

EASY NEVADA

AND THE PYRAMID'S CURSE



GEORGETTE KAPLAN



CHAPTER 1

UP TO HER NECK

THE ISLAND HAD NO NAME.

It sat on the calm Atlantic waters off the west coast of Africa like a frosted rose on a cake. Creamy white sands spotted with sea foam swept, unblemished, from the lip of the tide to the top of the beach and disappeared into an explosion of tropical vegetation. The jungle ran on for a hundred yards or so, before giving way to a majestic cliff of volcanic basalt, dark and strangely textured from an ancient flow of cooled lava. It provided a picturesque roost for several seabird colonies that shattered the tranquility of the lapping tide and gentle rattle of palm fronds with their interminable fights and mating calls.

Despite the birdsong, it was a truly beautiful resting place, and Easy Nevada wished her comrades had waited until she'd died before burying her in this vertical grave. Or at least buried *all* of her, not just everything below the neck. That was plain lazy.

The Gulf of Guinea was too damn hot for this nonsense, *and* they hadn't even put her death trap in the shade.

Like any decent optimist, Nevada tried to search for a silver lining. Not an easy thing to do when she was trapped in a sandpit. But, then again, it *was* low tide. Of course, that meant there would soon be high tide, which made everything feel less shiny and more dark cloud again.

She watched the tide slowly inch toward her. To cheer herself up, she sang Tom Jones songs, which just got "What's New Pussycat" stuck in her head—the silver lining being, if she did die, she wouldn't have to worry about earworms anymore.

Salt water was lapping the hair at the nape of her neck when she finally heard the Grumman G-111 Albatross flying overhead. The big-bellied propeller plane came into Nevada's view as the first wave foamed white under her chin. Its nose art displayed the words 'The Flying Carpet,' with a belly dancer on a Persian rug underneath.

The Flying Carpet banked, its engines grumbling as it turned, lining up for landing. It skimmed the water, kicking up a spray of fine surf, and Nevada heard its props snarl as the pilot cut them. The propellers spun down into chattering repetitions, and seawater dragged the flying boat to a halt. The noise bled out as Jacques threw open the overhead hatch in the nose compartment, tossed an anchor overboard, and then followed it out, splashing down into the shallows.

"I wasn't sure which to be worried about more!" Nevada called, the tide slapping higher against her chin. "That you wouldn't save me, or that you would save me in that old nag."

Jacques splashed toward her, holding his arms well clear of the waves lapping at the knees of his waders. Underneath he wore a white linen suit, casual and tasteful, that with the subtle alchemy of being worn by a low-born Gaul, had acquired a hint of the untoward. A few too many buttons open on the pink dress shirt, the collar a little too ruffled—it gave him a likable, louche air. His face was rumpled and scuffed from the ghosts of punches past. He could've been a youthful fifty or a hard-lived thirty. It was hard to tell when he didn't stop long enough to let anyone get a good look at him.

"Ah, what lovely flowers are in bloom this time of year," he said, giving Nevada an aesthete's appreciative look.

"Water first, French shit later."

"I will do you one better, just to show I care." He reached into his jacket pocket and brought out a flask, then sat down on the beach beside her and held the flask at an angle to her mouth.

Nevada drank greedily. The Frenchman put on a good show, but his flask held pure bourbon. No wonder his countrymen had kicked him out. "Don't suppose you brought a nice big parasol?"

"Ah, alas, *mon petite*, on such short notice, you ask too much." He tutted sadly, and then brightened. "And yet, I come through. Inspiring, no?"

He reached into his pocket, this time taking out a wrinkled trucker hat. He flapped it out a few times, then stuck it on Nevada's head. At least she could stop squinting, even if she dreaded finding out what it said.

"I need a cigarette," was her next demand.

Jacques obligingly took cigarette and matchbook from his pocket, poking the filter into her mouth before lighting the tip. Nevada bit down on her end, tilting the tip far from the sea now trickling past her. It was washing around her neck and trickling down to soak her body.

"Anything else?" Jacques asked.

"Scratch my nose?"

He scratched it. "Easy, *mon petite chou*. If you had wanted to go to the beach, you should've told me." Jacques's accent had been known to turn whole wheat bread into baguettes from fifty yards. "France has the best beaches in the world. The Riviera! Nice! The water is like fine wine, *méthode champenoise*, you slip into it and it's like the sea is making love to you."

