

The Nostradamus Revelation

An Omega Sector Thriller

Vincent Pauletti

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For Barbara Jean...

Prologue:

July 3rd, 1566

Salon-de-Provence, France

St. Michel Chapel

0300 hours

Brother Jean-Baptiste Chevalier would be dead in less than an hour. Had he known that would be the result, he would never have agreed to this unholy mission.

Since he was oblivious as to how this would end, Brother Chevalier unknowingly shuffled down the aisle of the cruciform, Romanesque, St. Michel Chapel. The hour was late, and because he carried with him the manuscript he set out to retrieve two days ago, no one would care about the time of night or his tardiness.

Were it daylight he would have admired the architectural grandeur surrounding him. The barrel-vault ceiling that curved smooth stone 22 meters high, stretching the entire length of the 97-meter long cathedral. The nave etching a path toward the ornate marble altar, sculpted with scenes of the Holy Family. Stain-glass, rose windows would have allowed beams of sunshine to dance across the face of the assembled parishioners sitting diligently in prayer as they listened to the Word of the Lord. Two aisles crossed paths with the nave while the transept formed the top portion of the cross-like cathedral. One led into the choir; the other into the sanctuary.

Conversely, at nightfall St. Michel Chapel took on a completely different look. Ominous beams of moonlight shone like beacons in through the stain-glass windows. Tonight rain fell and thunder struck, so that the cathedral took on a more threatening connotation. A flash of lightning crackled, illuminating a sculpted stone pillar of Christ in agony causing a shiver to run down the spine of Brother Chevalier as his long, black cloak skimmed the smooth polish of the stone floor.

The church was dark, the weather menacing, but Brother Chevalier had made this walk many times before. It was not the darkness of the cathedral that frightened him; it was what was *about* to happen that chilled his bones.

He continued walking, quickening his pace, turning right at the transept until he reached the sanctuary. Once inside the Holy Room, Brother Chevalier opened an ornate side door, a bas-relief of Christ on the cross sculpted flawlessly upon it, and descended the flight of spiral stone steps on its opposite side.

At the bottom of the steps, he turned right entering the catacombs of the hundred-year-old cathedral. The passage was narrow, not more than two meters high and three across. Made from the same stone that had been part of the original bedrock, the catacombs held one of the most sacred features of the cathedral that only those privileged enough ever saw. Every ten feet, niches, carved into the walls, held votive candles resting on wrought-iron braziers around magnificently sculpted, painstakingly decorated statutes of the Holy Family and several prominent saints frozen in silent prayer. The long stone hall finally ended abruptly fifty feet from the stone steps that led down from the cathedral. A thick oak door with iron hinges stopped any further progress.

Normally, this door remained locked. Keeping its secrets confined to the opposite side. Tonight, however, it was not.

Without knocking, Brother Chevalier entered the room.

The room was not large, just big enough for its purpose. A plain, round, oak table occupied the center of the room. A modest fireplace, crackling with burning ambers, was set into the room's far corner. The walls were plain stone. Smooth and decorated with two tapestries depicting the coat of arms of their Order- a black and white, cross Fleury, that counter-changed over a black and white shield, divided quarterly, and forming eight triangular pieces called a gyronny.

He went directly to the head of the table to greet the Master of the Order of the Dominicans, Father Vicente Francisco. Brother Chevalier knelt on one knee, presenting his Master with the soft, leather bound, handwritten manuscript about the size of a standard sized bible.

"Thank you, Brother Chevalier; your efforts will not go unnoticed." Father Vicente took the manuscript from his fellow brother then motioned for him to sit beside him.

The Master of the Order continued, "Two days ago a beloved member of our brethren died. With him, he took the knowledge that so many sought. His collections of works could fill the libraries of Rome and Florence three-fold. But it was his last work, this one," he held up the

manuscript Brother Chevalier handed him, “that could shake the very foundations of our faith. It is why I commissioned Brother Chevalier to retrieve the work, so that it may not fall into the hands of heretics and fanatics.”

“Why do we even disgrace our table with such works? Why not just burn the book?” A younger brother of the order demanded. Quite a few Brothers agreed with the younger one.

“I am in agreement that the book advocates heretical connotations, but to burn it would be to condemn our good brother who wrote those words. That I cannot allow. He has been a devout member of our community and one of the most ardent supporters of Christ Our Lord and the Holy See. I will not allow his name and reputation to suffer over this manuscript. In it, our dear brother prophesizes about the very heart of our faith, and the precise moment we shall meet our Lord and Savior.” Father Francisco placed the Manuscript in front of him on the table, “Within these pages lay the truths of Christendom, certain truths forecasting the end of this world and the beginning of a new everlasting divinity. As it is now, none but us are aware of its existence. It will remain that way until the end of days. Procured safely, with other works of great importance, inside The Philosopher’s Library.”

A chorus of murmurs echoed from around the table.

“That library is full of untruths and fanatical rants from overzealous free-thinkers,” One brother opposed.

“Our faith has no business assimilating with the likes of those heretics!” Shouted another.

The Master continued, “I understand your apprehension. If I did not think that this was the best recourse of action most beneficial to our faith, I too would voice similar concerns. Which is why, I have sent for someone responsible for keeping the secrets of that Library concealed. He has assured me that the manuscript will be safe. Never to be seen, nor spoken of again by outsiders. Our faithful brother’s name will not be tarnished.”

A knock on the solid, oak door confirmed the Master's words. A brother at the far end of the table rose to his feet and opened the door. A few whispers between the two, then the brother stepped aside and the stranger entered.

The man was dressed in a black, hooded, wool robe, his hands together, hidden inside opposite sleeves. He gave a curt nod to Father Francisco revealing the seal of his Order, which hung around his neck. It was an iron cross in the center of a circle with hands, symbolically, in

prayer. Those in the religious community knew the seal. It was the seal of The Order of the Servants of Secrets.

To Father Vicente Francisco the symbol was personal. For a time, in his youth, he had served with them. While there, he spent his time learning the secrets of their faith, serving humanity for better or worse. The Servants of Secrets were trusted with the world's most sacred knowledge. Many of the world's most ancient works survive within the walls of the Philosopher's Library. Some of Aristotle and Plato's earliest works are among the hundreds of ancient works that one can find there- works written long ago by the founders of Neo-Platonism, Plotinus, and Ammonius Saccas. Even mysterious texts belonging to a secret ancient organization called the Brethren of Purity, whose ancient origins are still unknown, are said to be hidden somewhere in the Library's great halls. But, it was not just philosopher's who's works could be found there. Works by great Greek and Roman historians like Herodotus, Thucydides, Quintus Curtius Rufus, and Plutarch just to name a few could also be found there. Even modern scholars like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Maimonides, Augustine of Hippo, Roger Bacon, and Albertus Magnus' research and texts hid deep within the secret Library.

Francisco had no doubt that putting the manuscript in their charge would ensure the tome's preservation in addition to withholding its secrets from the world as it has done so many times in the past with other mysterious texts.

"Father," the man spoke in a deep rough voice, keeping his head bowed respectfully.

"Brother, I have confidence that this manuscript will be safe within your walls." Father Francisco bowed his head in return and handed the manuscript over to the hooded man.

"It will be," he took the manuscript with his left hand and slid it into his cloak pocket.

Father Francisco had no time to react.

The man revealed a small crossbow hidden within his right-hand cloak sleeve and shot the Master of the Order of Dominican Friars square in the chest, felling him to the cold stone floor.

The scraping of chairs on the floor echoed in the small room as the remaining brothers jumped up in shock and anger. A Dominican Brother lunged for the traitorous interloper but an arrow intercepted him, lodging deep within his neck, coming from another crossbow on the opposite side of the room.

A crossbow held by Brother Chevalier.

By the time the Dominican friars could react, Brother Chevalier had moved to the door and opened it. Three more men dressed in black cloaks, wearing the same Servants of Secrets symbol around their necks, entered the room. The execution of all twelve Dominican friars in the basement of St. Michel Chapel took less than twelve minutes.

The man who began this execution was obviously in charge of the mysterious Order. Slowly, he walked toward Brother Chevalier, placing a hand on the distraught, younger man's shoulder, consoling him, "You did well, Brother Chevalier."

"I am yours to command, Brother."

The man smiled, turning away.

A knife plunged deep into the back of Brother Chevalier. His eyes went wide with surprise, his mouth opened to say something, but the words never came as he fell to the cold hard ground.

It was the last loose end to tie.

It was necessary if the secrets of the Library were to be preserved. The man disregarded Brother Chevalier, stepping over his dead body. Any man of God willing to betray his brethren to further his own egocentric ambitions could not be trusted. The Order of the Servants of Secrets would never have allowed a man with such immoral qualities to become a part of their Holiest of crusades against humanity anyhow. It went against everything they fought for and believed in. Someday the world would understand that for one to seek enlightenment with God, one must first accept their own immortality. Someday the world will know the wrath of a vengeful God, and fighting alongside Him would be His Servants.

The next day, the four Servants of Secrets walked through the heavy, oaken doors of the Château de l'Emperi. Smooth marble floors gleamed as sunlight drifted in through the high arrow-slit windows of the entryway. Grand tapestries of Christianity hung benevolently on every wall. Braziers filled with candles of every size and shape encircled the entire interior. A stone archway led into a grand room, the centerpiece of which was a great stone fireplace in which three men could stand erect, shoulder-to-shoulder. Dotted along the walls were several polished, wooden benches that supported by four smooth stone legs. Above each bench were stain-glass windows depicting Christ in the Stations of the Cross.

On the far side of the wall was an inauspicious wooden door with a brass handle, some might have mistaken it for a storage room, but they would be very wrong in making that

assumption. Who would guess that behind this simple door lay the treasures of some of the world's most revered scholars? As they approached the door, three of the Servants of Secrets stepped aside, allowing the fourth brother to open the door and enter, *alone*, with a tall wax candle lighting his way. Once inside, they closed the door behind him and stood guard at its entrance.

The man everyone looked to as their superior descended a long flight of narrow stone steps that ended at the beginning of a long corridor. While walking along the hall, he crossed himself several times, passing numerous crypts- resting places for his deceased brethren. At the end of the long corridor, a small square hole in the floor and several rungs, embedded into the wall, led further down into the belly of the castle. He took one rung at a time until he reached the bottom, which was the landing of another set of stone steps leading down into The Philosopher's Library.

Once at the bottom, he walked around the right side of one of the ten, twenty-foot high, wooden bookcases that ran parallel with the staircase. Each bookcase contained hundreds of square slots. While some contained ancient texts, others remained empty for future generations to fill with prized manuscripts from around the world. Each slot sealed by sliding a thick plate of glass down from the top of the slot and locking it in place with a brass key.

The man found an empty slot for the manuscript he took from Father Vicente, between works written by Herodotus and Paul the Apostle. He then took from his pocket a small brass key, that only he possessed, sealed the slot, and locked it. Feeling confident, he turned and climbed the steps, plunging the library into darkness once more.

Someday, he thought as he walked through the catacomb corridor, *something done to prevent anyone from discovering the secrets of our library.*

Perhaps he will commission someone from town to construct a series of traps to eliminate those that do not belong where they should not be.

One day, he thought as he reached the top of the staircase that led back into the grand room. He placed a hand on the cold, brass handle, blowing out the candle as devious grin grew upon his face.

One

A Gathering of Minds

November 3rd, 2012

2033 hours

Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Professor Miles Radcliffe was wandering the streets of Amsterdam like a frustrated, lost puppy. His cheeks were red, his nose was runny, and his whole body shivered under the heavy sheepskin jacket he wore. The snow and ice on the ground made walking hazardous, as he followed the instructions his old college professor, and mentor, had e-mailed him late yesterday afternoon. Normally, he would admire the stunning architecture and cultural history that made Amsterdam one of the world's most picturesque cities, but currently he had no time to appreciate it. As indicated by his e-mail, Professor Daniels wrote that Maarten Gerritsen, owned and operated a tiny bookshop off Rokin Street a few blocks from Muntplein Square, and would be waiting for him, intently and anxiously, to examine the item Miles carried inside his jacket pocket.

As he looked around, he could not help being caught up in his surroundings. Currently, he was standing in the center of Muntplein Square, more accurately described as a bridge crossing over the Singel Canal and made up of six streets meeting at the square's intersection. Famous worldwide- according to the guide book he read on his late afternoon flight from Reykjavik- for its boutiques in the famous Kalverstraat shopping district, and its floating flower market in the Bloemenmarkt, not to mention the quaint antique shops that dotted the cobblestone streets, Muntplein Square was a credit card company's dream come true.

In front of Miles was the centerpiece of Muntplein Square, the Muttoren tower, a vestige of the two towers and gatehouse that made up the city's medieval walls in the 15th century until a

1618 fire destroyed all but the guardhouse and part of the western tower. Between 1619 and 1620 the tower was refurbished in Amsterdam Renaissance style and still stands today as a reminder of the 17th century occupancy of French troops who used the tower to mint coins, hence Muttore tower (mint tower).

