

An excerpt from
EXTANT

By Michael McBride

CHAPTER ONE

The makeshift windbreak snapped on the gusting wind. Sand struck the tarps draped over the aluminum framework like buckshot and cascaded down into the excavation, where Rana Ratogue brushed dirt from the seams between basalt blocks. The roar of the wind drowned out the chugging of the gas generator powering the tripod-mounted halogen lights, which made it feel as though the entire dig team toiled in a perpetual state of twilight. At least down here, they were spared from the brutal sun and the sandstorms that kicked up without warning; Mother Nature's last-ditch effort to reclaim the ancient buildings she'd buried thousands of years ago beneath nine feet of aeolian sand and regolith.

The site had been gridded into sixteen squares: each one fifteen feet to a side and separated by six-foot-wide balks. So far, they'd excavated only the four in the northeastern quadrant, mainly because the so-called "skilled labor" consisted of eight relatively inexperienced graduate students, and assigning a pair of them to an area the size of a two-car garage was already overly ambitious.

Despite their limited manpower, they'd made remarkable progress in just four days. Granted, the hired shovels had done the majority of the heavy lifting, but they'd already uncovered what they believed to be an Old Kingdom pylon: a monolithic gateway that served as the grand entrance to an Egyptian temple. Considering all temples from that time period adhered to the same basic blueprints — schematics believed to have been handed down by the gods — it was only a matter of time before Rana and her team uncovered the colonnaded courtyard, the hypostyle hall, the barque shrine, and the sanctuary. Assuming, of course, the temple had been completed before the desert buried it.

Based on her proximity to the pylon, Rana should have been directly above the courtyard: a cavernous chamber filled with ornate columns designed to resemble the mythological marsh from which the Egyptians believed all life had sprung.

“Over here!” Anson Townshend called. “I found it.”

The excitement in his voice sent goosebumps up Rana’s spine. She dropped her brush, wiped the sweat from her brow, and tucked her stray bangs underneath her hardhat. Her T-shirt and jeans were brown with dirt, a crust of which had formed on her face and arms. She crawled past the ladder leading up to the surface and leaned over the edge of a pit framed by wooden cribbing. Her partner lay prone on the dirt at the bottom, his torso wedged into a gap between upright stone blocks. He squirmed back out and looked up at her. The light attached to his helmet made it impossible to see his eyes, but the grin on his face left no doubt as to what he’d discovered.

“How does it look?” she asked.

“See for yourself.”

Rana swung her legs over the precipice and dropped down into the hole. She switched on her helmet light and squeezed in beside Anson, who’d cleared the packed dirt from a rectangular orifice. It appeared to be a primitive clerestory window, an opening designed to admit enough sunlight to illuminate the courtyard’s main corridor, far below.

“Well,” he said. “Go on.”

“We should tell Dr. Baumann. He should be the first to see it.”

“Just one peek. I won’t tell.”

“You’ve already looked inside, haven’t you?”

The smile on his dirty face grew even wider.

“And the state of preservation . . . ?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

She wriggled through the narrow opening, her beam slicing through the darkness until it settled upon an ornamental column.

“My God,” she whispered.

Her voice echoed into a vast space that reeked of dust and age.

Sand trickled from beneath her and landed beyond the reach of her light, producing a noise that sounded almost like scratching.

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Eli Baumann brushed the remainder of the dirt from the window with trembling hands. This project was his baby. He'd spent the last decade honing his skills in the burgeoning field of satellite archeology, scouring the Sahara Desert in search of the answer to one of ancient civilization's greatest mysteries: the disappearance of the army of Cambyses II, the eldest son of Cyrus the Great. In 524 BCE, the second King of Kings of the Achaemenid Empire dispatched his forces to the Siwa Oasis with orders to destroy the Oracle of Amun, whose priests refused to legitimize his claim to Egypt. According to historical records, fifty thousand of his most ferocious soldiers marched into the desert from Luxor and vanished into a sandstorm, never to be seen again.

With the way the volatile winds reshaped this sandy wasteland's topography seemingly on a daily basis, it was no surprise that their remains had yet to be discovered. Barchan dunes rolled like waves through the Kharga depression, a broad valley framed by nine-hundred-foot-tall stone escarpments, at a rate of three hundred feet per year, which rendered LiDAR — near-infrared satellite imaging capable of penetrating the ground to a depth of five feet — virtually useless. Dr. Baumann had used fifteen years of LANDSAT MSS data and aerial reconnaissance photos from World War II to create an algorithm that predicted the movement of the dunes and digitally subtracted the sand, allowing the satellite to acquire imagery at depths previously beyond its range.

Even with such revolutionary technology, however, he'd still been looking for a cluster of fifty thousand needles in hundreds of thousands of square miles of haystacks. Skeletal remains were porous and absorbed the mineral content of their surroundings, which made them nearly invisible to even the most advanced satellites, especially with imagery that only resolved to three-foot-square pixels, so he'd been forced to change his approach. Instead of searching for the bodies of the missing soldiers, he'd probed beneath the strata for any sign of a camp or settlement where they might have sought shelter from the storm.