The next wave splashed Nevada full in the face. She spoke around the cigarette clenched in her teeth. "One more thing, Jacques. You mind getting me out of here?"

"But of course. You had but to ask."

He reached into his jacket once more, bringing out a gardening trowel, with which he picked at the wet sand surrounding Nevada's neck.

"I must admit, these are better circumstances than I usually find you in. Nothing on fire, nothing about to explode, nothing taking on water—"

"Me, Jacques. I'm taking on water." Nevada craned her head as another wave pushed past her jawline, swirling up to muddy her face. Her cigarette was soaked to its no-longer-smoldering tip. "It wasn't my fault that Somali pirates showed up before I'd even taken my fins off."

"Somali pirates are from Somalia, *mon cher*. That is on the other side of this continent."

"What am I, a GPS?" The weight of the sand shifted and Nevada wrenched one arm free. She immediately took the cigarette from her mouth, holding it between sandy fingers, her elbow resting on the beach. "The shipwreck was right where we thought it'd be."

"And the sharks?" Jacques asked casually.

"Friendly. The pirates, not so much. But we struck a deal."

“Yes, I can see what a brilliant negotiator you are.”

“Uh-huh. They buried me alive, and I...ugh,” Nevada grunted and pulled her other arm free. Clutched in her hand was a long rod, encrusted with mud and lichen to the point of being almost shapeless. She tapped her silver thumb ring against it. “Got to keep this.”

“Mademoiselle, I am in love.”

“Who’s the lucky chardonnay?” She took Jacques’s hand, hoisted herself out of her grave, and watched the tide rush in to fill it. Nevada was dressed in her usual clothes—a simple, practical, even tomboyish style of Adidas tee, twill jogger pants, and Vans that she had to dump the sand out of.

She stretched, stomped her cramped legs, and finally sat back down in the shade of a palm tree. Jacques joined her, politely not commenting on how ardently she hugged the artifact to her chest.

“I found a tablet down there too. I was going to go back for it, but, y’know...”

“Pirates,” Jacques said sympathetically

“I managed to translate most of it anyway.” Nevada laid the rod across her lap so she could wring out her hair—a mid-length morass of chocolate brown that wove itself around the nape of her neck like an overwatered plant. “The burial site is in Meroë, and if someone else had found it, we would’ve heard about it by now. So, either no one’s found it, or someone has, but doesn’t know *what* they’ve found.” She struggled to her feet, her legs still coltish and weak. “We need to get this plane back in the air, we need to get to Sudan, and we need to know everything about every excavation in Meroë in the past three years.” She turned to Jacques. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“We’re nearly there, Jacques. The Thirteenth is in that tomb, guaranteed.”

“Our lord and master does not think so.” Jacques gave an elegant shrug.

Nevada froze. Her grip tightened on the artifact. “What’d he say?”

“He said he won’t be paying the per diem anymore.”

Nevada turned away abruptly and headed seaward. “I need to talk to him.”

“*Mon petite chou*, this is not the sort of man who changes his mind. I warned you about getting into bed with him—”

“When have I ever listened to anyone telling me who I should be in bed with?” Nevada nodded curtly. “Get him on the horn. And the minute he hangs up, we’re flying.” She took off the baseball cap and checked out its front. It read ‘You Are Soul.’ “And what have I told you about going through my stuff?”

* * *

Nevada washed off the sand in the ocean, then changed her clothes onboard *The Flying Carpet*. Finally, she pulled her hair into a messy ponytail that looked halfway presentable for the call.

She was a tall, lean woman, with the threat of muscle in her solid, well-built physique. It made her arms thick, her thighs firm, and her abs sculpted but not overly chiseled. She wasn’t a bodybuilder; her muscle was meant to be used.

She liked the parts that weren’t muscle too. A little Botticelli left in the world, she thought. If she had to wear the dress, she could wear the hell out of the dress. Fortunately, most times she didn’t need to.

Jacques had the satellite link up and working. Nevada took the laptop from him with a nod of thanks, then sprawled out on one of the litters in the passenger-cum-cargo compartment that served as bunks. Coming down from the adrenaline was always worse than mainlining it. She felt cramped and stiff, and didn’t want to even think about where she still had sand.

