

LORD OF THE DEAD

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LISA A. SHIEL



Book Two in the Human Origins Series



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LORD OF THE DEAD  
BY LISA A. SHIEL

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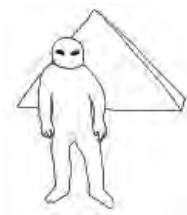
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*For Dad—  
the aviation expert*

*&*

*For Mom—  
the expert on everything else*



## PROLOGUE

The wind shrieked.

Akhmose tiptoed into the sanctuary behind his brother Isesi. The dust from the storm outside coated their bodies, a second skin borne of the desert. The sand burned Akhmose's eyes, parched his tongue, clung to his bare head as a wig might.

His brother led him toward the shrine. The lamplight glinted off the axe clutched in Isesi's hand.

The god's boat rested atop a dais as if drifting down an invisible river. The shrine—a wooden box seven feet tall—hulked in the center of the boat, its doors closed, the latch fastened.

Approaching the shrine, Isesi laid a hand on the doors.

"No," Akhmose said. "I have changed my mind."

"We are dying. The fields have turned to dust, the canals have dried, and the wells are nearly drained. Yet each day we bring oil to the temple so the high priest may anoint the god's image. Even as we starve, we offer food to the god's image." Isesi lowered his voice to a whisper. "The legend tells—"

"You cannot believe a legend."

"Our father was a priest of Djehuty, like us. He believed."

"The gods will punish us."

"My brother, the gods do not exist. If they lived, they would save us."

Isesi climbed into the god's boat. He unhooked the shrine's latch and parted the doors. The golden statue of Djehuty gleamed in the flicker of the oil lamps. While the body was

rendered as a mummy with hands folded over its chest, the face displayed a fullness far from the gaunt figures he had passed on the journey here. Far from his own wasted form.

Isesi swung the axe backward.

The god's eyes, painted so vividly they seemed alive, stared at Akhmose as if the great one knew his thoughts. Akhmose shuffled closer to the shrine.

Isesi hammered his axe into the statue. The gold chipped. He hacked at it until sweat stained his clothing, yet even then he did not stop.

Pfft!

They froze. The side of the statue had cracked. A cold draft emanated from the breach.

Isesi's chest heaved. He dropped the axe.

Akhmose stumbled to the shrine. Leaning over the boat's hull, he squinted at the crack in the statue. The figure was a hollow shell. He inserted his fingers through the gap and pulled. A hinge groaned. The front half of the statue swung open.

A body tumbled out onto the floor.

Isesi gasped.

Akhmose knelt beside the body. Wrapped in linen with the arms crossed over the chest, the body resembled a mummy. Steam rose from the corpse. He touched the bandages. Cold. He prodded the body with his finger. Soft.

Inside the statue, behind where the body had stood, Akhmose noticed a cylindrical object. A papyrus scroll. Bound with a gold ribbon.

He snatched the scroll. The ribbon bore the seal of the great god Djehuty.

The hairs on his body stiffened. A strange tingling rushed over him.

Lightning exploded before him. In its wake, a man hunched. The lamplight set the man's red hair afire.

The stranger strode toward Akhmose. He extended a hand. "Give me the scroll."

Akhmose hugged the scroll to his chest.

"Do not," Isesi rasped. "Its wisdom will save our people, as the legend foretells."

The stranger scowled at Akhmose. "Relinquish the scroll."

Akhmose gaped at the stranger. He let his jaw fall open, for he could not hold it shut.

"Y-you," Akhmose said. "You are the god—"

"I am chaos. That is all you need to know."

The god stepped toward him. Akhmose scuttled backward.

With a shout, Isesi rushed at the god. He rammed his head into the god's gut. When the god struck his jaw, Isesi wrestled him to the ground. Limbs flailed. Cries echoed off the limestone walls.

Akhmose bolted out the sanctuary door, into the antechamber, through the columned hall, past the pylons into the sandstorm that had settled over the town. The wind tore through the streets. It battered him until his flesh ached.

He glanced backward. A light, larger than a hundred suns, hovered above the temple. Flames devoured the temple's roof.

Akhmose hurtled through the storm.

Lightning burst behind him. He ran faster, the scroll clutched to his chest, the sand scouring his breaths. Ahead, lightning erupted. A woman shrieked.

Out of the dust something rolled toward him. He tripped over the woman's body.

Her eyes stared up at him without seeing. Blood streamed from wounds on her chest.