With a cursory glance at the directions, Miles walked around the tower, keeping the Amstel River to his right until he came to Rokin Street, which had been part of the original canal system running through Amsterdam until 1936 when it converted into a main street. From there he continued straight until he came to address number eight-hundred-sixteen, a corner shop with a bay window displaying new and old books. For some reason, he looked around cautiously, the obvious result of watching too many spy movies, then entered *Gerritsen de Oude Boekhandel*.

A tiny bell announced his presence as Miles closed the door behind him.

Gerritsen's Old Bookshop was just like every other privately owned shop in the Netherlands. Small, crowded, and stocked from floor to ceiling with merchandise. Five long bookcases occupied the interior, each one spilling over with all kinds of books from every corner of the earth. In addition to the five bookcases crowding the center of the shop, two bookcases, also brimming with a litany of literary knowledge, clung to either wall.

"*Wie is dat?*" A wizened voice from the back of the shop asked in Dutch.

"Mr. Gerritsen?" Miles called out in English, hoping the man spoke it, as he slowly inched his way toward the voice. "Professor Daniels sent me."

"Yes, yes, right." The voice answered in English, calmed by Miles reassurance. "How is that old coot?"

The man owning the voice finally came into view. He was probably in his late sixties and crouched as he walked. He wore light brown corduroy pants and a white fleece to keep him warm on this chilled Amsterdam night. A small patch of white hair covered his otherwise bald, round head. Strangely enough, Maarten Gerritsen was exactly as Miles had pictured him.

"Professor Daniels sends his regards," Miles smiled as the two exchanged handshakes. "When I called him yesterday, and told him what I had found, yours was the first, and *only*, name that came to mind. He told me his only regret was that he could not be here to share in the excitement."

"Humph," Gerritsen scoffed as he led Miles into a backroom, up a flight of stairs, and into a second-story loft.

Like so many second-stories in the Netherlands, Gerritsen's home was a modest loft just above his place of business. A sizable armchair rested beneath one of two windows while a three-seat sofa bed comprised the remaining living space. No television was visible, only more stacks of books- older and, from the looks of them, much rarer than the ones below in the shop- piled onto bookshelves that ran all along the four walls. A small square four burner stove, mid-sized refrigerator, and sink were against the wall opposite the sofa, while an oval table and two chairs lay in between.

It was obvious to Miles that Gerritsen did not do much entertaining, and since his wife had past fifteen years ago, according to Professor Daniels, he did not get out much either. The Old Dutchman just led a quiet discrete life. His nose constantly buried in every book he owned. It was why the professor suggested the Old Dutchman. If anyone could assure the authenticity of what Miles had found and decipher it, it was Maarten Gerritsen.

A teakettle whistled as Gerritsen walked over to the stove, and then proceeded to pour out two cups of piping hot tea.

"Sugar?" he asked.

"Yes. Two please." Miles stood around absently, staring at the endless shelves of books.

"Please, sit." Gerritsen brought the tea to the table and took a seat himself. "Now what is it you have to show me?"

Miles took the seat offered to him then reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small 5 x 8 package wrapped in leather and bound in cord. He placed it on the table and slid it toward Gerritsen.

The Old Dutchman stared at it for a second, picked it up, untied the cord and let the leather unfurl in his hands to reveal a crude, cloth book that had been threaded together to hold its pages in place. On the cover was a strange but familiar symbol to the learned bookworm.

The hand drawn picture of the World Tree was intricate and mesmerizing. Never before had Gerritsen seen such a detailed etching of Yggdrasil, the Norse mythological tree of life that lay at the center of the cosmic universe. It was obvious someone took the time and careful consideration to draw this image freehand. So fine were the lines that they seemed to become one with the cover.

Carefully, Gerritsen opened the handcrafted tome, well aware of the treasure that he held in his trembling hands. Excitement and wonder built up inside him. The first page told him all he needed to know. Written in Old Icelandic was the title of the book in question.

“The Gods, Middle Earth and Beyond. Snorri Son of Sturla,” Gerritsen translated under his breath, but not quietly enough for Miles not to hear him.

“Middle Earth? Like Tolkien’s Middle Earth?” Miles furrowed his brow.

“What?” Gerritsen shook his head. “No, no. Middle Earth as in Midgard the realm of man in Norse mythology,” he then looked at Miles. “Where did you find this?”

“At the excavation site in Þingvellir, Iceland, about 45 kilometers east of Reykjavík. We found lots of things. Stonewalls, hearths, wood preserved in some nearby peat bog. Then, we found that,” Miles pointed to the book in question.

Miles knew he did not have to give a history lesson of Iceland to Gerritsen. The Old Dutchman probably knew that Reykjavík was the oldest, continuous settlement in Iceland dating back to around 870 CE. He was also aware that the excavation site of Þingvellir, translated to the assembly fields, and was the site of the first Althing, the parliamentary institution held in 970 CE on the open fields in front of a gathered assembly of council members. Iceland still holds similar parliamentary proceedings, except now they are inside the hewn stone building of Alþingishúsið in central Reykjavík.

“Do you know what this is?” Gerritsen breathed with excitement.

“I have some ideas, but my knowledge of Norse mythology is limited to a few undergraduate courses at Cornell. My expertise is in Mesopotamia, I was only directing the dig site in Iceland as a favor to Professor Daniels. So, when we found that, he suggested I contact you.” Miles took a sip of the hot tea.

“Norse mythology does not begin to describe the artifact you have here,” Gerritsen carefully turned some of the pages, his eyes widened as he studied the text intently.

“In a nutshell can you tell me what it is we’re looking at?” Miles sat back in his chair.

“Have you ever heard of the *Prose Edda*?” Gerritsen looked questioningly at the younger man sitting across from him.

“Briefly, it sounds familiar, probably from one of those Norse mythology classes.”

Gerritsen sighed as he placed his hands on the tabletop.

Miles had been through years of undergraduate and graduate schooling, he felt a lecture coming on. He was right.

“The *Prose Edda* is the pinnacle of Scandinavian literature. Think of it as Homer’s *The Iliad* or Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, seeped in traditional myths and feats of the gods and humankind. A mixture of prose and ancient verse, the *Prose Edda* delves into the Norse creation myth, the struggle between the gods, giants, dwarves and elves, heroic deeds by legendary warriors and of course the Ragnarok- the end of the world.”

He leaned forward, excitedly. “Now, you must understand that many of these stories were told with great bravado in the oral tradition, so embellishment was part of the lore for these Viking tales of the ninth and tenth centuries. Part of the intrigue was for these myths to be heard with new voices and by fresh ears. I’m sure that if one person were to tell their grandchild these tales, when that grandchild was grown with grandchildren of their own, the tales would differ ever so slightly. But through time, and as generations passed, the tales would grow in grandeur and exploits.

“Interestingly enough, the title, *Prose Edda*, was actually just old 13th century Icelandic for great-grandmother; rather fitting for the tall tales that these elders would often spin. Now keep in mind no one knows for sure what the true title of the work is since the original work disappeared around the 13th century. We only know the term *Edda* because it appears as part of the book’s subtitle from some of the early 14th century copies. Until around that time no one was ever sure of the author of the work either. If it were not for the 14th century Manuscript, *Codex Upsaliensis*, which specifically credits a 10th century Icelandic chieftain with penning it, we might not have ever known who wrote it.

“That brings me to the author,” Gerritsen paused to drink his tea. He stood, stretching his back, clearly ready for the second part of his lecture. Miles found the old man intriguing, but he wished he got to the point a little faster.

“Snorri, son of Sturla, was born around 1178 in the Icelandic Commonwealth. At the age of two, in order to settle an ongoing family feud, a nobleman by the name of Jon Loptsson chose Snorri to be fostered at his court in Oddi. After sixteen years, he left Oddi, married a woman from a prominent Icelandic family, and rose quickly among Icelandic politics. In 1215 and 1222 he was elected the lawspeaker of Althing, at the time the highest position in Old Iceland’s Free State. Unfortunately, with the position of power came the threat of enemies, most notably in

Norwegian royal houses. He even went so far as to marry off his daughters to try to settle feuds. By 1241, however, alliances in Norway crumbled and two of his former sons-in-law attacked his estate in Reykjaholt. They found him hiding in his cellar, and killed him. A tragic end to one of Iceland's most important historical figures."

Gerritsen came back to the table carrying a paperback book he grabbed off one of the many bookshelves, and sat opposite Miles once again. He picked the cloth book up and shook it carefully at him. "Given the location of where you say this was found, and from what I can determine from reading it, I would have to conclude that *this* is the original work of Snorri. His first draft, if you will, of what came to be known as the *Prose Edda*."

"How can you be so sure?" Miles asked.

"Well, first off, unlike *this* book," Gerritsen said, tapping the book he grabbed from the shelf, a much newer copy of *Prose Edda*, "the one you found does not contain a Prologue. One that refers to the story of the Christian God creating the world in seven days, man's defiance of God, Noah, the Flood, even the famous battle of Troy is in that Prologue, albeit with Thor fighting alongside the Greek gods. In this Prologue, scholars have long believed, myself included, was added later to appease the Christians during the middle Ages. In addition to the Prologue, at the end of some volumes of the *Prose Edda*, is what scholars call the Háttatal, or List of Meters, in Old Icelandic. However, it is hardly ever included because of its technical verses in Old Icelandic. Most copies just omit it. This one does not. Finally, you have the *Edda*'s two middle, and most important, sections, the Gylfaginning and the Skáldskaparmál." Gerritsen must have seen the confused look of the face of the younger man, "I'll explain the latter first.

"Skáldskaparmál is an amalgamation of three Old Norse words. Skáld means poet. Skapr has two meanings, creation, or craft, both similar to the other if you think about it. The last word, mál, means language. Therefore, quite simply, if you translate Skáldskaparmál from Old Norse it means the *language of poetry*. Snorri uses this section to legitimize the backgrounds of Old Norse verse, which, interestingly enough, scholars still use today to explain Scandinavian lore.

"Gylfaginning refers to the Swedish king, Gylfi, and the tricking, or *ginning*, of said king. This is undeniably the most important section of the *Prose Edda* because Gylfaginning documents several important beliefs in Scandinavian mythology. The first is the Creation story followed by the wars between the gods, which eventually leads to the end of the universe. More commonly referred to in Norse mythology as Ragnarök."

Miles perked up at the mention of Ragnarök. Scholars of archaeology are familiar with the term and every culture has their version. Hindus call it Kali Yuga, or Age of the Demon Kali. The Muslims call it Yawm ad-Din, the Day of Judgment. Christians call it Armageddon. More recently, alarmists the world over have this obsession with the Maya and the Mesoamerican Long Count Calendar that has been interpreted to mean that the end of this current cycle of time corresponds to the calendrical date of December 21st as being the end of this world; rubbish as far as Miles was concerned.

Many forms of apocalyptic literature existed around the world. This was never more evident than in the online communities where any kook could post something and immediately become a cyber-cult phenomenon by feasting on the fears of others.

Gerritsen had continued talking while Miles was pondering these different and controversial views, "...because both Gylfaginning and Skáldskaparmál were clearly written at different times. The writing style of one, Gylfaginning, is purely dialogue whereas Skáldskaparmál is a mix of dialogue and third person. Nevertheless, there is no doubt of the authorship just because of these minor discrepancies. Snorri wrote all three sections at various times throughout his life- the Prologue remember was added later by Christian thinkers."

Gerritsen then picked up the cloth copy of *Æsir, Miðgarðr en Verde* by Snorri Zoon Van Sturla and examined it; turning each page with careful precision, not wanting to crease or tear a single one. As he skimmed through it he paused about halfway through, creased his brow, reading intently. The Old Dutchman stood up, book in hand, still reading.

"Mr. Gerritsen? Is everything all right?" Miles crooked his head at the old man.

"I am not sure."

"What is it?"

"In all my years of research I have never come across anything like this." Gerritsen pointed to the book in his hand. "In every other copy of *Prose Edda*, never once is it mentioned what happens after the death of the gods, particularly Thor of the Æsir. To my knowledge, after he kills the Midgard Serpent, Jörmungandr, Thor collapses to his death, poisoned by the cunning serpent. His three most revered possessions- his hammer, belt, and iron gloves- were lost to time. In fact, other than a few cursory mentions in the last few chapters, these treasures of Thor have all but disappeared from the written record. But..."

"But what?"

“In this version, a great funeral is held for the mighty Thor. Gods and man, giants and dwarves, all are present, paying their respects to the legendary warrior god. From there his body is laid to rest along the coast of the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea; forever keeping a watchful eye for the second coming of Jörmungandr and Ragnarök, the Day of Judgment. Then,” Gerritsen placed the book on the table, looking up in disbelief, “Snorri gives a date of this second coming of doomsday.”