The little spinning icon told her a connection was established, except Singh did not want to show himself. All she could hear was his voice, bereft of excitement, as he acknowledged her with a curt, “Nevada.” His accent was faintly Indian, but cut with thin British pronunciation that spoke of overseas education.

This time, she had no preliminaries, no pleasantries, no time for that crap. “I know where it is,” she said. “The last one.”

“I’ve heard that before,” he replied.

“You’ve heard it twelve times before. And I’ve brought you twelve. One more, Singh. I get the commission on it and a completion bonus; you get your tinker toys. It’s a proven winner.”

“Your progress was rapid at first,” Singh conceded. “Real bang for my buck. But lately, I have heard you say you know where the Thirteenth is far more than you’ve *known* where the Thirteenth is.”

“I have the key, I have the tomb.” *Pretty much*, she mentally amended. “All I need to do is take it there. Oh, and I have a plan. Just give me a few days. You know what I need the money for.”

“Knowing that you need the money does not equal knowing that you can earn the money. I’m going in another direction. If you need a reference or letter of recommendation—”

Nevada slammed the laptop shut, barely refraining from smacking it across the hold. He would’ve cut the uplink anyway. Doing it first didn’t give her much satisfaction, but she’d take what she could get.

Then take more.

Jacques leaned in from the flight deck. “So, what’s the plan? Côte d’Azur after all?”

“Meroë,” Nevada said firmly. “We’re going after the Thirteenth freelance. Then, if he wants it, he can pay us double.”

“He’s not going to like that.”

“He’ll like not getting it at all even less.”

“I mean,” Jacques spoke emphatically, “he *really* will not like it.”

Nevada looked him in the eye. He didn’t look away; he wasn’t backing out. She nodded in acknowledgment and repeated, “We’re going to Meroë.”

“I thought so.” Jacques tossed her a dossier, which Nevada smoothly caught. “There’s only one new dig site and it was opened this month, completely virgin. It lines up with the constellation.”

Nevada lay down on her litter and began paging through the file, a slow smile working its way across her face. The paperwork brought her up to date with Singh’s thought process. So, he assumed that because some *librarian* had already *found* the tomb, she could get inside it? That he would get his latest plaything without a finder’s fee? Uh-uh. *No sirree*.

She turned to the next page and found a photograph of this librarian. Nevada swooped to her feet and stomped through to the cockpit where Jacques was doing the pre-flight checks. She flicked the photo inches from his nose, so close he had to squint to focus.

“So,” she demanded, “who’s the hottie?”

CHAPTER 2

WHO THE HOTTIE IS

KHARTOUM INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT CAME INTO view as her plane curved for its approach. There was a single runway set into bare desert on the edge of the semi-developed sprawl of the city. Despite being Sudan's capital, the cityscape was low, with few buildings over five stories save for the needling minarets of the mosques. For a city girl like her, it gave the impression they were further off the ground than they were. Then she saw the three massive arches of the airport's terminal building, with their glass facades decorated like a church's stained glass windows, and realized just how quickly the ground was rushing up to meet them.

The landing was nerve-wrackingly bumpy; disembarking was slow. After a searing, short walk across the melting tarmac, it was blissful to enter the relative cool of the terminal.

The Arrivals hall had the sedate, sterile, non-descriptiveness of any airport—combined with a security presence that made her feel like she was being released from prison.

Soldiers in green fatigues and red berets were everywhere, machine guns slung over their shoulders. Their faces were drained of expression except for the eyes, checking people out as if they were targets. It was obvious to her why, wherever the disappeared people of Sudan disappeared to, they stayed disappeared.

She filled out forms and declared her currency. Finally, she stepped behind a black curtain into a cramped cubicle with a Muslim woman in full hijab. Her eyes were the only things that showed, and she had the same flinty stare as the soldiers. Still, it was hard not to feel a sense of relief, or

at least finality, at her harsh frisking. At least that meant the waiting was done.

“You are Harper Burke?” the immigration officer asked.

“That’s what it says on my passport,” she replied.

The immigration officer stared at her blankly. “Please answer yes or no. You are a journalist?”

“Yes.”

“What story are you working on?”

“An archaeological dig in Meroë,” Nevada said.