In ancient times, routes through the vast desert had been dictated by the availability of water, which funneled upward from the underlying karst landscape through aquifers and formed oases in the middle of nowhere. Even with the thriving flora that served to shield these lifegiving pools from the savage environment, they were constantly threatened by extreme drought, unstable geology, and advancing sands. Those that dried up left trace minerals and sediment that stood out like beacons, even beneath several feet of sand. It had been the discovery of one such buried oasis that caused Dr. Baumann to zero in on this region, where a combination of remote sensing techniques had revealed a buried village theoretically large enough to support a population of several thousand people.

It had taken nearly two years to secure the funding, but now here they stood — or, rather, crouched — on the brink of realizing his dream.

Dr. Baumann's face had paled considerably when he finally looked up at the others. Tears glimmered on his cheeks and beneath his thick black beard.

"They're here," he whispered. "Can't you feel it? Fifty thousand souls crying out to be found."

Rana glanced from one of her fellow students to the next. They all wore the same mixed expression of excitement and apprehension. When she looked back at Dr. Baumann, he was staring right at her.

"What?" she asked.

"You're not afraid of heights, are you?"

CHAPTER THREE

Rana twirled on the rope as the other grad students belayed her down into the darkness. She wore a repurposed tactical helmet that was too large for her and continuously slid backward on her head, causing the straps to bite into her cheeks and chin. It had a powerful LED light mounted on one side and an HD video camera on the other. The columns surrounding her blurred past faster than she could visually process.

She knew that the decorative capitals had been painted to look like papyrus plants in different stages of bloom, but all she caught were glimpses of strange shapes and flaking paint as she spun. She hoped the others, who watched the live feed above her on Dr. Baumann's laptop, were having better luck.

Her nerves were fried, and she had to force herself to breathe. She wasn't scared of heights so much as she was terrified of being suspended high above the unknown by a thin climbing rope held by grad students she didn't know well enough to trust with her luggage, let alone her life. Her beam cast swaying, netlike shadows from the thick cobwebs that connected the ceiling to the columns. She tried not to think about the spiders that had strung them, and yet she could practically feel their little legs crawling all over her.

"Try to steady the camera," Baumann called down to her. "We're making history here."

The strange acoustics caused his voice to echo from all around her at once. It would have been nice to think that he'd chosen her to be the first to enter the temple because of her academic record or her budding skills as a paleoethnozoologist, but she was simply the only one small enough to squeeze through the opening.

"I'm doing the best I can," she said.

"Talk us through it, Rana. I want to document your initial reactions. Tell us what you see. What you smell. Use all of your senses."

"There's a layer of dust hanging in the air. It smells musty. Like age and decay. With maybe a hint of desiccated organic matter." The ground materialized in her circle of light. "There's a lot of sand. Drifted against the columns. Maybe five, six feet deep in places."

Rana settled to the earth. The fine-grained sand swallowed her feet nearly to the ankles. The thought of standing where no human had set foot in thousands of years was exhilarating.

She slowly turned to get a better look at the surrounding columns, which were dense with hieroglyphics. She was by no means an expert on ancient Egyptian writing, but she'd managed to at least familiarize herself with the basic pantheon of gods after her application to join the excavation had been accepted. She recognized various depictions

of Osiris, the mummy-wrapped god of the dead; Anubis, the jackal-headed god who weighed the hearts of the deceased against the feather of Ma'at; Set, the god of chaos and war, whose curved snout and forked tail were unmistakable; and Sekhmet, the physical embodiment of wrath, with her lion's head and propensity for drinking the blood of her enemies. There was no sign of the sun god, Ra, or the great mother-goddess, Isis. No carvings of Amun, the creator of all things, or Horus, whose watchful eye offered protection from the very deities surrounding her.

There was something about the hieroglyphics ... something indescribable. This was a dark place. Rana could positively feel it radiating from the shadows and wrapped her arms around her chest to stifle a chill.

"It's the temple of a death cult," one of the students said, his voice barely audible above her.

"It is a temple where they worshipped the goddess Sekhmet," Baumann said. "You must be careful to draw the distinction."

"But the center of Sekhmet's cult was in Memphis. There's no record of her being worshipped this far into Upper Egypt."

"She was more than merely the goddess of destruction. She was also known as Nesert, the fire of the midday sun, in which capacity she was associated with the desert. It would stand to reason that she was revered where people routinely died from exposure to the elements."

Rana removed the Focus 3D laser scanner from her backpack and set it up on a tripod. The device used a laser beam that spun like a pinwheel to measure the distance to the floor, walls, and ceiling, while the aperture rotated 360 degrees on the tripod. The data was then plotted to create a photorealistic representation of the entire room, right down to the imperfections in the sand, which was why she'd been instructed not to take a single step. They needed to analyze the chamber from every conceivable angle before trampling all over it.

