

TOMBQUEST

THE STONE WARRIORS



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Summary: Twelve-year-olds Alex and Renata are on the run from the Order, which
is on the brink of creating an army of indestructible stone warriors to carry out their
evil schemes, and only the Lost Spells which his mother used to bring Alex back to life
can stop them—and undoing the powerful magic that created the chaos that is now
loose in Egypt might very well kill him.

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For Team TombQuest:

It takes many talented people to make a book, and even more to get that book to readers. When it comes to an epic adventure series like this one, the author is just the tip of the pyramid, and I am lucky to work with a team for the ages.

On the Run

Moving at a dead run through an unfamiliar city, Alex Sennefer risked a quick look behind him. Were the guards from the museum still after them? Had the police joined the chase? At first, all he saw was a broad street and wide sidewalks, lit at even intervals by streetlights and dotted with nighttime walkers. Then he heard a shout, sharp and clear: “*Halt!*” A guard rounded a corner and came into view, his tie flapping as his shoes slapped the sidewalk.

Is he armed? wondered Alex. *Are there half a dozen more men right behind him?* He turned to his best friend, Renata Duran, who was running beside him. “We need to get off this” — he huffed in another breath — “street” — puffed it out — “and hide!”

“Yeah!” said Ren. She was twelve years old, like Alex, but small for her age, and her short legs pumped furiously to keep up. “Which way?”

To their left was a large, dark park, a slumbering stretch of trimmed grass and thick trees, surrounded by a tall iron fence. Alex scanned the fence line for an opening but then

thought better of it. A fence could protect them — but it could also trap them inside.

Across the street to the right was a long stretch of open sidewalk and closed shops.

“Go right!” Alex said.

“Okay,” said Ren, “but not yet . . .”

Alex looked back — now a second guard was running just behind the first.

“Uh, are you sure?” said Alex.

“Wait!” Ren called.

“Why?” he asked. Then he noticed a vague rumbling noise.

“Just keep running!”

Alex swung his head around and saw a single, large headlight in the center of the street. Steel tracks in the road caught the growing light. It was a streetcar, heading toward them.

“Got it!” he shouted. The two friends sprinted off the sidewalk and into the street, straight toward the oncoming train.

The streetcar sounded its horn: a harsh, electric blare.

The guards were closer now and called out in German again: “*Halt! Vorsicht!*”

But Alex barely heard them as he sprinted across the deadly steel tracks right behind Ren. The horn blared, voices cried out, and the massive car rumbled forward. If he tripped, he’d be cut in half by heavy steel wheels. But with a few quick, careful strides, he and Ren cleared the tracks.

The streetcar rumbled on. Through the windows, Alex could see its few passengers gaping at the brazen duo.

By the time it passed, the two friends were gone. The street was quiet once more, and the guards were bent over, hands on knees, breathing heavily and staring into several small, dark side streets. The trespassers were headed down one of them. They just didn't know which one.



“I think we lost them,” said Ren as the pair hustled down a short street called Robert Stolz Platz. The street ended in a small park, this one unfenced, and the friends skirted its dark edges.

“Great,” said Alex, taking a quick look back and slowing his pace. “Then it’s official: We’re all lost.”

They took a left onto a street bearing the improbable name Nibelungengasse and slowed to a walk. “Yeah,” said Ren, breathing heavily and looking both ways down the little street. “Seriously. Where *are* we?”

He knew she didn't mean what street or even what neighborhood. She meant what city? What country? They had arrived here through a false door, a ceremonial ancient Egyptian portal that had somehow allowed them to travel from the Valley of the Kings in Egypt to another false door in the Egyptian wing of a museum here — wherever *here* was.

For weeks, Alex and Ren had been on the hunt for two things: Alex's mom and the powerful Lost Spells of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. His mom had used those Spells to revive him as he lay on life support in a New York hospital. But in doing so, she'd opened a gateway to the afterlife and the sinister ancient entities known as the Death Walkers had escaped. She and the Spells vanished after that, and Alex and Ren had traveled halfway around the world to find them.

But they weren't the only ones. The Order's deadly operatives were looking for them, too, and hounded the friends wherever they went. They knew the evil cult was working with the Death Walkers in some vast sinister conspiracy. The last Walker had spoken of *ruling* with The Order. Whatever they were up to, it was big, and if the cult found the Spells first, the Death Walkers would be unstoppable, and the whole world would suffer.