“These are your notes?”

“For my interviews, yes.”

The immigration officer looked them over.

“To understand Meroë, one has to understand Egypt. Not the Egypt of *The Ten Commandments* or *The Mummy*, but the modern Egypt, with its modern cities, where even the Great Pyramid at Giza is less than a quarter of a mile from Giza itself—a city of 2.6 million people, all of them as inclined to enjoy McDonald’s, Starbucks, and Pizza Hut as anyone else. A view from the top of the Great Pyramid doesn’t inspire awe—it’s a commercial break, with the Golden Arches, Starbucks green, and Chevron logos all sharing real estate with the Sphinx.

Meroë, nine hundred miles to the south, is what people think of when they picture Egypt. An ancient city surrounded by miles of sand-swept desert, with the flowing cataracts of the Nile River and her farmlands in the hazy distance. Its pyramids, temples, statues, and pillars, all now ruins. History holds reign there—not tourists, not encroaching modernity. More than two hundred Nubian pyramids defy the ravages of time, putting the sixty-three in Egypt’s Valley of the Kings to shame.”

“My interview subject,” Nevada said. “Dr. Candice Cushing. She has a blog.”

She folded up the notes and handed them back. “Good Muslims do not have blogs. They are a pestilence of the modern world and against the Qur’an.”

“Well, it’s on Tumblr, so I’m inclined to agree.”

The immigration officer waved her through at that. Nevada didn’t think the joke was that bad.

The brisk walk to the bus stop was a trial by fire. The chilly atmosphere on the plane had left her especially ill-prepared for the Sudanese sun, and the interlude in the dry heat of the airport had done little to acclimatize her.

This was a sweaty heat, a beating-down heat. It was summer—one of only two seasons in Sudan, she’d been told, and their version of winter hardly counted—a time when the thermometer got comfortable at 130 degrees Fahrenheit.

At least the bus arrived on time. Nevada had been proud of herself, saving some money by booking passage on a tour bus that was leaving shortly after she deplaned. That was before she saw the bus. Or rather, heard it—blaring Sudanese pop songs from a boom box. It was sky blue—as if this cloudless country needed any more of that—and caked with so much sand that it looked as if it had been born out of the desert.

Okay, so that might be a little fanciful. It was probably just the heat getting to her.

As the bus ground its way through the congested streets of Khartoum, there were no street signs she could see, and all the buildings had a drab, uniform facade of cement. Soon enough they made their way out onto dirt streets lined with brick houses. The suburbs, she supposed. Streets lined with palm trees where songbirds darted from frond to frond like flying jewels. Old colonial homes surrounded by walls fifteen feet tall, with wrought iron gates guarded by men of a disconcertingly relaxed disposition. People were everywhere—walking, talking, conducting their everyday business around the multitude of *souqs* that lined the main road out. Men hung around cafés. Boys in ratty, long-legged shorts ran alongside the bus begging for loose change, though she hoped it was more a game than desperation. And women, dressed in brightly colored robes, carried this and worked at that, always moving with purpose. Above the cacophony of human interaction, diesel generators made a racket, trying to make up for the electricity cuts the government had imposed.

Then they passed through a district of the city where a *haboob* had recently hit. Nevada had been warned of them, sandstorms with thunder

and lightning, dumping a kind of mud that was heavy enough to bring down power lines, cause outages. She thought she could see it leaving in the distance, a mile-high fogbank painted in yellow and brown. Everything that had been hit—the buildings, the people, and the few pieces of furniture that had been left outdoors—was covered with a layer of wetly brown sand, like it had all been pulled out of a pit of quicksand.

Then again—Nevada thought of the Roman outpost of Dionysius in Egypt, just east of Qasr Qarun. The French and Swiss had excavated it more than fifty years ago. But when they'd stopped digging, the desert had taken it back.

Maybe the desert had gotten a taste of Khartoum now.

The hustle grew more and more sparse by the minute and soon drifted away altogether as they exited the city. *Goodbye, Khartoum.*

They headed north, the dusty highway sometimes running parallel to the Nile, with its fertile farmland and beaches. At other times, they were out in the flat desert, all reds and browns, the only living things being goats, camels, and sheep. After an hour of travel, the goats and sheep petered out, leaving only camels.