“Okay.” Miles was expecting the Old Dutchman to say something like twenty years from now, but for some reason he already knew what Gerritsen would say.

Gerritsen frowned, “On eve of the third day of the twelfth month of this millennium.” He then rushed to a stack of books on a shelf beside the window. Quickly he flipped pages. Frantically his finger searched for an answer.

“Wait. That would be this December,” Miles exclaimed.

The Old Dutchman found what he had been looking for then looked up at Miles, “One month from today, actually.”

Miles sighed, shook his head.

Gerritsen nodded disparagingly.

A *ping* sounded as the glass of one of the windows broke and a stain of blood formed on Gerritsen’s white fleece. He looked down at the increasing stain then fell to the floor.

Another ping broke through the same window as a bullet landed only inches from where Miles had been sitting. Had he not dove onto the floor he would be dead as well. Instinctively, he risked reaching a hand onto the table, grabbed the ancient tome, leaving the leather and cord where they lay, shoving the book inside his jacket. Scrambling to his feet, Miles darted for the door, opened it, and ran down the stairs into the dark bookshop. The only light was coming from the glow of two street lamps situated outside the shop, causing ominous shadows to dance around him as he caught his breath.

For a brief second, Miles contemplated running out the back of the shop- if there even *was* one. He then thought whoever was shooting at them may have accomplices waiting there, so he hesitantly opened the front door and dashed outside, into the cold, down the semi-crowded streets.

Thank god for Amsterdam nightlife, Miles thought as he briskly strode down Rokin Street toward Muntplein Square. The tram service was still running this time of night. It was only half

past ten. He could easily take the tram ride down to Dam Square. From there he would get a cab to the airport and utilize his open-ended ticket back home to Rhode Island where, he hoped he would be safe.

When he got to the tram-station, Miles hopped on the next tram, which happened to be going in the direction he wanted. He showed the driver a ticket he had purchased earlier, before he decided to walk to Gerritsen's bookshop. Walking to the back of the tram, Miles plopped down into a seat and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. His heart still raced as the events of the past two hours ran through his mind. He knew coming here would shed some light on his find, but he never could have guessed the outcome, otherwise he would have never involved the Old Dutchman.

Miles felt sorry for the old bookworm. The man's knowledge and enthusiasm was unmatched. Unfortunately, it was his knowledge regarding the ancient tome that killed him. Apparently, he was onto something; why else kill the old man. Whoever killed Gerritsen knew Miles would be there too. Moreover, the second shot that missed meant the killer was willing to eliminate both of them and retrieve the book upon their deaths.

Understandably, Miles feared for his life. The secrets of the ancient volume were now secure with him. That, along with the fact that he actually carried the book in his jacket, made him wary of everyone around him. He was not sure whom to trust, and expected someone to shoot at him around every corner.

The next two hours were a blur. Everyone looked suspicious to him. More than a few times, he jumped at minor noises, or flinched if someone bumped him. It was only while he was waiting at the Icelandic Air terminal that he felt safe. Gerritsen's last words echoed in his mind. Somehow, the date in this ancient tome, written nearly 800 years ago in Iceland, proclaiming the second coming of Ragnarök, corresponded with that of the Mesoamerican Long Count Calendar, created 4500 years ago, nearly 5500 miles away.

How could no one else have ever realized this? Miles thought rubbing his temples as he tried to relax on the plane ride home. Originally, he was going to get some sleep, but not anymore. He wanted desperately to take out the book and read it for himself, but he dared not expose it. Instead, the entire flight, Miles racked his brain trying to think if something in his studies of ancient Mesopotamia that may also relate to this particular date. Nothing came to

mind. When he got home, he would have to do some extensive research about possible correlations.

In the meantime, something about this book- Miles thought as he patted his jacket reassuringly- had been enough for someone to try to kill two people for, one of which was dead. Was it the doomsday date? Maybe it had something to do with the treasures of Thor that Gerritsen mentioned right before he died. Maybe it was something more sinister. Maybe it was all of the above. *That was a lot of maybes*, Miles thought. Whatever the reason Miles knew one thing: he was lucky to be alive and was grateful for some solace in an otherwise hectic few hours.

November 4th, 2012

0300 hours

It was three a.m. when Miles finally walked through the door of his apartment. He placed his keys in a plastic bowl resting on top of a wooden table beside the door, not bothering to turn on any lights- partially because he was tired, but more the fact he did not want anyone who may have been following him to know he was home. He tossed his duffle bag and laptop onto a hall chair, both of which he had secured in a locker at the Amsterdam airport before going to Gerritsen's bookshop and had retrieved before he left for Rhode Island. He slung his jacket across the back of the same chair then went to the fridge, grabbed a beer and downed it in one satisfying gulp. It wasn't until then that Miles saw the shadowy figure sitting in a chair in his living room.

By then it was too late.

The shadow clicked on a light next to where he was sitting. He was an older gentlemen. Even in a sitting position, Miles could tell the man struck an imposing figure when standing. The man's salt and pepper hair was slicked back, but it was the man's uniform that struck Miles as out of the ordinary.

"Good morning, Professor Radcliffe." The shadowman had no doubt in his voice. He knew who's apartment he was in and how Miles looked.

Miles tilted his head, not sure if he was about to be shot. "Yes."

“My name is General Anderson Harris, Commander of the United States Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command. I’m going to need you to come with me.”

As if on cue, the door to Miles’ apartment opened and two Marines in full uniform appeared.

Waiting.

For him.

“Are you going to kill me?” Miles gulped.

“If we wanted you dead, Professor, you would have been dead in Amsterdam.” General Harris stood up and motioned for Miles to follow the two Marines at the door.

“Can I change first?” Miles asked as he started walking toward the door.

“No. But you can bring your duffle bag, laptop, and jacket.” General Harris led him out the door as Miles grabbed the three items. “I trust you still have the book?”

Miles turned back to look at the General but continued to walk, afraid of what the consequence may be. He already avoided dying once tonight, or last night as it were. He was not going to press his luck by making a scene, so he simply said, “Yes,” putting on his jacket, the book still in its pocket, and grabbing the duffle bag.

“Good,” the General responded, reaching for Miles’ laptop before he could grab it. He and the Marines proceeded to escort Miles down the emergency staircase of the five-story apartment building silently.

A sleek, black sedan waited for them outside. Double-parked, but, somehow, Miles knew he they would not be ticketed. One Marine held the backdoor open as Miles got into the backseat, while the second Marine took Miles’ duffle bag, popped the trunk, and tossed them casually on top of two bodies, a single gunshot wound in their forehead. Whether by accident or not, Miles saw what was inside just before the trunk was slammed shut.

“Who were they?” Miles asked as he settled nervously into the backseat, a sudden wave of nausea and dread overwhelming him.

The General sat beside him and said, with no remorse, “The men who tried to kill you in Amsterdam.”

November 4th, 2012

1522 hours

San Andrés, Guatemala

Amanda lifted her UNC baseball cap, brushed a lock of her long blonde hair, from her face, and let out a long deep sigh. Dirt stained her clothes and sweat beaded down her pretty face. On her head, she placed a helmet to protect her from any falling debris. In her hand, she held a flashlight as one of her crewmembers lowered her into the hole that caved-in the floor at top of the staircase of the Temple of the Moon. The powerful MagLite's beam shined brightly, illuminating everything around her as she descended.

It was just like one of the crew members had said, a series of thirteen dots and lines. Just like the ones found at K'iche in the Mayan highlands. According to their creation account, the fourteenth b'ak'tun would begin and correspond to the Gregorian calendrical date of December 21, 2012. Of course, this gave rise to the popular belief that the world would end on that date and everyone was doomed.

However, those pseudoscience junkies always fail to mention what the Maya believe will happen on that date, which is that only the calendar ends, not the world. For the Maya it was a day of celebration, the return of their god, Quetzalcoatl. To make it to the end of a cycle for the Maya was a great accomplishment. Nowhere in the archaeological record of Mesoamerica is it ever mentioned that when the thirteenth cycle ends, so too will the world. Nobody ever mentions that the Long Count continues for another two cycles with an absolute end date of June 28, 2801. By then, if we do not destroy the world with our Greenhouse gases or nuclear wars, the world will most likely be nothing like the one we know. If we anyone is still living on it that is.

Still, in some ways, with all the science fiction mumbo-jumbo that surrounds the Maya, Amanda felt lucky. No one had thought much about this part of Guatemala as a dig site. A thick jungle canopy veiled it from the outside world. It rained constantly on-and-off ten out of twelve months. Nobody in the archaeological community seemed to want it. Therefore, with the help of some locals, Amanda jumped at the opportunity and found herself a sweet spot for ancient Mayan remains. Moreover, this year's excavation has yielded more than any of the previous four combined.

Now, at the age of thirty-two, with excavations at San Andrés scheduled over the next five years, her reputation as a serious archaeologist in Mesoamerica was spreading throughout the academic community. Almost as celebrated as her father.

If it had not been for Amanda's dad, she may have never turned to archaeology as a career. Up until the time she was sixteen, Amanda wanted to be a pediatrician. Then her father had the stroke.

It had come on suddenly. One day he was doing research for an article he was to have published in an archaeology journal about the Spanish conquest of Latin America. His wife and daughter had kissed him goodbye that morning as he left for a day at the public library. Two hours later they were standing beside a hospital bed holding his hands as the doctor told them he suffered an ischemic stroke; he would no longer have the use of the left side of his body, his right arm nor would he be able to speak.

The rest of the conversation with the doctor was a blur. Something about an embolism and thrombus, the blockage of arteries and the brain tissue being particularly vulnerable, all Amanda could think about was that summer she spent with her father trekking from Mexico City to Cuzco.

Hard to believe that was when she was ten. Since then, she and her father rarely spoke. Her going through the typical teenage years where boys were more important than family, and he constantly researching and teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Unfortunately, on that cool, crisp March morning, everything had changed. Now, she was determined to make her father proud by continuing his research throughout Mesoamerica. When she finally graduated high school, several prominent archaeology programs across the country accepted her into their program. UCLA. Arizona State. Penn State. Even Ivy League schools were trying to recruit her. She said no to all of them. Instead, her heart was to remain loyal to her dad.

Amanda accepted the scholarship to UNC and in four years, she graduated Magna Cum Laude, a Bachelor's degree in Archaeology in hand. The next eight, she spent at Florida State, where she eventually got her Doctorate in Mesoamerican Culture and Civilization. Two years later, she was heading dig sites in Mexico City and La Venta. Then she traveled to San Andrés, Guatemala because of some local talk of ancient pyramids and secret burials. The next day she called her sponsor and they gave her the funds to start an excavation there- but only for three months. After that, if she had not found anything they would close the site.

That was four years ago. Since then, the site has turned up numerous burials and countless treasures. No more calling up and asking for an extension of funds. No more worrying

where equipment was going to come from or if it was going to work. Anything she needed from her sponsors over the next five years she got. Life was good. She was happy.

If only her dad had been well enough to see her succeed, instead of in a nursing home unable to move or speak. Her thoughts were always with him when she gazed upon a brilliantly undiscovered artifact or watched the sunset across the top of one of the many pyramids. Sometimes she wished he could be there beside her.

Except now. Suspended in midair, inside a temple, documenting carvings etched onto the walls of the hole she hung precariously over was not her father's idea of fun. If he were here, he would have gotten one of the locals or a graduate student to snap the pictures. Amanda chuckled to herself as she snapped away with her digital camera. *There, that should be good enough*, she thought, satisfied after taking ten pictures. Besides, it was getting late and it was hotter than hell's ass down here. She could go for a cold iced tea, preferably a Long Island one.

Amanda tugged twice on the rope- the sign to lift her from the hole- just as the first shot rang out, apparently hitting Miguel because he toppled end over end into the hole, missing Amanda by inches, and ending in a bone-crunching pile twenty feet below her.

The next few minutes were hazy and hectic.

Amanda immediately turned off her flashlight, so as not to attract any unwanted attention, and remained suspended in darkness listening to the chaos above her. Screams, gunshots, and machine-gun fire reverberated all around her. They were rapid, quick, firecracker-like bursts, and constant, not stopping for a single second.

Probably some Guatemalan treasure hunters, which is never good, Amanda thought as she shimmed her way up the taut rope.

When she reached the top, she carefully peered out of the hole at the top of the staircase. Bedlam was all she could see. It was as if she was watching a Roland Emmerich film. Men and women running back and forth, panicked. Hiding behind fallen stone ruins just before the bad guy shoots them from behind. Already she counted ten bodies lying motionless on the ground with pools of blood surrounding them. From where she was perched, she could see that most of them were locals; two were volunteers from the States.