Alex shuddered slightly in the night and looked around at a scene that seemed far less grim. The buildings were lit softly by a combination of streetlights and moonlight, and the architecture was old and beautiful. "It's so pretty," said Ren.

"This whole city looks like something you'd find on top of a cake," agreed Alex. He nodded toward a nearby building. It was painted a delicate light green that did, indeed, look a bit like frosting. It reminded him of an exhibit he'd seen at The Metropolitan Museum of Art back in New York, where his mom had worked as an Egyptologist before she disappeared. "Is that, like, art deco?" he said.

Ren shook her head in disapproval. “Don’t be ignorant,” she said. “It’s art nouveau.”

“Oh, *obviously*,” he said sarcastically, but he didn’t doubt her. He was aware that she knew a lot more about it than he did. Her dad was a senior engineer back at the Met, his mom’s most trusted coworker, and Ren had inherited his love of elegant angles and solid construction.

“What was that?” Ren gasped, interrupting his thoughts.

“What was what?”

“I thought I saw something slip between those buildings,” said Ren, pointing. “Just, like, a shadow.”

Alex followed her finger but didn’t see anything. “It’s the middle of the night,” he said. “There are shadows everywhere.”

New voices echoed down the little street. A small white dog turned the corner and then two people appeared behind it. “Let’s ask them where we are,” said Alex.

“Can we trust them?” said Ren.

Alex understood her cautiousness. They had already been betrayed once that night. He could still picture his cousin Luke standing up in the moonlit desert and shouting, *Over here*, giving away their position to the brutal death cult. He was still stunned that his own cousin was working for The Order . . . but another glance at the middle-aged couple put his mind at ease. “They’ve got a shih tzu,” he said. “Not exactly an attack dog.”

He waved as the couple approached: a man and a woman, wearing casual clothes but fancy shoes. The signs — and

shouts — had all been in German so far, but that was the only clue they had about their location. Fortunately, his mom’s family was from Germany.

“*Hallo!*” he called. He knew that part. “*Wo, um, sind wir?*” *Where are we? Maybe?* He was less sure of that, and longed for the smooth, fluid German his mom had always used on the phone with his grandmother.

The man holding the leash smiled and responded with a barrage of rapid-fire German that baffled Alex.

“*Ich spreche nur ein bisschen Deutsch,*” said Alex with an apologetic shrug. *I speak only a little German.*

The woman answered this time, wearing a patient smile and speaking precise English. “You are American, yes? You are on Nibelungengasse.”

Ren spoke up. “Not what street,” she said. “We’d like to know what city this is.”

The dog walkers exchanged quick, confused smiles. Even the dog seemed to regard them with tongue-lolling pity.

“You are in Wien, of course,” said the man. “Vienna. Is there something you need help with? Are you . . . lost?”

“No, we’re fine,” said Alex. “But thanks.”

The dog walkers went on their way, but the strangest thing happened as Alex turned to give one last embarrassed wave. He thought he saw a shadow, too, a thin slice of night slipping from one side of the streetlight’s glow to the other.

“Wow, Vienna,” said Ren, looking around with fresh eyes.

“That’s got to be two thousand miles from where we were,” said Alex. “And it felt like it took a minute.” He

remembered their desperate sprint through a strange and murky landscape . . . *Had they really traveled through the afterlife?*

His mind was full of big questions and confusing new realities, but right now he had a more immediate concern. As his eyes scanned the dark edges of the street, he felt the ancient scarab amulet at his neck growing warm against his skin. A warning: Death was lurking nearby.

“Maybe we should, uh, find someplace to stay,” he said.

He suddenly wanted to be anywhere other than the dark streets of an unfamiliar city. He reached into the pocket of his jeans, but all he pulled out was a handful of Egyptian bills. Useless. What good was Egyptian capital in the capital of Austria?

“Maybe we can find somewhere to change those when the stores open tomorrow,” said Ren.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Alex repeated absently. His eyes were fixed on a dark corner that seemed, somehow, to be darker than the rest.

It was tonight he was worried about.



Shadow of a Doubt

A little while later, they found themselves hiding in a secluded park. Around them, as night settled in, the city's lights blinked out one by one.