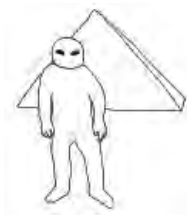
A knife gored his back. Pain wrenched through his body. He lurched forward. The assailant tore out the blade and plunged it into him again. He gasped for breath. The pain wrung his body like a fist, and his knees buckled. He collapsed onto the ground. The scroll slipped from his hand, rolling away into the storm.

His assailant stabbed the blade into his back. As his *ka* flowed from his body on a river of blood, he glimpsed a woman fleeing past him. She clasped the scroll to her chest.

Screams echoed through the town.

His assailant thrust the blade into him one last time.

Akhmose whispered a prayer to Ra—and then he died.



## CHAPTER ONE

*Glacier Peak Wilderness  
Wenatchee National Forest, Washington State  
Wednesday, October 15*

One year ago she'd found a 100-million-year-old human footprint.

Today she was looking for a really big rock.

Katy Bergren hopped over a foot-tall clump of stinging nettles. She halted beside a hemlock tree to adjust the straps of her metal-frame backpack. The hemlock towered over 100 feet tall, with a girth of three feet at its base. She leaned her shoulder against the tree and, pulling a Kleenex from her pocket, blotted her forehead. Despite a temperature in the upper forties, sweat moistened her skin. An hour ago she'd taken off her jacket. She rolled up the sleeves of her flannel shirt. The wind tugged at her canvas hat. She wiped her hands across her thighs, smearing sweat on her blue jeans.

She wasn't used to the altitude. She estimated they'd hiked to less than 2000 feet, but back in Michigan she never got even that high.

A gust roared through the trees.

The hairs on her neck prickled. She patted the fanny pack strapped around her waist to feel the lump of her Taurus .357 revolver inside it. Unlike most hikers, she knew what dangers lurked in the forest. Big, hairy, bipedal dangers. The press had given the creatures the innocuous nickname "Bigfoot." She knew first-hand how the creatures turned violent when they felt threatened.

Breaking into their home could be construed as threatening. The big rock she sought marked the entrance to the tunnels the creatures called home. She must break into the tunnels to find what she needed.

Ahead of her Rick stopped. A series of beeps issued from his direction as he checked their position on the GPS unit. They'd adopted a zigzag pattern for their search which had thus far netted them nothing.

Rick glanced back at her around the body of his metal-frame backpack.

The trees swayed in the wind. A light flashed overhead.

Katy jerked her head back to look up at the light. The sun, of course.

"It's almost noon," Rick said, "and we've only gone seven miles from the trailhead. At this rate we'll need a month to find whatever it is we're looking for."

"A big rock by a Y-shaped tree, uphill from the stream. Under that, we'll find a tunnel."

"And in the tunnel, a stela explaining the truth about human origins." Rick strode to her. "I still get the willies every time I think how human beings have been around for half a billion years."

"Maybe longer."

"Great, I feel much better." He frowned. "We're looking for a pine needle in a forest, Katy."

She blotted her temples with the Kleenex. Where had humans come from, since they hadn't evolved from the ancient hominids as evolution said? Today, she and Rick intended to find out.

Seven miles in four hours—not exactly record time. From the trailhead at Downey, they'd driven their rented Ford Explorer down the four-wheel-drive road that paralleled Downey Creek. Six miles from the trailhead, at Bachelor Creek, they'd parked the Explorer and taken off on foot. Searching every shady spot, dip, and stream they encountered slowed their progress.

Rick tucked the GPS unit into a pocket of his vest. The vest hid his shoulder holster, which housed an old service issue .45 auto. The shoulder strap of his backpack rode just above the holster.

"Let me see the map," Rick said.

Katy reached into her jeans pocket. She withdrew a folded sheet of paper, wrinkled from its captivity in her pocket. It was a satellite photo of the Glacier Peak Wilderness that she'd printed out from a website. A black circle marked an area of the wilderness. She handed Rick the map.

He pointed at the circle. "This is where we are. But the circle covers a six-mile area. We've gone about two miles into the circle."

"We keep going then."

He handed the map back to her. "I can't believe we're following directions given by a Bigfoot."

"Garfield's smart. He understood what I wanted from him."