Shouts in some language Amanda did not recognize echoed around the small courtyard with two temples; the one Amanda was in and a smaller one to the east of her, on which she

spotted Carrie and Matthew, two of her graduate students, bellies pressed firmly to the floor on the temple's uppermost level.

"Kuwaleta hapa," A tall African man shouted as six of the tall African's comrades herded the remaining twenty toward the center of the temple complex.

Who the fuck are these people? Amanda wondered, and why were they attacking her site?

"Your friends will not get hurt, Professor Hazelton. All I ask is that you come down here and join us," The tall African spoke in broken English with a Swahili accent. "And be sure to bring those pictures you took as well."

Still lying flat against the tallest temple Amanda shouted, "Why are you doing this?"

A shot rang out followed by a bellowing cry from an elderly woman, Ruthie from Tennessee. She had come down here with her husband Bernard because they had always wanted to join an archaeology dig.

"I do not answer to you, Professor." The tall African voice echoed through the jungle canopy. "I will shoot one person for every minute it takes you to comply. When there is no more to shoot, I will personally come and kill you."

Amanda took a long, deep breath. She looked over at the smaller temple where Carrie and Matthew still cowered, but were getting ready to spring up, to come to her aide. Amanda shook her head as she rose to her feet, hands on her head, camera in her hip pocket.

"Come." The tall African smiled as he waved a hand to her.

Amanda carefully climbed down the steps of the typically steep Mayan pyramid and walked over to where the leader of this small African band stood, only feet from where Ruthie knelt, still in tears, in front of her husband's dead body.

"See, Mutumbo, white women can be taught to obey. Just like the wild Mbwa mwitu." The tall African and the man he called Mutumbo laughed, as did the other Africans.

Five consecutive shots then rang out.

Except these came from the outlying jungle, piercing five of Africans in the back of their heads, leaving only the tall African in charge to watch as his men fell face down in the dirt.

Amanda stood in shock, while blood and chunks of brain matter from five Africans showered her entire body and face. She did not have any time to react to this new and confusing dilemma because the tall African was now pointing a gun at her head.

"Fuck you," he snarled through gritted teeth as he released the safety on his Glock-40.

BANG!

The tall African's head exploded backwards leaving nothing but an unidentifiable mound of sinew and flesh, as he too fell forward onto the dusty ground.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, it was over.

The gunfire from the jungle stopped and all was quiet, save for the occasional howler monkey or scarlet macaw's protest over the commotion being caused by the humans in the environment.

Amanda desperately wanted to stop and think about what had just happened but she knew she needed to get herself and her crew out of here as quick as possible, so, without any hesitation, she hurried everyone to the vehicles on the opposite side of the complex.

Removing her harness as she ran, she looked around at her remaining crew. All nineteen of them looked haggard and beaten, and rightly so. Normally they would all pile into assigned vehicles but not today. Today, it did not matter where anyone sat as long as everyone got out of this jungle without dying. As it so happened Amanda and her five graduate students piled into her jeep, the day's artifacts had already been packed away in the back, albeit haphazardly, while the two remaining volunteers drove the other jeep. The twelve native Guatemalans scurried to their van and drove off before even Amanda or the other jeep.

The drive back was long and arduous, but, more notably, the silence that filled the air was even more uncomfortable. Amanda could not blame them. No one wanted to talk about what had just happened. Maybe once everyone got back to the hotel showered and had a chance to clear their minds they would gather in her room and discuss it. Until then, Amanda welcomed the silence.

For the next hour, they drove through the rugged jungle on what constituted as a road, bouncing along over potholes, climbing over fallen tree branches and scattered boulders. The terrain was indeed rough, but Amanda had driven this route for the last two years. She knew every topsy-turvy pothole, knew where every boulder and branch was, although, over the years, more branches added to that obstacle course. Amanda drove with confidence and, in no time, found what passed for a main road in this part of Guatemala.

An hour later, they were back at their modest hotel in the middle of the small town of San Andrés. The two volunteers pulled their jeep into a vacant parking space and jumped out. Amanda could see that Ruthie was still crying, understandably so, while her fellow volunteer, a

young man from Spokane named Bill Boyd, consoled her. Amanda wanted to go up to her, apologize, say all the right things, but she knew no matter what she said nothing could bring back Bernard, so, instead, she bowed her head in solemn prayer.

Amanda parked her jeep in a reserved spot, and told her graduate students to go on upstairs. She could handle the unloading the day's find, as much as she wanted to just go upstairs and cry under a hot shower herself.

Two eager hotel employees came running over to help Amanda until they saw what a bloody mess she was. She smiled at them, putting on her best everything's-okay-look but she saw they were not buying it. As much as she did not wanted to, Amanda had three more days left on her grant, which meant another three days of wondering if those Africans had friends waiting for them in the jungle somewhere.

Regretfully, she walked up to the hotel desk to pay for rooms for another three days, knowing that she would probably be the only one staying.

"Professor Amanda Hazelton?" A baritone voice questioned from behind her.

"Yes?" Amanda's heart sank, her heart beat faster as she turned around to see a tall man, standing right behind her. She almost felt relieved to see that the man was wearing the uniform of United States Marine Corp officer, as were the two Marines standing behind him.

"My name is General Anderson Harris, Commander of the United States Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command. I'm going to need you to come with me."

"O-kay," Amanda dragged out the word, furrowing her brow questioningly. "Do I at least get to change?" Annoyed at the man's insistence, but hoping for a much-needed yes. No such luck.

"Your things have already been loaded into the car. You can change once we are airborne," General Harris put his hand on Amanda's shoulder, half-guiding, half-pushing her toward the car.

"Airborne? But what about my bill?"

"It's been taken care of," General Harris helped her into the sedan, not caring about the blood that would get on the upholstery, and then sat beside her.

"Look, after all I've been through today..." Amanda began to protest.

"We know all about your run in with the *Le Mercenaire Afrique Brigade de Commando*," General Harris said calmly.

“Oh, is that who fucking tried to kill my entire crew!” Amanda’s blood was boiling. “Because of them I have to explain to the NSRA, not to mention the families of those poor volunteers...”

“It has already been taken care of, Professor,” letting out a fatherly sigh.

“Who the hell are you people?” Amanda shook her head, half-curious half-disgusted.

“We’re the people keeping you alive, Professor Hazelton.”

“Wait,” Amanda tilted her head, “you killed those men at my site?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re referring to, Professor.” General Harris answered stoically, unemotionally. Then, “I trust you still have your digital camera.”

November 4th, 2012

2230 hours

MARSOC Headquarters

Camp Lejeune, North Carolina

Professor Amanda Hazelton still wore her UNC baseball cap as she sat in a plain square room with plain white walls. Nothing else was in the room save for six empty plastic chairs with metal legs, the kind that one might see in a high school cafeteria, and a television, muted, stuck on some military news channel. Clearly, this was a staging area, a room to test the patience of its occupant. Since she had been sitting here for almost two hours, quietly and peacefully, she had no doubt she was passing this unannounced test of perseverance. A knock at the door confirmed her suspicion and relieved her hidden anxiety.

“Come in,” Amanda said instinctively, knowing that the person on the other side knocked as a courtesy, regardless of her response.

A tall, burly man in a Marine uniform opened the door.

“Please follow me, Professor Hazelton” He did not wait for an answer; he just turned on his heel and started walking down the hall.

Amanda had to half-jog to catch up with him as they strode down an empty corridor made up of white and gray linoleum floor tiles and white brick walls. Not even a window or office lined the empty hall.

“You guys should really talk to an interior decorator. Even some potted plants could make this place seem livable.” When she realized the man would not bite at her attempt at humor, Amanda simply asked, “I don’t suppose you could tell me where I’m off to now?”

The marine did not bother to face her, he merely kept walking as he answered, “Afraid not, Professor Hazelton.”

They approached the end of the hall, a virtual dead-end. The Marine then placed his palm on one of the white bricks and the white wall slid apart to reveal an ordinary sterling silver elevator. Amanda creased her brow, *Okay, now this is getting interesting*, she thought as the Marine stepped to one side allowing her to enter alone. The solitary, silver panel inside the elevator had no numbers, just one button clear and unmarked. Since the building she was in was only one story, Amanda was curious as to where this elevator led. Down, obviously, but to where she was apprehensive to find out.

Strange, she thought as the Marine leaned into the elevator, pushed the button, and walked away as the doors were closing.

Amanda descended this mysterious elevator to nowhere rapidly and smoothly. Five seconds later the doors opened onto another long corridor, similar to the one above, except at the end of this one she could see a large set of double doors. With no other option, Amanda stepped out of the elevator and watched as the doors closed behind her.

The corridor around her was long and painted a bland, dull white. She walked the length of it and when she reached the set of double doors noticed a palm-reader identification pad mounted beside them. With no one else around, she decided her only course of action was to place her hand on the flat paneled pad. A *ding* confirmed she had thought correctly because from out of the wall, just above the panel, came a secondary security system. A chin-rest and retinal scanner, similar to the kind anyone can find at an optometrist’s, now hovered at face level. Shrugging she placed her chin in the small, white scoop attached to a long metal rod and rested her forehead on the upper bar. A green light on the panel beeped.

“Hazelton, Amanda C.” A computer’s voice chimed as the double doors slid into the wall, like some sci-fi television show’s spaceship.

The first thing Amanda noticed when the doors opened was the large insignia embossed on the smooth, polished marble floor. To some it might seem strange. It looked like the letter O

but, instead of closing to form a complete circle, it stopped just short of the bottom and jutted outwards into two horizontal lines.

Amanda recognized it immediately as the Greek letter Omega: Ω

Below the symbol was a phrase, written in Latin, forming a crescent shape with its words: *Permaneo Versus Tutaminis*.

The Last Line of Defense, she quickly translated.

“Welcome to the Omega Sector, Professor Hazelton,” General Anderson Harris stood off to one side of the electronic doors. “Follow me, please.” He started walking not waiting for her to acknowledge him.

Curiosity more than anything urged her to follow General Harris deeper into the underground facility. What the Hell, she figured. There was no escape now.

Amanda was amazed as he led her through the large hallway, which was a stark contrast to the floor she had just come from. On either side, behind sealed glass doors and full-length glass walls, were dozens of men and women sitting behind computer terminals, wearing headsets, diligently concentrating on their jobs. Inside both glass enclosures, the entire wall opposite them was composed of an enormous HD flat screen digital map of the world. Lights of several colors flashed every so often, pinpointing locations around the world.

“What is this place?” She asked.

General Harris smiled, “This is home to MARSOC’s newest facility, The Omega Sector.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” she felt like a tourist visiting New York for the first time, gawking at all its skyscrapers.

“That’s the way we like it.”

One year two months and fourteen days following the tragic events of 9-11, the government of the United States created a new Cabinet post to help ease the minds of a nation on edge. That Cabinet post was the Department of Homeland Security, DHS. As part of its duty, the DHS incorporated an advisory system to monitor and maintain the threat level regarding the nation. Within this new Cabinet was an additional security prevention system operating covertly using the DHS as its front. The public has no knowledge of their existence, but those in the government referred to them as The Sectors.

Assigned to each one of these Sectors are the finest combination of brains and brawn available to the government. In all, there are a total of four Sectors- Alpha, Beta, Epsilon, and

Omega- each corresponding to the government's four military branches. Recruitment is meticulous and complex. Only those who have graduated with high honors from OCS, Officer Candidate School, in Quantico, can become members of the Sectors. Following acceptance, the candidates must undergo additional, intense physical and psychological evaluations before admission into the secretive government agency. Those with strong resolve of both mind and body have the opportunity to accept the coveted positions within a particular Sector. There are no exceptions. If the individual fails *any* portion of the assessment exam, the position goes to someone else, and, instead, that person obtains the rank of commissioned officer from whichever military branch he or she graduated.

The divisions of the Sectors are broken down as follows:

In matters of security protecting borders of the Western Hemisphere, which include the United States, Canada, Mexico, South America, and England, the responsibility falls upon the United States Army Special Operations Command and their several subordinate units, the Green Berets, Army Rangers, and such. Highly trained and prepared, the USASOC specialize in protecting our borders from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego and everything in between. They are our first line of defense, hence the designation Alpha Sector.

When dealing with threats to the coastlines of North America, its international territories, or underwater facilities, the protection of the United States Naval Special Warfare Command's Beta Sector gets the call. With experts in a variety of fields including Biological, Chemical, Geological and Physical Oceanography, Maritime Engineering, Hydrology and Environmental Science, Beta Sector operatives are a special breed and have more than once prevented a disaster from striking.

If there is a planetary threat, whether it is near-Earth objects or unforeseen extra-terrestrial ones, Epsilon Sector, from their base at Washington D.C. where the Air Force and NASA have joint Special Forces, gets the call to quell the problem. One of the most coveted Sector positions, Epsilon is where many of the world's top aeronautical engineers, mathematicians, robotics engineers, physicists and astronomers disappear to when they say they have a government job.