The heat was living with Nevada now, breathing with her in pools of sweat under her arms, down her back, between her thighs. So much heat that her sweat congealed into a slimy, sticky sheen that couldn't be wiped off or rubbed away. *Wet naps. I should've brought wet naps.*

They passed through Wad Ramli, and Shendi, and countless other nameless campsites made of goat-skinned tents before finally coming to Meroë. The driver went right past the base camp, trundling the bus up a hill to park at the top. The bus reminded Nevada of a junker she'd had in college; no working ignition, but she'd been lucky enough to have a steep driveway and could give it a push-start. She wondered if it was possible the bus had similar quirks.

It was a long hike down the hill, and hard not to imagine how brutal going back up would be. She tried to keep her chin up, reminding herself that she'd had a similarly tough time in Afghanistan, Australia, and Phoenix. She'd always gotten used to it. And at least no one was shooting at her. Yet.

Looking at Meroë, she could see why the crackpots believed that aliens had built the pyramids. For all their splendor, they seemed incomplete, and yet held such majesty it was intoxicating. It was hard to accept that such magnificence had come and conquered, and in turn decayed and fallen away over the millennia. Surely these ruins weren't the last of that vast, sophisticated civilization, but merely the fingerprint of an alien race, dormant but strong, and still demanding respect.

By the time she made the trip down to base camp, the flurried activity of a kicked anthill she'd seen as her bus approached had become an impromptu greeting party. A Mercedes-Benz L3000, converted into a flatbed, hobbled its way over the sand. The old truck blew out almost as much exhaust as it kicked up sand. Its frame was shot through with rust, and the hubcaps were missing, one tire seeming to list to the side, out of alignment with the transmission. But it pulled up to a thankful stop before Nevada, hacking up phlegmy, gunmetal-blue streams from under the hood. *A step down even from the bus*, she mused.

Nevada leapt onto the cab's running board and looked inside. The passenger seat was empty. The driver wore a traditional white *jellabiya* and a crocheted *imama*, his robes wafting in a flow of air that came more from the radiator fan than any air conditioning.

"Back here, my dear," came a sonorous voice from the flatbed. Nevada followed it.

A man lay on the floor, attended to by a grad student who was mopping his face with cool water from a bucket with the assiduous fidgeting of someone who wasn't accomplishing anything, but had little else to do. Nevada dismissed the student. An amateur archaeologist, and not a very good one if he'd been put on nursing duty.

"That's enough now, Bartholomew, you're drowning me."

With consternation, Nevada recognized her host, Sir Joseph Whemple. He looked much the same as on the back cover of his books, just a little older. Less hair on his head and ironically more in his well-groomed beard as it stopped being groomed so much. His eyes were bloodshot, his Oxford shirt partially unbuttoned to show a nest of white chest hair. His lower body was covered by a sleeping bag.

Sir Joseph sat up, putting a hand on Bartholomew's shoulder to get himself upright. He couldn't manage it without the student pulling him

up so that he could bend forward, resting his hands on his legs. His sleeves were rolled up, his arms liver-spotted.

“A touch of malaria, I’m afraid.” Sir Joseph had a speaking voice that conveyed an impression of authority without seeming to raise in volume—a lecturing voice, but not a hectoring one. “They tell me I should be in hospital, but, seeing as I’ve had you come all the way out here, I thought it rude not to receive you myself.”

Nevada rested her elbows on the boards. “Very thoughtful of you, considering they only sent me out here on your say-so. So, why *have* you brought me out here, Sir Joseph? Can’t be just any old mummy.”

Sir Joseph laughed, managing to carefully keep from having a coughing fit. It gave him a vulnerable, insincere edge. Bartholomew moved to mop his forehead and Sir Joseph waved him off, dipping his own hand in the bucket and splashing his face with water as if anointing himself. He sighed into the droplets that ran down his face, the exhalation driving a few beads of water from his lips.

“You’ve arrived just in time, Ms. Burke,” he said breathlessly. “This is the find of a lifetime. My lifetime, perhaps. But I think it’s more likely that it’s Dr. Cushing’s lifetime.”

The threatened coughing fit struck, and Sir Joseph covered his mouth with his hand, fresh sweat breaking out over his sun-dried forehead and pate as if the exertion of his own frailty was too much for him.