"I wish we had our tents," said Alex, trying to find a way to sit that didn't involve getting stabbed by tree roots. The park was nice and clean and leafy — as everything in Vienna seemed to be — but it was still a dark and open space. And Alex had other concerns. Shadows shifted all around them, with every gust of wind through the trees.

"Well, the tents are back in Egypt," said Ren matter-of-factly. "All we have is this." She swung her small backpack onto the thick grass and began pawing through it. She pulled out her flashlight and clicked it on and off quickly. "Still works!"

Alex unzipped his backpack, too. He pushed his hand inside and felt around for his flashlight. He felt the burned shirt he'd changed out of, the smooth cover of his passport, and then a little pool of sand that had settled at the bottom

of the pack. “Can you believe we were just in the desert?” he said as his hand finally closed around his flashlight.

“I kind of can’t believe any of it,” said Ren. “We basically ran through a fake door painted on solid stone in Egypt and straight out another one in Austria. And I know the only thing that makes sense is that we traveled through the afterlife — I mean, I saw it. But I still can’t believe it. It creeps me out.”

Alex was listening, but also looking out into the night. As he did, he saw it again. The darkness seemed to coalesce into a slice of deeper black. Alex pointed his flashlight and clicked it on. But the light cut straight through and hit the trunk of one of the two thick trees they were camped between.

“What are you doing?” said Ren.

“Nothing. I guess I’m just freaked out, too.”

Ren looked at him carefully. Her face was a gray oval in the night. “Do you think we’re okay?” she said. “I mean, if we traveled through the afterlife . . . were we — are we — um, dead?”

Alex shook his head. “I don’t think so. I think we were just, like, passing through? It must be the amulets that let us do that.” He glanced over at her Egyptian ibis amulet, the image of a pale white bird, glowing faintly in the moonlight. He felt the weight of the scarab hanging from his neck.

“Well, I guess you would know,” said Ren, before quickly adding: “I mean because you’ve had your amulet for longer. Not because . . .”

Alex nodded. He knew what she meant: Not because he'd been dead before.

Not because his mom had accidentally unleashed death so that he could live.

His mom.

The thought hit him like an avalanche: a cold and massive weight. They'd picked up her trail in the Valley of the Kings. They'd been so close to her — and now, just hours later, they were a continent away. It felt frustrating and unfair. He didn't know why she was running. She had always looked after him, always known what to do, so why abandon him now? He couldn't figure it out. But he knew he needed to find her. And not just to put his growing doubts to rest, but also because the Spells she had with her were the only things powerful enough to end the evil spreading across the globe.

A memory flashed through his mind: his mom's handwriting in a government logbook in the Valley of the Kings. She'd signed a fake name, but a familiar one: Angela Felini, one of his old babysitters. But there was no one looking after him now, not his mom and not Angela, who'd moved to Alexandria, Virginia, years ago. Now he felt like he alone was responsible — for himself, and for all the trouble he'd caused.

Ren interrupted his thoughts. "We should call Todtman."

Dr. Ernst Todtman was the leader of their unlikely group, and the last time they'd seen him was in Cairo. They hadn't heard from the mysterious German scholar since they'd split up to cover more ground.

“Yeah, definitely,” said Alex. He dug into his pocket for his disposable cell phone — what Ren called his “spy phone.” He clicked it on and checked the screen. He’d had calls from his own phone forwarded to it — just in case his mom tried to reach him — but he had no missed calls at all. And now the battery was almost dead.

“Do you think our phones will work here?”

“Maybe. They worked in London and Egypt. Todtman must have gotten, like, the international plan when he bought the phones.”

Alex dialed, but once again the call went straight to voice mail. He left a quick message.

“It’s me. We’re in Vienna. Austria. I’ll try to explain when you call us. A lot has happened. Don’t trust Luke. Please call!”

Ren ruined some of the urgency of Alex’s message by letting out a mighty yawn. “Sorry,” she said. “Really tired.”

“Me too,” said Alex. “I guess we should get some sleep and try Todtman again in the morning.”

“What if they find us?”

They. Alex knew she didn’t mean the guards from the museum. She meant The Order. “We left them in the dust back in Egypt,” he said, hoping it was true. “Or the sand, anyway. There’s no way they could know we ended up here.”