As for international threats, the United States government calls upon its most covert Sector, Omega- the last line of defense. Men and women recruited to work for Omega are some of the brightest minds in their fields. Where Alpha, Beta, and Epsilon require specific training in

one particular area, Omega operatives rely on a broader range of intelligence. Among them are the Social Science Interdisciplinary fields of anthropology, archaeology, cultural studies, communications, demographics and linguistics, as well as those knowledgeable in chemical engineering, biotechnology, munitions specialists, computer science and a host of other fields too numerous to name.

The minds working for Omega possess an entirely different mindset from any of those in the other three Sectors combined. Countless men and women, graduating from some of the world's most prestigious universities- Princeton, Yale, Cambridge, Oxford, UCLA, Brown, Stanford, MIT- can be found both sitting at their desks behind state-of-the-art computers and in the field working for the Omega Sector in some capacity.

Unlike Alpha, Beta, and Epsilon, Omega has bureaus around the globe filled with international agents ready to serve any country, using every resource available to them, whenever called upon. They were truly The Last Line of Defense, and on this particular mission, they would be the world's only hope.

All this being confidential, the only thing the General told Amanda as he stopped in front of a large wooden door marked *Conference Room A* was, "All you need to know right now is that if the situation were not dire, you would never have heard of us.

He then motioned for her to enter the room, "In here please."

Unlike the room Amanda had been sitting in for the last two hours, this room was large, with polished wood paneling. An oval, oak table was set in the center of the room with eight leatherback swivel chairs around it. At the head of the table was a laptop, and in front of the four chairs were four files, sealed with red tape and marked:

Ω Sector: Operation Doomsday Recovery

Amanda took a seat in one of the chairs in the middle of the conference table. General Harris sat the head of the table, in front of the laptop. A young man in his late twenties, hair neatly combed, wearing a white, button-down, collared shirt and suede jacket with khaki pants had already been sitting on the opposite side of the table as Amanda sat down. A confused look was apparent across his ruggedly, handsome, stubbly face. He acknowledged her with his green

eyes and flashed a Cheshire grin that Amanda found quite attractive. She smiled back and quickly tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Professor Hazelton, this is Professor Miles Radcliffe from Brown University.” General Harris motioned toward the young man then, “Professor Radcliffe, Professor Amanda Hazelton from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.”

Both acknowledged the other, like two teenagers being setup on a blind date.

“We’re still waiting on Major Stone.” The general finished saying just as the conference room door swung open and in walked a tall, broad-shouldered Marine with short black hair, a strong, perfectly squared jaw-line, and steel-gray eyes. Hazelton estimated he could not be older than thirty-five or six.

“Ah, right on cue.” Harris smiled as he sat down.

Major Stone sat at the other end of the table and slid his finger into the file, breaking the seal. General Harris did the same, so the two professors followed suit.

“You’re probably wondering why you three are here,” Harris began. “I’ll make it brief since time is a factor. Two days ago our surveillance satellites intercepted a cellular uplink from somewhere in the desert just west of Cairo. Inside the folder you are holding is a transcript of that phone call. It has been translated from Arabic into English, and we have labeled the persons as Caller and Recipient.”

Amanda found the page and read it over, as did Stone and Radcliffe.

“You mentioned ancient writings and texts warning us about this threat,” Radcliffe acknowledged Stone, “Is that what this is for?” He held up the book he found in Iceland.

“To be honest, most of the writings we know about are nothing more than ancient soothsayers going on about an impending apocalypse. Some speak of other rulers and other relics, but we have no idea which rulers or what relics they are referring. That book you found is interesting. As of now, we are unsure of its significance, but I have never been a fan of too many coincidences. And, unfortunately, we’re missing a vital piece of information,” Stone looked at General Harris, then continued, “For the time being, all we need from you, Professor Radcliffe, is your knowledge of the Persian Empire. Odin and his treasures can wait,” Major Stone smiled; satisfied he answered the question, while whetting the appetite of the two academics.

“Wait, what about Alexander the Great?” Hazelton spoke. “Neither he nor I know much about him. A few undergrad courses in Ancient Greece will not be enough. *Will it?*”

“Not nearly enough. Fortunately,” the General stood up, “we already have someone in mind to fill that position. Now, if you will, we are on a tight schedule,” He walked toward the door, motioning everyone to follow him.

Somehow, Hazelton thought, this is going to get worse before it gets better.

Amanda and Miles held onto their files as they traveled between the main buildings of the United States Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command headquarters, to a tarmac where an enormous plane waited for them. On the nose of the plane, the image of a painted vulture clawing a basketball in its talons struck an imposing figure. Underneath that was scripted the name of the giant bird that awaited them: *The Meadowlark*.

Once inside the giant military aircraft Amanda could not help but awe at its grandeur. Not unlike some ordinary airplanes, there were rows of seats, but in this case, they spread out evenly among the cabin- five by each window and ten in the center, twenty seats in all. While she and Miles were led to their seats in the center of the plane beside Major Stone, Amanda was startled that the seats were rich, Italian leather, reclining, lounge chair-type seats all facing forward, upright for the time being and occupied by the military personnel that would be joining them.

As they strapped themselves in, Stone must have noticed the look on both Miles and her face because, as they sat down, he explained to them the history behind the aircraft.

“The aircraft we’re on right now is considered the pinnacle of military transport. The Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules is a modern marvel of aircraft tactical transport and engineering. Introduced by Lockheed Martin back in 1999 at a cost of \$62 million US dollars and, as you can see, worth every penny. If you look out the windows, you can see the four 4 x Allison T56-A-15LFE turboprop engines, and the Dowty R391 composite scimitar propellers. In the cockpit, which I can show you once we are airborne, the two pilots are equipped with the latest in digital avionics and head-up displays or HUDs. Normally a minimal crew of four is required to operate this bird but since we are on a tight schedule, it has been knocked down to a skeleton crew of two, the pilot Captain Charles ‘Eagle Eye’ Murdock and the General who would not ordinarily join us on missions but, like I said, tight schedule.”

Amanda did not understand a word the Major said. All that mumbo-jumbo techno-babble sounded like it came right out of a Tom Clancy novel. Nevertheless, she let him drone on about the plane. He seemed to like it, and Amanda enjoyed listening to him.

Stone went on to explain that each branch of military was equipped with two of them, but he failed to go into detail that only the branches of Sector had access to these specialized aircraft any time of day or night. Some things, Stone knew, needed to remain confidential for the sake of national security, and their own. He did mention, however, that the alteration of this particular Super Hercules met specific accommodations for the needs of the Omega Sector.

Currently, the one they were on now, *The Meadowlark*, consisted of three decks. The uppermost deck, consisted of a state-of-the-art cockpit; the lounge-like seating area, which they were currently sitting in and came equipped with personal flip-top tables and internet access; a conference room with Wi-Fi access and a fifty-two inch HD flat screen wall-mounted monitor; and twenty staterooms, each equipped with personal lavatories and a queen size bed.

The second deck was where all the technical magic happened. Without ever leaving the cockpit, Eagle Eye and General Harris could operate the Marine Corps' ISR/ Weapons Kit where everything from two 30mm cannons, Hellfire missiles and precision-guided (PG) bombs, utilized with a push of a button. Also on the second deck was an entire satellite surveillance system capable of pinpointing anyone's location to within a millimeter.

The third deck was the cargo bay. Equipped with the latest in enhanced cargo handling systems, the cargo bay of the Super Hercules consisted of a central computer system. These computers remotely operated loadmasters, under floor winches, a floor system capable of flipping and converting to accommodate pallet rollers or flat floor cargo- all of which Eagle Eye controlled from the cockpit. Along with the high-tech electronic systems in the cargo bay, a fully stocked arsenal of some of the militaries latest and most sophisticated weapons were at their disposal.

Concluding *The Meadowlark's* history Stone simplified, "Basically, what it comes down to is, we're flying in an overpriced, fully operational, highly secure, mobile, military command central." He smiled at the two professors whose mouths were agape at what they had seen and heard. Reassuring them, Stone added, "Don't worry. It took me a few weeks to get used to this thing too."

While Stone explained all this, the plane lifted off so smoothly that Amanda did not realize they were airborne until he was finished with his military aircraft history lesson. By then, most of the military personnel had unbuckled their seatbelts. Some chairs swiveled around so they were facing each other. Others took this opportunity to close their eyes and get some sleep.

Amanda took this opportunity to look over the files of the mission and the profiles of the nine men and one woman sitting around her.

Across from them, beside the window to her left, Amanda recognized two men. They had taken out a deck of cards and were playing poker, using Skittles as currency.

One of the men had shocking red hair, cropped close to his head. Amanda flipped a few pages until she found his picture. Second Lieutenant Daniel Lackey, call sign D-Boy, an obvious reference to his name and young, freckled-faced features. Born in Louisville, Kentucky to a schoolteacher mother and encyclopedia editor, Daniel Lackey graduated fifth in his class and went on to Tulane University where he earned a dual degree in Astrophysics and Chemical Engineering. *Smart guy*, Amanda thought *Good genes too*.

The man playing against D-Boy was- she flipped to the next page- Second Lieutenant Francis Nixon, call sign Tricky. *Cute play on words*, Amanda thought. Last name Nixon, nickname Tricky, an obvious reference to our 37th President who ran into a few political scandals and gained the moniker Tricky Dickey because of his ability to wiggle out of most of them unscathed. His background was an interesting one. At the age of three, Tricky's parents died in a car accident and his maternal grandmother brought him up. He graduated high school with honors and attended UCLA film school before changing his major to Physics. Under the section, marked opinion, were two words: cunningly brilliant.

Sitting behind the two card sharks with an I-Pod in his ears, bobbing his head to something up-tempo was- Amanda found his file page- Second Lieutenant Nicholas Barrington, with an appropriate call sign of Nicky Rich. Six-foot two. Well built. Clean-cut. He looked every bit as wealthy as his moniker indicated. His short, perfectly, cropped blonde hair matched his crisp well-tailored uniform. He was by far the youngest of the group, born in 1983. In 2001, at the age of 18, he graduated Magma Cum Laude from prestigious MIT with a 4.0 GPA and 2 degrees, one in mathematics, the other in linguistics. *Note to self: call Barrington at tax time*, Amanda smiled

On the opposite side of the plane, beside the window were two men- one young, the other older. They too were facing each other, only they seemed to be discussing something- writing and making notations on some paper. The younger man nodded his head understanding what the older man was explaining to him. She instantly got a student/teacher vibe from them as she flipped the portfolios around, finding the right files.

The younger one was Second Lieutenant Jonathan Dix, but everyone called him Johnny Boy. Born, raised, and schooled in the Lone Star State, he attended Texas Tech University and majored in Middle Eastern Studies. Once he graduated, he joined the Marine Corps and deployed to Iraq where five long years went by very slowly. His file also noted that he negotiated two hostage crises successfully utilizing his knowledge of the people in that region. While there, he honed his skills as a sniper, from the man smiling back at him like a proud father, Captain Richard Emilio, but his friends call him Remo.

Remo was one of the senior members of Omega Sector. His degree in advanced physics and engineering from Oregon State University obviously made him a valuable asset. Several accommodations accompanied his file from two Presidents and three foreign officials. Handwritten, at the very end of his file, was Best damn sniper in the entire United States Marine Corps. Maybe entire United States military. Perfect score. Ten years and counting.

In front of Remo and Johnny Boy, sleeping with a mask over his eyes was, Captain Thomas Kingston, call sign Marley. His file did not indicate why it was his nickname, but from reading his background info- born in the Bronx to a Jamaican mother and Cuban father- and from the looks of him- dark complexion, dreadlocks visible under a kerchief- it was obvious he had an affliction towards anything and everything Bob Marley. His education background was also very interesting. Graduated from Oxford University with a dual-degree in Quantitative Methods in Social Science and Anthropology. From there, he joined the United States Marine Corps and quickly rose through the ranks until Omega recruited him. A notation in his file caught Amanda's eye: Tough as nails. Takes no crap!

She continued to thumb through the file until she found the person sitting behind Remo and Johnny Boy, both of whom were arguing over who had better starting pitching, the Diamondbacks or the Dodgers. The man behind them was First Lieutenant Dean Vandal, aka Rebel. In his hand, he held the latest scientific journal, intently immersed in an article. *No wonder*, Amanda smiled, noting his background, a Doctorate from Princeton on Genetic Development and Microbiology. One look at him, though, and you would think he would be more comfortable on a beach somewhere. His California surfer boy look mixed with his movie-star appeal would have been a blockbuster summertime hit.

Amanda rose slightly in her seat, looking around the plane for the last two members of the team, other than the pilot, General, and Major Stone whom she purposely left for last. She finally found them, three rows behind them, a man, and the only other woman.