He leaned back and Bartholomew took over, cradling him, easing him gently back onto the plush sleeping bag. Sir Joseph closed his eyes, gathering himself. “Yes. Dr. Cushing. You’ll have to talk to her. She’s the one who started digging here. She’s the one who can tell you why. I just had the privilege of acquiring the proper paperwork and signing the checks.”

The driver popped the latch on the passenger side door, pushing it open in squeaking invitation.

“If I may ask, Sir Joseph—if this is such a big find, why hasn’t it been uncovered before? I thought all Meroë’s significant sites had been picked clean.”

“Significant.” Sir Joseph’s coughing interspersed with his laughter. “That I can answer you, Ms. Burke. That is the simplest part of it. We are excavating the tomb of Queen Amanirenas. And no one has ever found the tomb of Amanirenas before because of the curse.”

CHAPTER 3

THE CURSE OF AMANIRENAS

TENTS REMINDED NEVADA OF A carnival. One big top, in this instance a geodome acting as the central hub for sorting and storing the excavated material, as well as site head office. Surrounding this, a hodgepodge of canvas structures had built up. The crew quarters having no order or specification, a few of the professional staff had brought their own canvas condos, while the diggers made do with tatty lean-tos. A set of metal tracks spooled out from the hub toward the dig itself, a depression in the desert stone and sand of about fifty feet. From it issued grunting repetitions of “*Hela hob, hela hob, hela hob!*”—an old Arabic phrase to help keep the rhythm.

“How many diggers did you hire?” Nevada asked.

“Oh, no diggers. Grad students. Much cheaper.”

The desert was as inhospitable as the moon but studded with colonization attempts. A tent worthy of a revivalist meeting served as a break area, with folding chairs and coolers of bottled water stuck down in the sand. Workers nearing their limits sat down, drank, and reconnected with their phones. A radio was reporting on a soccer game back in the UK, the announcer’s voice disappearing out over the horizon. In the distance, over a dune, beach umbrellas marked the latrine area.

Nevada compulsively drew her canteen and took a swig. Seeing this much desert always gave her an overwhelming impression that she, that they, didn’t belong here. What had the Romans called this place? Oh, yes, Aethiopia. The Land of Burnt Faces. You had to hand it to the Romans, they called it like they saw it.

The flatbed trudged along next to the length of track, giving Nevada a slightly ostentatious vantage point from which to watch the sway of passing dirt-laden wagons. Each had to weigh a ton, but was easily pushed along by a digger.

“A test unit,” Nevada said. “You sift through the sand to make sure you haven’t missed anything?”

“Quite,” Sir Joseph agreed.

“Have you found anything?”

“Scorpions.”

Nevada shuddered. She couldn’t understand any creature that needed more than four limbs.

A winch awaited each wagon at the far end of the track. Nevada watched as it brought up a fifty-gallon drum of sand to dump into the next empty cart.

The uneven circle, fifty feet wide and twice as deep, lay like an open wound in the heart of the desert, its sides scored by the work of the backhoe before more delicate tools had taken over. People were working down below, spiraling down a stairwell carved out of the sand and shored up by wooden planking. At the very bottom, the order and efficiency of academia collapsed into the tenuously controlled chaos of the field.

There were cameras and surveying tools, shovels, buckets, trowels, plastic bags, nails, mesh screens, rulers—as if they weren’t so much digging as performing a massive autopsy upon the ground. The diggers were there by the dozen, most armed with simple hoes, pulling dirt into buckets at their feet. The full buckets went up one line of workers and the emptied buckets came down another.

“When are you going to stop?” Nevada asked. “When you hit magma?”

“Our imaging software tells us it isn’t that far,” Sir Joseph assured her. “Don’t worry, we’ve used soil nailing to protect us from cave-ins.” He indicated lengths of rebar sticking out of the sandy walls at regular intervals, anchored by what looked like splotches of concrete. “It’s perfectly safe.”

“You said Dr. Cushing was the one I should talk to. Which one is she?” Nevada asked.

“It’s a hundred degrees and they’re doing manual labor,” Sir Joseph replied, pulling himself up to look over the edge of the flatbed. “She’ll be the one smiling. Candice! Candice Cushing!”

