman tenses before she spins, lifting the edge of her scarf to hide her face as she flees.

Noura chases in a horrific sprint. Her lungs, ravaged with too many emotions, reject the air.

The woman dashes between cars. Lights catch her face for the barest of moments. Despite the shadow floating across her, Noura is sure now.

Estelle is in Egypt.

2



From across the street, Estelle hears her sister call, "Estelle! Estelle!" Her words crumble like dust in the afternoon heat.

Estelle ignores Noura and darts between people—not quite enough of a crowd to conceal her—and then scrambles down the stairs to the Nile walk and leans against the cool cement wall. She'd waited for hours, only to have Noura pop around the corner, flirting with *him*.

Noura, Estelle thinks, may be one of the smartest people she knows...and also the stupidest, most blind creature on the planet.

Yes, the man Noura's with wears respectable clothes and sports a respectable haircut now. But the last time she saw him, he was fencing stolen artwork and asking about some of the most dangerous people of Estelle's acquaintance.

Estelle extricates a packet of Camels from her bag and lights one with a shaking match. The irony of the American brand taking advantage of something distinctly non-American isn't lost on Estelle. She's traveled the world and doesn't much like what she's seen of her countrymen.

Estelle drags in the warmth, calm careening through her. A cloud of smoke escapes and billows to the endless blue sky where a white falcon perches atop a dark lamppost. The bird cocks his head, studying Estelle in accusation.

"It's not my fault," she whispers to the winged predator.

She didn't set out to steal some of the most famous artifacts in the world. She took the job to pay off Mehedi's debt. Once she realized

Noura was in Cairo, Estelle hoped to gain better access. Noura would have keys and knowledge of the schedules. But now? Estelle will have to try for the artifacts again on her own. Ducking her head, Estelle resumes her walk, conforming to a dutiful posture—barely seen and never heard—escaping the vigilant watch of her sister's handler as well as her own. There's a reason she dyed her hair black. It isn't safe to stand out when you do what Estelle does.

Above her, the falcon squawks his displeasure and swoops over the older sister to roost on the museum roof, watching for his next opportunity.

Traffic shifts, and a piece of paper flutters to the ground at the older sister's feet, where Noura stomps on it. Bending over, Noura retrieves the page and straightens. It's a list of items—items she recognizes intimately.

"Good heavens. Where's the fire?" Theo gasps behind her.

"I thought..." Noura stops, realizing how absurd the explanation sounds. What is she supposed to say? *I thought I saw my sister, who disappeared six years ago? Or I saw my sister, who hates Egypt?* Or was the woman a mirage? An image conjured by a desperate woman—one who'd sworn to protect her sister and failed. "I..."

"I honestly didn't know the paint had already been delivered." Theo's apology floats disconnected in Noura's mind, not quite bridging the marshy places Estelle left behind. "Frank means well. He's a romantic at heart and...well..."

When Noura doesn't move, Theo leans over her shoulder. The smell of cedar and cinnamon, distractingly close, makes her think of Christmas in Ann Arbor, curled next to a fire with Professor Anderson's family. Her last real home.

"What's that?" he says.

She glances at the crumpled sheet. Somehow, she'd expected a letter from Estelle. An "I'm sorry for disappearing, but I'm in danger" missive. She flips the page and frowns at the inventory of Tut artifacts. What is Estelle doing with the list of antiquities Noura's team is packing?

Not sure what to do with Theo or the war of pros and cons rising in

her, Noura spins and thrusts the note between them. Maybe he'll understand it.

"It's a list of King Tutankhamun's artifacts." Theo snatches the paper, and Noura stiffens.

"I do have a brain." She plucks the paper back.

"I didn't mean to say you were stupid," he says gently. "I'm saying it's odd."

Noura plants her fists on her hips in mimic of every woman on the planet dealing with blatant stupidity.

"Of course." His face mottles, and he has the decency to appear apologetic. "That's why you picked it up."

"Probably harmless, though," she says, praying it's true. "Maybe a tourist excited to see the exhibit in the States. Or someone from the museum staff double-checking we don't pilfer something on our way out." She shoots Theo what she hopes is a dazzling smile as she folds the paper and stuffs it in her pocket to examine later. Maybe her disinterest will be enough to distract him from her bizarre plunge into the street. And maybe Estelle is innocent.

And maybe tonight, King Tut will rise from his wrappings to enjoy a game of the chess-like senet.

"Why would the Egyptians check up on us?" Theo says, seemingly unruffled by Noura's pushback. "They're right there as we do our work. We aren't Howard Carter without supervision and heaped with so much debt we're drowning."

She cringes at the reference to the British man who uncovered Tutankhamun's tomb…and likely retained a few items for himself. "Still, there's always a temptation," she says. "And in the mess, who would know if one disappeared?"

Theo studies his coworker under a lifted eyebrow. An impish grin spreads in teasing question.

Realization drops on Noura. "Not that I would ever take anything." Her mind stumbles over her gaffe. "I meant I understand wanting to hold a piece of history and call it my own." She clenches her jaw to staunch the verbal vomit threatening to prove how witless she is. "Besides, these pieces are too well known to keep or sell. You'd have to be a blithering idiot to try."

Theo frowns, tilting his head like he's sorting her prattle into a sensical picture.

"You know what I mean." Noura shoves her hands into her very sensible pockets and plows toward the museum. She should never have agreed to this. Should never have been lured into such a ridiculous stunt or picked up that list of artifacts. The mango ice churns in her stomach. Unsettled.

A white falcon dives from a palm tree, plunging toward the earth, wings extended, tail flailing as he soars, turns, and dives again into the underbrush. A startled squeak tells Noura the falcon has found his prey, then he shoots back into the sky. Noura squints at the almost entirely white bird. Strange.

Her grandmere would say Estelle's appearance is a warning. Combined with a falcon the color of Egyptian royalty, Grandmere would be arming herself to the teeth. So reactionary. Noura, however, has endured too much, read too many myths to pay mind to boogeyman signs.

Theo catches up to her and gives her a playful nudge. "Relax, I know you would never take anything. And I don't think we need to worry about anyone else, either. It's probably just a coincidence you found that list."

"Probably." Noura pushes out the word through clenched teeth and stalks toward the museum.

Noura knows for certain Estelle would happily exchange what she deems useless for cash to support her newest project. A worthy plan for someone not worried about international repercussions or bending morals for what she believes is right.

But then, who decides what is right and what is wrong?

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