The woman was asleep, stretched out across three seats, her head inches from the man's lap. Being the only other woman, Amanda easily identified her as First Lieutenant Vivian Dario, call sign Lovey. Born in Manhattan, New York. She joined the Marine Corps straight out of high school then from there she attended NYU where she graduated in the top 2% of her class with a 3.95 GPA and a degree in Archaeological Anthropology, with a concentration on Southeast Asian cultures and civilizations. Hired by the government to oversee several overseas excavations, she eventually pursued a military career, graduating from OCS and recruited instantly by the Omega Sector. Underneath her impressive credentials was a handwritten entry: Call sign does not reflect her attitude in the field.

Amanda smiled at that. The man sitting right beside Dario was big, burly and was a senior officer for Omega. At 6'5", 250lbs, Captain Maximillian Strove, call sign Money, was not someone she wanted to mess with. With a degree from the University of Colorado Technical School in Mechanical Engineering and another from NYU in Chemical Engineering, Money was one of the brightest and most respected officers in the Marine Corps, or so it was noted in his file.

One other thing Amanda noticed about Captain Strove: his hand, every so often brushed the cheek of First Lieutenant Dario. She did not seem to mind though, because each time he did it she smiled. *So much for no fraternizing*, Amanda shrugged and smiled at the obvious couple.

The last file that Amanda looked at was Major Donovan Stone. He had gotten up a while ago to speak with Remo and Johnny Boy. Right now, they were laughing and joking. Miles was asleep. Quietly and, for some odd reason, nervously, Amanda read over the file of the man handpicked by the General to lead this mission.

Name: Stone, Donovan J.

Born: 1971 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Father: Stone, William J., General, USMC. Deceased/KIA

Mother: Stone, Cecilia K.

Education: Yale University, Ph.D. Archaeology of the Ancient World. Columbia, Ph.D. Classical Studies

Active Service: USMC, 1994-present

Highest Rank: Major

Omega Sector: 2003-present

Field Missions: Confidential/Eyes Only

Amanda closed the file and sighed. The mysterious and hauntingly attractive, Major Donovan Stone suddenly became a lot more intriguing she thought as she closed her eyes.

As she drifted off to a peaceful sleep, Amanda realized some of the most highly trained and intelligent field operatives the United States government employed surrounded her. She should feel safe, and yet, something in her head told her that some of these men and one woman, possibly all, herself included, might not survive. A shiver ran down her spine. True, these people were hardcore and, from the looks of it, the brawn matched the brains. As sleep finally overtook her, her last thought was she only hoped they possessed enough of both to keep them all alive.

November 5th, 2012

1200 hours

Cairo, Egypt

He walked through the winding, crowded streets of the Khan al-Khalili. Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir tried to look like he was not in a hurry, as if he was not nervous. Like he was just another Cairo citizen going about his or her daily routine. To the casual observer he did, but to the man following the Professor, he was more conspicuous than a dog in a room full of chickens.

The man had been following the Professor for the last thirty-minutes, from the time he took the phone call from his friend a few hours ago, through the busy Cairo streets, and into this packed market place. Abdul-Qadir was not a hard man to keep track of. They triangulated the signal off his cellular to within five meters of where the Professor had been when he received the call. For the past two days, they had been waiting for the phone call, expecting it. Modern technology is a wondrous thing but, like everything, it had its problems. For Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir it was currently a big problem. One that could cost him his life.

1205 hours

As the sun rose, high over the famed Egyptian market, it was typically crowded and hot, but to the diligent shoppers, that did not matter. Everything anyone could possibly want was at Khan al-Khalili. Perfumes and spices from across the Middle East. Silk and beaded belly-dancing outfits hand woven by skilled artisans. Tightly weaved, colorful Persian rugs and carpets, draped over taut ropes hanging in front of every stall. Tourists came for the ambiance. The opportunity to barter over anything and everything was something the human psyche could not resist. Money was tight worldwide, so any chance to get a bargain was a welcome reprieve for any consumer. Mingling among the tourists, the average Egyptian could purchase products that, normally, tourists would not be interested in- like finely ground spices or the freshest in poultry and lamb.

Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir, however, was not your average Egyptian.

For the past 27 years, Professor Abdul-Qadir has been teaching archaeology at the University of Cairo, the last ten of which he served as the Dean of the Archaeology Department. While most archaeologists like the idea of jumping into a pit and digging away at 1000-year-old fossils, the Professor was not one of those people. He would much rather sit at his desk analyzing ancient texts from long-dead languages, specifically, how they pertained to the culture surrounding them.

It was because of his expertise in this field that he was now wandering the streets of one of the world's largest markets. He had received a call on his cellular phone, from a very dear friend, insisting that he come down to his shop to translate something he had bought from someone a couple of days ago. Normally, the Professor would reprimand his friend for dealing with the likes of men who buy and sell illegal artifacts found at dig-sites, but then he told him what it was- an untouched alabaster pommel.

It was shaped in the traditional Egyptian lotus-style, but with one unique feature- an engraving on the pommel- that piqued the Professor's interest. Moreover, if it were as important as his friend claimed it to be, then this would be the archaeological find of the decade, if not the century.

The Professor had entered the bazaar thirty-minutes ago through the Al-Azhar Street side. He turned a few corners, ducked into several alleys, stopped at a dozen or so shops. The Professor was apprehensive; wanting to be sure no one followed him. Once he was certain he was not, he headed straight for the antiquity shop his friend Ashraf Amir owned just off Heidan Al-Musily. The street was a dead end, not many tourists ventured this far and this deep into the market, which is exactly why his friend chose its seedy location. Only the fervent collector or curious scholar would hazard a jaunt through the back alleys of Khan al-Khalili.

When the Professor arrived at Amir's shop he cautiously put his hand on the door, looked both ways, and pushed the door open, ringing a tiny bell in the process which hung over the top of the doorframe.

1237 hours

The tall African man watched, partially hidden behind a brilliantly hand-woven Persian rug, as Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir entered Ashraf Amir's shop, *Rare and Exotic Antiquities*.

From there, he had his instructions. Through a tiny earpiece, a voice told him to remain where he was until Amir gave him the signal. Only then would they enter his shop. What happened next was up to Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir. If all went according to plan, they would abduct the Professor and he would lead them to the object. His friend Amir would not be so lucky; but that did not matter, he was of little consequence. The man meant nothing. It was Professor Abdul-Qadir they needed, his friend Amir was expendable- already a dead man.

He had already received word from his superior that his brother had failed in Guatemala to secure the woman professor. Another failure would not only cost him his life but his family's life as well. He would not fail; must not fail.

1237 hours

"Ah! My old friend, it is so good of you to come on such short notice!" Ashraf extended his arms, giving the Professor a big hug.

"Yes, it has been too long, my friend. " The Professor returned the hug and got right down to business, "Now, where is this piece you spoke of? "

Ashraf gave his friend a wide smile and ducked behind one of the counters.

The shop was smaller than the Professor remembered. A large window overlooked the street outside. Two glass counters on either side of the shop, with a variety of rare artifacts, most of which obtained illegally no doubt. Delicate papyri with colorful hieroglyphs painstakingly, hand-painted on them hung on the walls behind them. From the looks of it, *they* were authentic. On the counter closest to the Professor was an old-fashioned cash register. The kind you would see in a 1950's ice cream shop, complete with a loud *Ding* whenever his friend made a sale. Other than that, nothing seemed out-of-the-ordinary.

Then, Ashraf Amir popped back up from behind the counter holding a small, plain wooden box. He placed it on the counter. Carefully took off its lid. Unfolded the linens covering the object, and offered the Professor a look.

Abdul-Qadir's eyes widened. He looked up at his friend, smiled, then looked back down at the object. Having put on a pair of latex-free gloves, which he always carried on him, the Professor gently reached into the wooden box and lifted out the object.

It was exquisite.

The pommel was fashioned in the style of an open lotus- handcrafted in smooth alabaster, most likely from the very early Ptolemaic Dynasty, around 332 BCE. However, it was the inscription on the underside of the alabaster pommel, in the middle of the lotus, that caught the Professor's breath.

Åalevxandroß

When Abdul-Qadir read the inscription, he had no doubt, to whom it once belonged. At first, he thought it might have been a forgery by grave robbers looking to cash in on the gullibility of another Egyptian antiquities shop owner. However, the intricacies and artisanship of the pommel showed that someone had taken great cares to carve it; convincing him, it was indeed genuine

“Well, my friend? “ Ashraf eagerly awaited behind the counter

“Where did you say you got this again, Ashraf?” Professor Abdul-Qadir held up the object.

“Some Berber from the Siwa came into my shop not two days ago,” His friend lied nervously, looking out the window.

Abdul-Qadir thought nothing of it, “Well, from what I can see, what you have here is the real thing,” turning the object over in his hands.

Ashraf Amir stared at his friend in disbelief, walked over to the shop’s window, pulled down the shade, and walked back behind the counter. *I am a rich man*, he thought.

1246 hours

The tall African entered Rare and Exotic Antiquities seconds after the signal from the Egyptian proprietor. Behind him were two men armed with Colt M4 Carbine automatic rifles. He casually walked up behind Professor Abdul-Qadir, who was still studying the relic with intensity, oblivious to their presence, let alone the fact that anyone had even entered the shop. The two men, armed with their rifles, stood at their leader’s side as Ashraf Amir looked nervously between the Professor, the tall African, and both soldiers.

“Excellent! That is what we had thought. We just needed someone with an expert eye to confirm our findings.”

Abdul-Qadir turned his head, startled by the deep voice with the Swahili accent coming from behind him.

The tall African leaned into his shoulder, pressing a button on his COMSAT radio attached to his uniform. “Troublemaker to Faithful Star, we have confirmation on the relic, proceeding as planned to link-site and will await further instructions.” He then looked at the Professor, “Do not worry Professor, *you*, we need,” then at Ashraf Amir, “Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for your friend.”

The man called Troublemaker took his Glock-40 from his hip holster, pointing it at Amir’s head.

“Wait!” The shopkeeper pleaded. “I was promised I would be paid well. Made a rich man!”

“Yes,” Troublemaker inclined his head slightly, “well, you were lied to.”

Ashraf Amir did not have a chance to respond as the bullet entered his brain, exiting just as quickly, leaving chunks of blood and gray matter on the wall behind him.

Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir was stunned. He watched in horror as his friend of nearly twenty years fell to the ground, limp as a rag doll, a pool of blood soaking the stone floor. He

looked back at the man, who identified himself as Troublemaker, the barrel of the handgun still smoking. Words could not come quickly enough to his lips. The Professor just stood there, dumbfounded.

“Forgive me,” Troublemaker said, “We have not been properly introduced.” He placed his gun back in its holster, not taking his eyes off Professor Abdul-Qadir. “I am Captain Matata Bol, Commander of Afrique de Commandos d’Elite, and you Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir of Cairo University, will be joining us for the next several days. How long you stay alive, is entirely up to you,” Captain Bol smiled, showing off his glistening white teeth.

“Me?” Abdul-Qadir asked nervously. “What use could I possibly be to you?”

“It is not *you* that my employer is interested in, Professor. It is the knowledge you possess inside that head of yours,” the Captain smiled as he pointed to the Professor’s head.

Captain Bol motioned toward the two men who had remained silently beside their commander. They simultaneously grabbed the Professor under his arms, dragging him to the door as Captain Bol grabbed the pommel, leaving the wooden box behind.

“Wait! Where are you taking me? Where are we going?” Abdul-Qadir protested.

“We are going to where this,” Captain Bol held up the pommel before he placed it in a satchel slung across his body, “was found.”

“Siwa?” The Professor slowly started putting the pieces together.

“Yes, Professor, the Siwa Oasis. Where *this* was found,” The Captain patted the object, now securely in his possession, “lying at the base of the Gebel al Mawta. And,” he smiled, “if that was found there then the tomb of Alexander of Macedon will not be far from it.”

The Professor shook his head, “The tomb of Alexander the Great, hidden deep within the Siwa is a rumor spread among greedy Bedouins looking for a quick pound. They are just myths spread by village elders. Passed down through generations.” He sighed, raising his brow, “Even if it truly did belong to Alexander the Great, we would not be able to find the tomb without the *Nostradamus Manuscript*.”

“Yes, I know,” Captain Bol smiled as he opened the door of the tiny antiquities shop, his soldiers and the Professor in tow.

A black Humvee was waiting just outside the shop in the narrow street. How it fit down the narrow streets of Khan el-Khalili, Abdul-Qadir did not know. At this point, he did not care.

The Captain walked around to the passenger side while the two men forced the Professor into the back.

Bol turned around in his seat so he faced the Professor, “I do hope you can translate Latin as well as you can translate Ancient Greek,” Captain Bol tossed him a cylindrical tube. Abdul-Qadir popped its top open and tilted it so that its contents, a rolled parchment, fragile with age, slid into his grasp.

