

EYE OF EGYPT

PART 1: THE PHARAOH'S GREATEST GIFT

PROLOGUE

Egypt- Cairo, 2649 BC

A breeze wisped fine sand across the palace courtyard and gently rippled the silk curtains that draped from the sandstone walls. A long corridor leading from the square disappeared deep behind the protective ramparts to a grand staircase that opened majestically onto the Nile. The morning shadows cut sharp lines across the landscape, ignorant to the sound of clashing blades carrying ominously from the palace gardens.

At the top of the grand staircase, two palace guards stood resolute. They knew they were going to die. They were born to it and today they would go to the afterlife with honour. Behind them, an archway heavily draped with a curtain was all that separated them from the Pharaoh's private quarters.

Within the palace a chilling scream echoed through the empty halls and the two guards calmly drew their blades. They stepped forward, bare feet positioned on the top run of the staircase.

Inside the quarters, Pharaoh Djoser, his wife, two children and his chief engineer desperately gathered belongings as three anxious manservants waited beside the river with horses.

On hearing the scream, the Pharaoh's bodyguard turned and moved in front of dividing curtains prepared to be the last obstacle to his king. In each hand he clenched short curved knives that promised no mercy to those who brought violence before him.

"Go now my king," he urged, "they're nearly upon us!"

The Pharaoh snatched up a small chest with mysterious lacquer markings and pushed it into the hands of his chief engineer. "You must

protect this with your life. Take it to Saqqara and do as we agreed,” insisted the Pharaoh over the ringing of blades and cries of the two hall guards.

The engineer clutched the small box to his chest and ran outside to the horses where Djoser’s terrified wife and children were being protected by the three manservants. They scrambled desperately onto their mounts just as the rebels burst through the curtain.

The surge of enemy was met with short but fierce resistance from the last bodyguard, but his sacrifice was not in vain as he granted the horses and their precious cargo time to escape along the river and into the desert.

Djoser knew this life was almost over as he faced his antagonists, their blood splattered garments testimony to their loyalty and cause. They slowly parted as their commander stepped threateningly into the centre of the room and faced the soon to be deposed Pharaoh.

Utter silence had returned to the palace and the soft breeze still teased the palace curtains as if nothing had happened.

But it had, and the man who stood icily before the Pharaoh had brought war to the kingdom.

Worse still, it was a man Djoser knew well and had utterly trusted. As the rebel commander drew a small curved dagger and thrust the blade mercilessly into Djoser’s heart, the man’s sleeve slipped back exposing his wrist, and in that fleeting moment between life and death, the Pharaoh suddenly understood how and why his kingdom had been lost...

CHAPTER 1

1862, London

Rain hammered the grime-stained window and found its way through gaps in the frame, the stone floor cradling pools of icy water adding to the dampness and misery of Bishopsgate Orphanage.

Sebastian, a fifteen-year-old boy with ratty hair, squatted on his thin mattress listening to the constant rhythm of the downpour. Both his parents and younger sister had died from the cholera outbreak when he was seven and he had been in the institutions ever since. Now, at fifteen, he knew he should be slaving in the factories or down the coalmines, but for the past six years he had been head boy and was as much a part of Bishopsgate as its staff. His position gave him some authority, more responsibility, but few friends. He didn't mind. The role had its benefits, the most positive being a room to himself.

The catch of a key turning in the door's lock announced the arrival of Giles, an exceedingly large man with a badly tortured face. His left eye socket, a hollowed cavity, made his right eye utterly penetrating. Down the left side of his cheek, neck and chest snaked a heinous scar making him resemble Frankenstein's monster. In what seemed a cruel twist of fate, Giles' distorted looks were further marred by the lack of front teeth. This caused him to make a whistling sound when he spoke. This was highly amusing, but the spray of spittle that inevitably followed was not.

Giles ran the orphanage. His tasks ranged from cleaner, kitchen hand and caretaker, to the job he most enjoyed, disciplinarian. He was currently in the role of kitchen hand and in his oversized hands he held a tray of gruel.

“Ere’s yer food yer little bugger,” Giles spat as he threw the tray onto the end of the mattress. “Urry up, I ain’t got all bleedin’ day.” His massive frame twitched impatiently at the end of the bed as Sebastian dug his fingers into the warm porridge-like substance and shovelled it as fast as he could into his mouth. The food was one of two meals received in the orphanage each day. It looked and tasted somewhat like glue, but at least it was warm. Giles’ huge hands reached down prematurely to collect the battered tray. Sebastian made a desperate grab for the last few mouthfuls, plunging both hands into the tin plate to save as much of the remaining glug as possible.

“Greedy as always,” sneered Giles, pulling the tray away. He sniffed loudly and swallowed a gob of phlegm almost as thick as the gruel, making Sebastian grimace.

“Bleedin’ rain makes me nose run,” mumbled Giles as he gazed out the window wiping the back of his hand across his nose. Now moist, he smeared it absently on the side of his trousers, rattling the large bunch of keys hanging from his heavy leather belt. He twitched his head as he discovered a niggling in his right ear.

“Soon be time to go down for evenin’s work,” Giles mumbled as he tried to jam his right index finger deep into the canal, but realised this was futile, so he violently shook his head in an attempt to remove whatever it was that was annoying him. This process also being unsuccessful, he used his limited ingenuity and tugged the keys off his belt, shoving one of the shafts into his ear. His attempt made the key almost disappear.

“If you’re not careful, you might unlock a sense of humour,” Sebastian muttered cheekily. Fortunately, Giles didn’t hear, but he seemed pleased with himself as he withdrew the key to inspect a large clump of putrid wax. Satisfied with his efforts and obviously impressed with the result, he wiped it onto the same patch of trouser previously decorated with snot, before hooking the big bunch of keys up again to his belt. Giles turned and gazed at Sebastian coldly with his one eye. “Little Will Turner got took last night, so keep them windows closed tight and I’ll make sure all the doors is locked well be’ind me.” With these words hanging in the air, Giles left, locking the heavy wooden door behind him.

Over the past month, at least three London orphanages had reported abductions in the still of night. Each of the disappearances even more mysterious by the fact that the rooms were undisturbed, with the doors still securely bolted and the heavy iron bars on the windows untouched. Sebastian had learned this much from listening to the gossip between Giles and the other staff during their nightly work. But now, for the first time, the disappearances involved Bishopsgate. Despite investigations by the local police and intervention from Scotland Yard, not a single disappearance had been explained. It seemed likely that because they were orphans, locating missing children rated very low on the police to-do list.