One of the worker bees down in the pit looked up. She was so dark in skin tone that Nevada would've taken her for a native, one of the southern Sudanese whose isolation had frozen their bloodline in amber, a direct line from the woman who ate from the Tree of Forbidden Knowledge. She was tall and lithe, with feline eyes and night-sky skin, stars gleaming in her sweat.

She was crowned with a wreath of golden hair, like the sun haloed her head. Her razor cut hairstyle was side swept and shaved, colored brown at the sides, pineapple blonde on top. She wore earth-colored clothing—beige shirt, snug green cords, and canvas boots, with the T-shirt reading 'My Life Is in Ruins.' Not exactly high fashion. In fact, the most noteworthy thing about her threads was the pendulous breasts and wide hips stretching them out. And while those were just fine, Harper saw the real treasure was the smile Sir Joseph had promised. It was luminous. The happiest Nevada had ever seen anyone. The rest of her features, perfect as they were, seemed like they'd just been laid alongside her smile to give it a proper setting.

Oh yes, they were definitely going to have sex. Nevada couldn't wait for Candice to figure it out.

* * *

"Are you trying to hit me?" Candice asked. She'd barely caught the empty bucket as it sailed toward her. That would've been just great, getting nailed in the face like one of the Three Stooges just when the press showed up. Not a bad-looking member of the press, either.

Candice's brow furrowed; something about the reporter put her teeth on edge. She couldn't place it, and it was ridiculous, of course, turning her nose up at any publicity. Tell someone you were digging up Egypt and their heads swelled with pyramids and mummies. Start talking Kush and *mastabas* and *tumuli*, and their eyes glazed over. It was practically an allergic reaction.

Maybe it was just her clothes. Candice bore the habit of never wearing red or orange, picked up on a dig in Cyprus out of deference to the birds. The reporter wore red pants, with an orange jacket tied around her waist, below a round-necked white tank top.

Impressive. You're actually managing to tank relationships before they're even crushed. What comes next after being a snob about fashionable color schemes? Turning people down based on their chakra?

Pulling a worker off the bucket brigade, she handed him her hoe and set off over the network of ramps and ladders that allowed people down into the land of what history had buried. It wasn't long before her ascent brought her out into the sunlight, where the wind stirred a haze of heat against her skin.

It was no wonder the ancient Egyptians had worshipped the sun. It was overwhelming, overpowering. If she could've afforded it, she'd have bought a few more canopies to shelter her men on the short but punishing journey between the tents and the worksite. The immense heat could prove too much for people, hitting them all at once, especially when they exerted themselves.

The funding for that, and a million other things, was not forthcoming.

"Candice, let me introduce Ms. Harper Burke of the *Daily Star*," Sir Joseph said, leaning out from the bed of the Mercedes. Harper stepped away from the vehicle and offered her hand as Candice came up the ladder. Candice ignored it.

"What are you doing out of bed?" she asked Sir Joseph. "You should be in hospital, but you can't even keep out of the sun?"

"I'm fit as a fiddle," Sir Joseph insisted. "Please, Dr. Cushing, Harper here—"

"What's this about a curse?" Harper asked, smiling widely. Like most reporters Candice knew, Ms. Burke had a shark's smile.

"You're not starting that nonsense, are you?" Candice turned on Sir Joseph. "Go to your tent and don't come out until dusk. And I should sew it up behind you for spreading stories like that."

Harper set her hands on her hips. "It's commonly accepted in most schools of journalism for the subject to actually answer questions? I'm filming a news piece, not a reality show."

Candice looked at her, again struck by the instinct of something...off. A Ming vase among Grecian ruins. A bull in a china shop. "You don't look like a reporter," she said after a brief pause.

Harper had taken off her backpack and was digging into it, an old, weighty, canvas thing that looked positively Boy Scout compared to the fancy trends Candice had seen around camp.

“You don’t see me as a reporter?” Harper asked. Her eyes wandered a moment, off to the side, before zeroing in on Candice, making her feel twice as sweaty as she’d been before she wiped her brow. “What position do you see me in?”

There was an almost malicious layer of subtext to the words, and Candice’s eyes instinctively dashed to Sir Joseph to see if he had picked up on the implication—the flirty froth in the lilt of Harper’s voice. But, called out by her mother-hen act, he appeared weakened, diminished.