“Okay,” Ren said sleepily. She put her backpack behind her head and lay down on the soft grass. “Maybe one of us should stay awake and keep watch.”

“I’ll take the first watch,” said Alex. He was really tired but felt like he owed it to her. He was the reason she was here in the first place.

Ren fell asleep immediately, leaving Alex alone with his thoughts. He leaned against his backpack and gazed into the dark summer night. The air was warm and the faintest strains of classical music floated out from some open window far away. He scanned the shadows, measured the darkness. He told himself there was nothing there — but he didn’t quite believe it. He needed to know for sure.

He reached up and slipped the ancient scarab amulet from under his shirt. It was plain and chunky as Egyptian artifacts went, just polished stone and refined copper. But the scarab beetle was a powerful symbol of resurrection in ancient Egypt, and the amulet had tremendous power. It could activate the Book of the Dead and banish the Death Walkers; it could move objects and summon powerful winds; and lastly, it could detect the undead.

Alex closed his hand around it. Even as his pulse revved with ancient energy, he sought to calm his mind. To open up and stretch out with his senses . . . For a second, he thought he felt something: a slight presence no more substantial than the last soap bubble in the sink. But then it slipped away. It was such a weak signal that he wasn’t entirely sure he had felt it at all.

He released the amulet and chastised himself. He had too much real trouble to go inventing more. A Death Walker

would light up his amulet like a battleship on a radar screen. Why drive himself crazy with a weak, slippery signal that might not exist at all?

It had been a long day with lots of running. Alex's grimy nylon backpack wasn't much of a pillow, but he was sure he could lie back and relax a little and still stay awake. But a moment later, his eyes fluttered closed, and he fell fast asleep.



The shadow had followed them from the afterlife. It liked this new boy who was shadowed by death, too. How was it possible to bear the marks of death and still be so full of life? The shadow didn't know, but it wondered if it could take that energy for itself. If it could gorge on this boy's life and become full. Maybe it would even remember who it had been, once upon a time, so long ago.

It leaned over Alex as he slept, and pinched his nose shut.

Alex immediately began to squirm. It was a soft movement at first, as if rolling to get more comfortable. But as the oxygen ceased to flow, he twisted with a bit more urgency.

The shadow concentrated. At first it was all it could do to hold the nostrils of the squirming boy closed. It was still a weak presence in this world, and this was the outer limit of its influence here.

Alex opened his mouth and gasped. That was what the shadow had been waiting for. The strange creature breathed

deeply, sucking the warm air leaving Alex's lungs straight into its own dark form. And as it did, it grew stronger. Its hand grew more defined. What had been little more than a cold, dark paw now resolved itself into individual fingers, a wrist.

The shadow pressed its new hand down over Alex's nose. He thrashed beneath the increasing force and, finally, his eyes snapped open.

What he saw made no sense to him, just an impenetrable darkness hanging over him. And then he saw its milky gray eyes.

It was a sheut, the shadowy vessel that the ancient Egyptians believed contained a person's spirit and self, their ka and ba. Alex had seen the pooled blackness at the feet of the living in the ancient art at the Met. But the body of this one was long dead, and the ka and ba had fled. Something had gone wrong, and they hadn't been reunited in the afterlife. All that was left was this thing of darkness: a shadow of its former self.

Alex watched in horror as a stream of soft white fog rose from his own open mouth and disappeared into the sheut. He rolled and thrashed, but the hand pressed down hard. *How can a shadow hold me?* Alex wondered desperately. But hold him it did. Stronger with each breath it stole, it pinned his head hard against the ground. *It is taking my strength,* Alex suddenly realized. *It is taking my life force as its own!*

Alex reached up to wrestle the thing away, but his hands passed straight through the apparition's arms. It could affect him, but he couldn't affect it.

His amulet!

Alex's lungs cried out for oxygen even as they gave it up. He felt his vision narrowing. He was on the verge of passing out. He reached desperately for his amulet and found only its silver chain. The heavy scarab had swung around behind him as he slept and was now pinned between the back of his neck and the ground.

As its gray eyes turned milky white, the sheut lowered them toward Alex. *How iss it you arrre alllliiiiive?* it asked, the words taking shape not on the air but inside Alex's mind. He had no breath left to answer. And it didn't seem to matter: He wouldn't be alive for long.