Without another word, the driver skillfully backed-up the Hummer, turned down a few streets and exited onto Al-Azhar Street, heading north.

Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir held the ancient Manuscript in his hands. His heart filled with dread, *For the sake of humanity I hope we find nothing.*

November 5th, 2012

1305 hours

Thessaloniki, Greece

“One of the most important innovations in the history of ancient warfare was the hoplite phalanx of Archaic and Classical Greece. The uniformity of these tightly formed groups of infantrymen was renowned for strict discipline during combat. The way it worked was,” Professor Stavros Kostakis came from behind his lectern and assumed a combative stance, “as the entire regiment locked shields together, they formed an impregnable wall of metal. The first two rows of men then leaned their spears forward, across the row in front of them. This wall of shields and spears was what the enemy would see when they came charging toward them; ready for battle.”

Professor Kostakis walked back behind his lectern, placing both hands on either side of it. He was of average height, fitter than most fifty-six year olds were. As he took off his wire-frame glasses, wiping them with a piece of cloth from his pocket, he smiled confidently. He had been teaching here, at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, for thirty years, and was *the* foremost expert in the subject of Ancient Greece. Aside from teaching, Kostakis was also Dean of the University’s School of History and Archaeology Department.

Placing his glasses back on his head, Kostakis continued his lecture on ancient warfare and combat in the classical world. “Quite possibly, the most valuable contribution Phillip II of

Macedon made toward the phalanx- furthering the military supremacy of ancient Greek warfare- was the introduction of the sarissa, a 3 to 7 meter long spear-shaft, replacing the shorter Athenian dory shaft.”

Kostakis clicked a button on his laptop and the overhead image switched from a map of ancient Greece to a long wooden shaft with an iron tip. “Although the phalanx was not his creation, it was Phillip II who refined this corps of infantry soldiers. So perfect, that it took less than one-thousand Macedonian phalanx troops to defeat three-thousand men from Athens and Thrace to overtake a once powerful Greece.”

Professor Kostakis keyed a button on his laptop again and a slide appeared on the overhead projector.

“What you are looking at is a team of one hundred men standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Each man is holding a ten-foot long spear and a four-foot wide bronze shield, which, as you can see, is almost the same size as the men themselves. The men in front would then balance their spears in one hand, angling them forward, their shields securely held in the other hand and strapped to their arm, its bottom edge dusting the ground.” Using a laser pointer, Kostakis indicated additional highlights of the image. “The men surrounding the perimeter of the tight phalanx would use their shields to block any approaching attack while the men in the middle held their shields above their heads, thwarting aerial assaults from enemy archery corps.

“As you can see, every man had his place; each phalanx is flanked on either side by another man. And, with their shields acting as a barrier, it was nearly impossible to penetrate.”

Professor Kostakis looked at his watch.

“Next time, we will discuss some key battles that solidified Macedon as a power in the Hellenistic world and how Phillip’s son rose to become one of the world’s most ingenious tacticians ever to lead a conquering army.”

That was his class’s cue to pack-up their books and get to their next class. Professor Kostakis would be heading back to his office in the Old Philosophy Building A where he was meeting a friend of his he had not seen in nearly two years.

Normally, he would not be teaching fall semester classes. Usually, he was off on a dig somewhere- Crete, Alexandria, Macedonia, Turkey. This year he decided to take it easy. The digs will always be there. He smiled contently as he walked the semi-crowded campus back to

his office, thinking it was finally nice to take a break from all the traveling he ordinarily did over the course of a year.

Old Philosophy Building A was located, not surprisingly, right next to the New Philosophy Building. A sprawling maze of hallways and corridors, it was home to the offices of the archaeology and history departments. Kostakis reached his corner office, told his secretary not to be disturbed, and entered his office closing the door behind him.

“You really should tell your secretary to have visitors wait outside.” A tall man dressed in denim blue jeans and navy t-shirt with a Greek letter on its breast pocket indicating the man’s importance, although few knew even that. The man stood beside the window, admiring the crisp, late autumn day as he held back the curtain, gazing across the campus, then let it fall away.

“That was quite an impressive lecture, Stavros,” The man turned to face the Professor.

Kostakis walked to his desk, placing his laptop on it. He then walked around to the man, smiled and hugged him like a long lost brother.

“You think so, Harris?” Professor Kostakis slapped the man on the shoulder, “I did not even see you come in, or leave for that matter.”

“That’s what they pay me for,” Harris walked around the desk, sitting in one of the two chairs in front of it. Kostakis sat in the high back, leather chair behind it. “My Greek is a little rusty, but I think I got the gist of what you were talking about.”

“You must let me teach you one day. The Greek you learn in America will not get you a cup of tea here,” Kostakis smiled as he opened a humidor, offering General Harris a Cuban cigar. He clipped the ends of both then proceeded to light them with a sterling silver lighter. “I can teach you how to talk to the Gods.” A puff of rich smoke escaped from his clenched teeth.

“Funny you should mention the Gods,” Harris said, placing his cigar into an ashtray, “Something has turned up on the antiquities market, something from the Siwa Oasis.”

To the average person, Professor Stavros Kostakis looked like the normal scholar. Tweed jacket. A simple collared shirt. Pressed khaki pants. Brown loafers. Worn soft-leather briefcase. Laptop. Just another professor in another university. However, in actuality, Omega Sector recruited him two years ago to join their international community. He, along with several prominent scholars and field agents, were available at a moment’s notice whenever something of urgency came up.

Like now.

“Something is always turning up. Egypt still has over eighty-percent of her treasures and mysteries buried beneath the sands,” Kostakis smiled.

“This item is Greek,” Harris baited the hook.

Kostakis looked up at Harris curiously, “Greek, you say?”

“Found at the base of Gebel al Mawta. *With* an inscription,” Harris caught his friend’s attention with that last sentence, then handed him a piece of paper, “Here, read this.”

Kostakis took the folded piece of paper from Harris’ hand. It was the transcript Stone and the two American professors had read back at Omega headquarters.

Slowly Kostakis’ eyes widened. A smile grew wide on his face, matching the look of incredulity. He stood up, and walked to his bookcase where hundreds of books were meticulously alphabetized, ranging from ancient Greece to ancient Egypt to everything in between. He brought with him two heavy-looking books. One hardback and leather bound. The other a paperback, of similar shape and size.

“You mind sharing, Stavros?” Harris sat up in his chair looking at the titles. *Ancient Greek Myth and Cosmology* and *Theological Apocalyptic Conspiracies*.

“Well,” Kostakis sat back in his chair, leaned forward and opened the ancient Greek book first to a page he seemed to have memorized, “for centuries scholars have long wondered how much of the myths surrounding Alexander the Great were true and how much were purely the imagination of loyal supporters. Spread throughout time to broaden and popularize the fascination with the young Macedonian ruler. Think of it as ancient political propaganda.”

“Okay,” Harris puffed on his cigar, sitting back in his chair, ready for a lengthy but informative lecture from his friend. Something he had come to expect, anything different would be suspect. It was why Omega recruited the respected Greek professor. He knew everything about anything.

“Let’s start with what we know for sure. Alexander the Great ruled the known world from 336 BCE to 323 BCE. Think about that. Thirteen years to conquer all of Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and parts of the Indian subcontinent. Then, mysteriously, just before his thirty-third birthday he died at the palace of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. To this day, no one is sure what attributed to his death. Speculations then, and now, run rampant. Everything from malaria or typhoid fever to natural causes, even poison. In fact, a few years back, somehow,

without ever examining a body, which was never found,” Kostakis raised his hand stopping Harris from asking a question, as the General was about to do.

Harris raised his hands, understanding. It was the Professor’s not-while-I’m-on-a-roll gesture.

“As I was saying, with no body to examine, in 1998 an article, appearing in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, declared his death to be the result of typhoid fever and several complications from it. How they came to that conclusion, I am not sure. What I do know is that for nearly two thousand years, the mystery surrounding the *burial* of Alexander the Great has baffled scholars. Some texts claim his generals buried him where he died, in Babylon. Other reports claim someone, whether it was one person or a conspiracy of men, stole his body and brought it back to Alexandria where Ptolemy I, a Macedonian general under Alexander, displayed him in a golden anthropoid sarcophagus. Then, in Late Antiquity, Ptolemy IX, melted the gold sarcophagus to ration for lack of funds, replacing it with a glass one. This of course, enraged the citizens of Alexandria, who were horrified at the treatment of their adopted son, whom they revered as a god. Needless to say, after that incident Ptolemy IX was assassinated, and Alexander the Great’s body was never seen again.”

“So where is he then?” Harris asked.

“Some believe he was brought back to the place where he was proclaimed, by the Oracle of Amun, a god. The Siwa Oasis. Evidence of this burial, however, has never been found.” Kostakis finished with a smile.

General Harris understood, “Until now you mean? You think he’s buried at Siwa Oasis.” It was more of a declaration than a question.

“Not just Alexander, but his Khaos Blade as well,” Kostakis stood from his chair and looked out the window, which so happened to face south- towards Egypt. “It is there this journey begins.”

“I was under the impression that all that stuff about Alexander and his *magical sword of invincibility* was just myth.” General Harris stood up, stubbed out his cigar butt, pocketing the rest for later.

“Within every myth lies a certain amount of truth, however, it is when that myth becomes a legend that it grows to epic proportions. In fact, the history surrounding the Khaos Blade is

even more fantastical.” Kostakis walked back around his desk, “When Alexander visited the Oracle Temple at Amun...”

General Harris raised a hand, interrupting Kostakis, “Hold that thought. We are on a tight schedule and have a plane to catch. You can brief the team along the way.”

“Pardon?” Kostakis looked confused; he was hovering above his chair, about to sit down.

“I’m going to need you there, Stavros. You’re the only one whose background is extensive enough to assist us on this journey, as you called it.” Harris walked to the office door and opened it.

“But I’m no field agent,” The Greek archaeologist smiled nervously, standing back up, resting his hands on the back of his chair.

“You are now, my friend.”

Two

The Khaos Blade

November 5th, 2012

2000 hours

Libyan Desert

Between the Qattara Depression and Egyptian Sand Sea

The Meadowlark had finally taken off from a tiny island in the Aegean Sea around ninety-minutes ago. By the time they left Thessaloniki with Professor Kostakis, General Anderson Harris had briefed his Omega Team and the three scientists about the situation they were about to

get into. They purposely waited until the cover of dark to carry out this mission. At this time of night, there would be no guards stationed at the site, the Egyptian government considered nothing of value was there. It would be as simple as getting in and getting out.

No tourists.

No witnesses.

No problem.

Inside the belly of the C-130 Hercules, the men and women selected for this mission sat patiently, ready to roll. Fourteen Marines in casual attire- blue jeans, boots, and a navy blue t-shirt with the emblem of their sector, Ω, etched over the left breast pocket. Over their shirt, they wore a heavy-duty, leather bomber jacket, insulated with extra padding and lined with lightweight Kevlar armor. Imprinted on the back of each jacket another symbol showed these men and women were serious. The design consisted of three concentric circles- a thin gold one, a thick red one and a large golden disc in the center- etched boldly on the top portion of red ringed-circle. In golden arching letters, the name of their unit: Special Operations Command. The bottom portion of that same circle was the branch of military they were part of, the United States Marine Corps Forces. In the center of the emblem, on the gold disc, was a black spade with a partially ridged haft. Overlaying the spade was a silver eagle and globe, under which was an anchor, in the shape of a sea urchin, wrapped with a silver noose. A banner hovered over the emblem and read *Semper Fidelis*, the motto of every Marine. In Latin, the phrase meant *Always Faithful*, and was a motto their unit followed religiously.

One unique aspect of these specially designed jackets, by the Omega Sector Weapons Ops Division, was that since they could not carry the standard load bearing vests used to carry extra ammunition, including M84 flashbangs and ALS sting grenades, their jackets were equipped with concealed compartments within its lining for just this reason. Beside the variety of weapons, M4A carbine assault rifles, M1911 semi-automatic handguns, a few carried the newest in advanced weapons technology, the Advanced Taser M-45 (ATMs), which took advantage of a new technology called Electro-Nervous Disruption (END), capable of emitting 15,000 volts into the central nervous system, paralyzing its victims for up to thirty-minutes.

In the center of the cargo hold was their transport, an M998 High Mobility Multi-purpose Wheeled Vehicle, a Humvee, strapped and braced inside a steel cage, its wheels locked, but ready for action.

Sitting opposite the Marines were the three civilians accompanying them on this mission. Unlike standard Marine missions, these special Ops missions welcomed outside help. It was something the Marines had grown to understand, having been on several previous Omega missions. Dressed in khakis, button-down shirts and hiking boots, all three scholars carried with them a weapon of their own, personalized MacBook Air laptops- the only item General Anderson Harris insisted they bring with them.