“Yes,” he said, blithely ignorant of the turning of the conversation. “I think I should go back to my tent. So sorry about the curse business. But it is interesting. You should tell her.”

Harper wheeled triumphantly on Candice. “You should tell me,” she repeated.

Candice resisted the urge to roll her eyes. This was what she’d wanted. Attention. Validation. Some goddamned appreciation for once. If she had to go through this woman to get it...well.

She fell into step behind the flatbed as it moved off toward Sir Joseph’s tent. “It’s not a curse,” she said over her shoulder to Harper, who followed on her heels. “It’s science. The Nubians who built the pyramid—”

A red light caught the corner of her eye. She turned to find that Harper had a camcorder pointed at her face.

For Candice, seeing her own reflection in the fisheye lens was like looking at another person. It jerked her out of being who she was being. She recalled a line from Churchill, *The River War*...the only book on her homeland she could find at the library growing up.

“The aboriginals absorbed the invaders they could not repel. The stronger race imposed its customs and language on the negroes. The vigour of their blood sensibly altered the facial appearance of the Soudanese.”

“Shouldn’t there be a cameraman doing that?” she asked. “Someone holding a boom mic? Producers, assistants?”

Harper neatly sidestepped a mine cart coming back down the tracks, another load of shifting sand in it. “They’re on their way. But I was told you were hours away—*hours*—from finding the pyramid. My producers would rather have *that* than you standing around after the fact, yakking on about how you unearthed it, so I’m here early.” She lowered the camera, taking away Candice’s distorted reflection. “And if it turns out to be nothing, I won’t have blown my whole budget on a wild goose chase.”

Candice wouldn’t take the bait. Typical for some muckraking journo, she supposed. Get the subject riled up, make her try to justify herself. Well, she didn’t have to. The site justified itself quite well. She gestured for Harper to raise the camera again. Harper complied.

“The Kushites who built the pyramid traded with the ancient Romans. One of their exchanges was the technique for making Roman concrete—*opus caementicium*—and sonar shows they used it here instead of brick or stone. Probably as an experiment, like the Bent Pyramid of Dashur. Unfortunately, they built it several meters below sea level, and only a hop, skip, and jump from the Nile. Groundwater seeped into the foundations, weighing it down, and it sunk into the sand.”

“Like the Pyramid of Amemhamhat III,” Harper said.

“Exactly. But the Kushites couldn’t be expected to know that, so they resolved that it was cursed.” Candice paused a step, letting Harper continue sweeping her camera over the tents. “You’re very knowledgeable, Ms. Burke.”

Harper returned the camera to her. “Just observant. You, for instance, how are you enjoying your homecoming?”

“This isn’t my home,” Candice answered truthfully.

“No, going by the London Cockney, that’d be somewhere near Bow Bells. And practically from birth too—you don’t hide one unsightly accent with another. But your parents...”

Candice felt her cheeks warm. It came back to this. Whatever the conversation, whoever the person, it always came back to this. “My father was brown, my mother black. It wasn’t considered a proper match here.”

“And in England?”

“At least they were equally rejected.” Candice cocked her head to look past the camera lens at Harper. “I don’t much like human interest stories. The news is the pyramid.”

“Yes, it is. But I can still find a human interesting, can’t I?”

Candice reached out to grip the lens and lower it. “Has anyone ever told you you’re quite the American?”

“Yes. They usually tend to be a bit more profane about it.”

Candice abruptly remembered Sir Joseph. Stupid of her. Stupid and silly, forgetting about him to spar with this woman. But he’d already made his way into his tent with Bartholomew’s help, and Candice could see their silhouettes through the canvas, settling him into the cot that’d been serving as a rest care for him. She thought to check up on him, just to be sure, but didn’t want to appear too sycophantic in front of Harper.

Instead—hoping whatever point they’d been wrestling over had been proven—she gave Harper a polite smile. “Alright, Ms. Burke. Now, would you like a tour?”

“I don’t think there’ll be time.” Harper aimed her camera down the tracks.

Candice heard before she saw—fast, pounding footfalls hitting the rails that held the tracks together. Someone running toward them, and there was only one reason to run in this heat.

“Candice, come quick! We’ve found it! We’ve found it!”

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PYRAMID'S CURSE

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