Only the pharaoh and the most powerful nobles, priests, and viziers had been permitted to enter the courtyard. It was where they'd performed sacred rituals, the details of which were memorialized in the endless rows of hieroglyphics barely three

inches tall and covering seemingly every available surface. She couldn't resist the temptation to run her fingertips over the nearest column. Someone had haphazardly painted it with flaking brown ocher that disintegrated beneath her touch.

"Is the scanner in place?" Dr. Baumann called down.

Rana turned in a circle and saw even more brown arcs and spatters, as though flung from a brush or sloshed from a bucket. The subtle air currents generated by her movements caused them to turn to dust and fall to the sand in glittering motes.

"Ready when you are," she said.

"Try to get a clear shot of any potential points of ingress first. There should be two, one at either end of the central aisle."

A sandy slope filled the front doorway and stretched halfway into the chamber. The egress at the back of the room had partially collapsed. Rana could barely see the shorter columns inside the hypostyle hall over the rubble. There was a carving of Sekhmet above the threshold. Someone had painted a giant eye over it in such a hurry that the dripping paint nearly obscured the design.

"Is there any way you can zoom in on that?" Baumann asked.

"Not without losing resolution. Do you want me to get closer?"

"No. Stay where you are. Just describe what you see."

"Someone painted the Eye of Ra over a relief of Sekhmet," she said. "In bright red paint."

CHAPTER FOUR

Rana slithered out through the clerestory window and detached the climbing rope. Her inner thighs felt as though they were chafed to the point of bleeding, but she didn't want to take off the harness, knowing full well she'd only have to put it right back on again.

"You're sure it was the Eye of Ra and not the Eye of Horus," Dr. Baumann said. "The distinction is critical."

“It was a right eye.”

“You’re certain.”

“Without a doubt.”

Baumann nodded thoughtfully and turned to watch the other graduate students perform their assigned tasks. Anson and Penny Stilton, the freckled redhead from Northern Arizona University, had already finished measuring and documenting the support block adjacent to the window Rana had used to enter the temple and were in the process of prepping it for extraction. Zeke Paradis and Jonathan Culver stood by with the jack and wooden blocks they would use to replace the basalt brick, widening the gap enough for all of them, along with their equipment, to pass through. Ellie Hartley kneeled in front of the professor’s laptop, her dark hair drawn into a ponytail and the glare of the monitor on her face, manning the digital reconstruction of the 3D data acquired by the scanner. Mailyn Nguyen stood over her shoulder, capturing the process on a handheld digital camcorder, while Tami Bowles nervously chewed on her lower lip and made notations on her tablet.

The wind no longer howled or assailed the windbreak with sand. The reddish glare of the setting sun passed through the seams overhead in seemingly palpable crimson arcs.

“What does it mean?” Rana asked.

“Priests invoked the Eye of Ra to protect a sacred place, like this temple, generally as a last line of defense,” Baumann said. “Doing so in red paint signified great danger.”

“What kind of danger?”

He winked at her.

“That’s what I intend to find out.”

The two of them joined the others at the computer and watched the screen fill with countless green dots that moved in no apparent pattern. Slowly, the data points coalesced and drew contrast from one another, forming three-dimensional shapes with texture and depth. The detail was magnificent. The imperfections in the stone, the chips in the paint, even the cobwebs were represented with stunning accuracy. The hieroglyphics were perfectly legible. The paint used for the reliefs had been applied just thick enough

to remain visible, although it lacked color contrast. The sand on the ground demonstrated even more texture than it had when she was staring down at it in person. A few more passes with various filters and it was as though the colonnaded courtyard had been photographed from all possible angles and seamlessly blended into a virtual recreation — minus the radial shadows of missing data cast by the columns, which had attenuated the spinning laser beam — that could be viewed from any vantage point.

“Rotate thirty degrees,” Baumann said.

Ellie slid her fingers across the mousepad, and the image on the screen slowly spun until they were looking straight down the central aisle toward the hypostyle hall. The eye painted over lion-headed Sekhmet wasn’t nearly as clear as it had been in person. There were sections where too little paint had been applied to register at that distance, but there was no doubt as to which eye it was.

“What’s that?” Mailyn asked. She leaned closer and touched the monitor, smudging the dust that had accumulated on the screen.

“Zoom in on it,” Baumann said.

Ellie tapped a few keys and the far end of the hall came closer. The view into the hypostyle hall was fan-shaped and revealed little more than the upper halves of two columns, beyond which the points of data dissipated like an aerosol. In front of one was an object that had initially looked like a rounded piece of rubble from the crumbling threshold, but with the added depth provided by the reconstruction, it was clearly distinguishable as the vertex of a human skull.

I hope you’ve enjoyed this extended preview of **EXTANT**.

To continue reading, return to my website and click the link to purchase the full book.