Over the past year, Katy had developed a friendship with Garfield. In spite of that, he'd waited two months after his trip in a UFO to tell her about it. He remembered flying over North America to a spot near "the great western river." After showing him some

maps, she'd figured out he meant the Pacific Ocean. The ufonauts, who called themselves the Planners, had taken Garfield into an underground tunnel system. There he met other Bigfoot or, as Katy called them, hairy hominids. Most importantly, he'd seen a stela. The standing stone mentioned the origins of man.

The Planners had stopped him from getting close enough to see any more. By showing Garfield satellite photos of the US, Katy had determined the Planners brought Garfield to Wenatchee National Forest in north-central Washington State. Specifically, they brought him to a 700-square-mile area called the Glacier Peak Wilderness, in the northern end of the park. Nearby, Glacier Peak mounted over 10,500 feet into the heavens.

The wind gusted. Dead leaves, strewn across the forest floor, crackled.

"Maybe Garfield got confused," Rick said.

The wind gusted again, harder. Branches twisted and bobbed. Peripherally, Katy spotted a flash of gray.

She spun toward the flash. Between gusts, the branches settled down. They masked whatever she'd spotted.

The wind kicked up. Branches flapped. Low to the ground, gray flashed.

Thirty feet straight ahead. Beyond a pair of spruces. The trees jutted upward at inverse angles. Three feet off the ground, the trunks of the spruces merged.

Katy leaped to her feet. She pointed at the trees. "There it is!"

"I'll be darned," Rick said.

Katy bolted toward the tree.

The wind blustered. Branches dipped down toward her head. Ducking, she hurtled through the forest toward the Y-shaped spruces. Her backpack caught on a branch. She jerked it free and charged onward. Behind her, Rick's boots clomped. Leaves crunched beneath both their feet. She swerved around the spruces.

Her legs crashed into a two-foot-tall boulder.

Her feet flipped out from under her. She tumbled over the rock. The weight of her backpack propelled her forward. Face-first, she hit the ground.

Rick hurdled over the rock. He landed on both feet, right beside her.

Katy unhooked the straps around her chest and waist that secured her backpack. She shoved the pack off her shoulders onto the ground, scrambling to her feet. At two feet tall and three feet wide, the boulder could seal off a tunnel entrance. The hairy hominids added back entrances to their caves, cut out of the ground, with boulders to seal them off in case of emergency.

Four feet to the left of the boulder sat an earthen plug, rectangular, three feet wide by two feet long and six inches thick. A wooden peg protruded from one side. The plug rested next to a hole of matching dimensions. A portal into the caves.

Rick dropped his backpack on the ground. He squinted at the portal.

Katy bent down. She tore open the zipper of her backpack and pulled out her digital camera. From a side pocket, she dug out a flashlight.

"Oh no," Rick said. "Wait a m—"

She ran for the portal, jumped in feet-first. When her boots struck the floor, she scuttled sideways. She flicked on the flashlight. Light flooded the corridor. The passage dead-ended to her right, but stretched into darkness to her left.

Rick dove into the tunnel. *Whump*. He landed beside her.

"Thanks for waiting," he said.

"First doorway on the right," she said. "That's what Garfield told me. Which must mean we go left, then find the first doorway on the right-hand side of the passage."

She angled leftward.

Rick swiped the flashlight from her. Pushing past her, he marched down the corridor. Thirty feet later, they found a doorway on the right. It led into an oval room 15 feet long by ten feet wide. The walls bore no paintings or inscriptions. At the farthest end of the room hunkered a stela, a standing stone three feet tall, etched with symbols.

Katy trotted to the stela. The inscription was written in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. She knelt before the stela. As she skimmed her fingers over the opening lines of the inscription, she translated them silently.

Her heart thudded. Blood thundered behind her eardrums.

She whispered, "We found it."

Rick lingered in the doorway, halfway across the threshold. The .45 in his hand, he watched down the corridor.

"What's it say?" he asked.

She swallowed the mass in her throat. "Here lies the Master of Secrets, he whose identity is hidden, whose ancestors lived in the first house of man. The second house of man was born here...a thousand million years before the First Time. This is the tale of our birth."

Katy sat back on her heels. She bit her bottom lip.

Rick looked at her. She looked at him.

"A thousand million years," Rick said. "That's one billion years. Human beings were born over a billion years ago?"

"Yes, and I have an idea of where." She placed her fingers in a V, one fingertip under each of two hieroglyphs. "These are the symbols for star and sky. They're right after the phrase First House of Man."

She looked at him. "We came from another planet."

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