The Marines and the civilians *did* have two things in common. One was the protection of the lightweight Kevlar bomber jackets, a convenience that General Harris had insisted for everyone. The other was a GPS locator, implanted into the shoulder of each one so satellite surveillance teams could keep track of everyone in case they are lost or separated.

“Professor Kostakis,” General Harris interrupted the silence above the droning calmness of the engines, speaking into his Stinger 700 throat microphone for everyone to hear through their wireless IFB earpieces, “can you tell everyone what we were discussing before we left?”

“Well, the way I see it,” Kostakis began, “from what you have told me, the pommel of the sword that may, or may not, have belonged to Alexander the Great was found somewhere near Gebel al Mawta, and we are going to seek out this relic before others can get their hands on it.”

“Yes, that part we know,” Harris smiled from his seat across from the Professor. As usual, his friend was being very exact, “What about the history surrounding Alexander the Great, can you explain that? Specifically, the significance of this particular relic, for those of us that may not be familiar with it.”

“Of course,” Kostakis took a deep breath and began, “Well, most of the written accounts regarding Alexander the Great come from five primary sources: Diodorus Siculus, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Arrian of Nicomedia, Plutarch, and a Latin historian Justin. Now, out of those five, only Diodorus Siculus lived before the time of Christ, and even then, he lived nearly two hundred years *after* Alexander the Great had died. But his source for recounting Alexander’s life relied heavily on a Greek Historian, Timagenes, who lived in Rome at the time of Marc Antony and Cleopatra. So, chronologically, two-hundred and sixty-eight years passed between any historical accounts, regarding Alexander the Great’s life and his campaigns, and the earliest written record of his deeds. Keeping that in mind, archaeological records verified the validity of these works.

“There are some facts about Alexander that we know for sure. He was born in Pella in 356 BCE, then the capital of Macedonia, to King Phillip II and Olympias Epirus, although disputes surrounding even that has divided some scholars. On the night Alexander was conceived, Plutarch writes about how Olympias had a dream that her womb was been struck by a thunderbolt, claiming she was impregnated by Zeus. Therein lays the beginnings of the legend that Alexander was the son of the King of the gods, *before* he was even born. A legend that, Alexander took quite literally some time later. Early on, a relative of his mother’s, Leonidas of Epirus, had trained Alexander both mentally and physically. At the age of ten, something happened to Alexander that would change the course of history.

“A horse trader from Thessaly brought a wild horse to King Phillip’s court. The beast was feral, untamable by anyone. Phillip was going to have it taken away until Alexander boastfully claimed he could pacify the horse. He calmly walked up to the beast spoke a few words then, astoundingly, proceeded to mount the horse without any resistance. Elated by his son’s ability to conquer the beast, King Phillip stated to his son that he ‘must find a kingdom big enough for your ambitions. Macedonia is too small for you.’ It was a statement Alexander took quite literally once he became king.

“After many years of training with Leonidas, King Phillip decided it was time for Alexander’s education in the arts to begin, so he designated Aristotle to be his tutor. Phillip wanted his son well rounded and who better to give him a higher education than one of Greece’s most respected philosophers. So, in 343 BCE he began teaching the young prince about, biology, literature, philosophy, religion, logic and, of course, the arts. After a few years of tutorial from Aristotle, at the age of sixteen, Phillip named Alexander regent of Macedonia while he rode off to war with Byzantium. Between the years of 343 BCE and 336 BCE, Phillip waged war several times, some successful some not at all. Then, suddenly, but not unexpectedly, in 336 BCE while attending a wedding banquet in Aegae for his daughter, the captain of his guards assassinated King Phillip II, leaving the kingdom of Macedonia without a king.

“Now, keep in mind,” Professor Kostakis wagged his finger at no one in particular and smiled, “ascension to the throne of Macedonia was not as simple as that of the English monarchy let’s say. Heirs are not necessarily next in line. Rivals to the throne came out of the woodwork. Chaos ensued throughout the kingdom until nearly every rival was murdered, leaving only one to claim the throne.”

“Alexander was named king of Macedon in 336 BCE by its noblemen and army at the age of twenty. Once he claimed the throne, Alexander began eliminating his rivals, several of which included relatives and friends. Because of this political distraction, riots broke out in important Greek city-states of Thebes, Athens and Thessaly. Even tribes from Thrace, in northern Macedon, revolted when they heard of Phillip’s death. But, Alexander did not back down from this crisis. Instead, he marched his army of 3,000 men through Thessaly, forcing their army to join or die at the hands of his men; they joined. He then marched into Athens with his enormous army, forcing Athens to send a peace envoy to talk terms of surrender. Alexander accepted both the envoy and the offer of peace.

“By 334 BCE, Alexander the Great ruled all of Greece and the entire arm of the Balkan peninsula. Never satisfied, he left generals from his army to govern those lands, and set out to conquer the entire ancient world. Had he known wars with the mighty Persian army would last five long hard, years Alexander may have been content with what he had already accomplished.”

“Hmm, not bloody likely.” Radcliffe scoffed under his breath.

“Yes, well, nevertheless, the next five years were spent on countless battles with the Persians,” Kostakis added.

“Some things never change,” Major Stone obviously referred to the United States constant battles with troops and insurgents from the modern day Mesopotamian country of Iraq.

“Sad, but true,” Kostakis sighed then continued. “Now, keep in mind, these battles ranged from Asia Minor to Syria, Egypt to Babylon, and finally Persia. Everywhere Alexander waged war he came out the victor, for the most part. Several battles between Alexander’s formidable Greek army and the armies of the Persian commander, Ariobarzanes, ensued over the next five years. The pinnacle of these was the Battle of the Persian Gate at Susa where Alexander looted its treasure before moving on to Persepolis, razing it to the ground; some say as revenge for the Persian’s burning of the Acropolis in Athens during the Second Persian War, although no historical evidence has ever been found to support this conflict.

“Whatever the case may be, Alexander, in a period of seven years managed to do what no other world leader has done since: conquer the known world. Keep in mind that Rome was in its infancy at this time. The Celts still populated most of England, along with a few minor tribes. France was still Gaul and Alexander’s men ruled Egypt, conquered by the Greeks several years earlier.

“With no place in the east left to conquer, Alexander and his army continued east, setting their sights on the Indus Valley and its riches. Over the next few years, Alexander’s army stormed through the Indian subcontinent conquering every clan he and his men fought, until he reached the Hyphasis River where the only force strong enough to do so finally stopped him. His own army mutinied, refusing to march further. Tired and homesick, Alexander reluctantly turned around and began his long trek back to Macedonia.

“Throughout their journey from Syria to India, Alexander commissioned some of his most trusted officers to govern provinces in his name, literally. All along the entire Indian subcontinent and Asia Minor, cities called Alexandria sprouted up. Then the strangest thing happened on the journey home. One day shy of his thirty-third birthday, Alexander the Great succumbed to an illness and died. To this day, no one is sure how he died. The accusations ranged from malaria, made worse by an infection in his leg, the result of a wound he received in India, to poisoning by Aristotle himself; whichever the case, one fact remained, Alexander of Macedon was dead.

“But, the story does not end there. For nearly two thousand years, the mystery surrounding the burial of Alexander the Great has intrigued scholars. Ancient texts have him buried anywhere between Babylon and Egypt. The only factual account we have is that sometime after his death, they brought Alexander’s body back to Alexandria. The ruler at that time was Ptolemy I, who eventually gave rise to the Ptolemaic dynasty culminating with Cleopatra committing suicide, if you were to believe *those* stories. For years following the return of Alexander’s body, the Ptolemies displayed him in a golden anthropoid sarcophagus. Sometime between 116 BCE and 81 BCE Ptolemy IX melted the golden sarcophagus where Alexander’s body lay, replacing it with a glass one. For the next few hundred years, numerous dignitaries visited his tomb. Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Augustus, until Emperor Septimius Severus closed it to the public. A few years after that, details regarding the whereabouts of Alexander’s tomb become unclear until it eventually, mysteriously, disappears from the historical record forever. That was almost eighteen hundred years ago.”

“Looks like we’ve got some work to do,” Remo shook his head, looking at his fellow Omega operatives, his gaze stopping on their unflappable leader, Major Donovan Stone.

General Anderson Harris put this man in charge of this mission. Handpicked by Harris himself. A consummate professional, by the book. If there were rules to follow, Stone followed them. He was the perfect soldier.

While members of his Omega team had interesting, creative nicknames, Stone did not. He did not need one. Everyone knew who he was. He was a legend among MARSOC Marines and his reputation in at Omega Sector as someone you did not want to cross was growing exponentially. Only those who working closely with him ever knew the man, and, even then, some mysteries remained hidden among internal paperwork marked *Eyes Only*. Those who did not know him were not important enough to know. If you were not a member of his team, and you knew Major Donovan Stone, you would not know him for long; you would be dead.

“That is an understatement if ever I heard one, Captain,” Kostakis nodded.

“So, why are we going to this oasis if no one really knows where Alexander the Great’s body is buried?” Remo followed up.

“That is precisely what we are supposed to believe,” Professor Kostakis took off his glasses. “You see, I am a firm believer that the body on display at Alexandria all those years was not that of Alexander the Great, but a decoy. A body, planted there by Alexander’s generals, to keep the true burial site hidden from history. “

He opened his laptop.

“First of all, upon his death, Alexander, being the egotistical ruler that he was, would not have wanted to be buried outside the land he was worshipped as a god in. any scholar who disagrees, or disregards, this important information should have their degree revoked. Therefore, Babylon is out. “

He typed a few words on his keyboard.

“Secondly, to be buried then put on display for all to see was something Alexander, most likely, would not have requested upon his death. After all, he was the son of Zeus, he considered himself a god on earth. A shrine with fantastic images of him and his victories, murals and sculptures praising his every conquest, is what a great ruler of the ancient world, such as Alexander, would want more than a public display. Sending a decoy in his place, with his true burial kept secret by only his most trusted companions, is more likely what happened. Besides, as far as I know, there are no written accounts of anyone actually *seeing* Alexander’s body inside that coffin.”

Then, Professor Kostakis smiled.

“Ah-ha! Here it is,” he spun the laptop around so that everyone could see what was on the monitor. “Therefore, it is my belief that his body was brought back to the one place where his divine proclamation was first bestowed upon him.” He pointed to a map of Egypt’s Western Desert. More specifically, the Siwa Oasis.

“Okay, now that we have a location any idea where? Because from the looks of it, Doc, that there is a big piece of somewhere,” Johnny Boy asked in his deep southern drawl.

“I have been thinking about that,” Professor Kostakis turned his laptop back around toward him. “The pommel head was found at the base of Gebel al Mawta, give or take a few yards. But, I am not convinced that Alexander’s tomb and his Khaos Blade will be there, within the mountain that is.”

“Whoa! Whoa, Professor! Khaos Blade? What is this some sort of *Dungeons and Dragons* type shit?” Nicky Rich a looked bewildered.

“You play D and D, Nicky Rich?” D-boy poked fun at the younger Marine.

General Harris broke up the history lesson by interrupting, “All right team, we’re approaching the DZ. Everybody inside the Humvee and ready for the drop and rock.”

“DZ?” Miles Radcliffe asked, unsure of what that even meant.

“Drop Zone,” Amanda Hazelton answered him, and then turned to Major Stone who was staring at her with a curious smile on his face.

“What? “ Amanda asked. “I’ve done my share of jumping out of planes. I’m not some fragile bookworm who sits behind her desk all day, you know?” Flashing a confident smile.

“I know. I read your profile, Professor,” Stone smiled back at her.

“Amanda,” she offered. “You can call me, Amanda.”

“Let’s dispense with the pleasantries and get ready to drop,” General Harris ordered.

With that command, every Marine scrambled in the most orderly fashion Hazelton, Radcliffe, or Kostakis had ever seen, while General Harris headed for the cockpit.

Captain Thomas *Marley* Kingston, First Lieutenant Dean *Rebel* Vandal, and First Lieutenant Vivian *Lovey* Dario joined Stone and Remo beside the troop’s rucksacks With expert hands, they secured all the extra ammo, including two M203 grenade launchers.

While Stone’s group secured the munitions for the mission, D-Boy, Nicky Rich, Johnny Boy, and Second Lieutenant Francis *Tricky* Nixon assisted their senior officer, First Lieutenant

Maximillian *Money* Strove. The five Marines took extra special care in unlatching the steel bars holding the Humvee steadily in the cargo hold of aircraft making sure the wheels were securely locked, and performing a systems wide diagnostic of the inside and outside of the vehicle.

Once they double, and triple-checked everything they started loading the Humvee. First, the weapons went in, fastened in the hatchback, followed by the personnel, with the Marines taking seats by the windows. As usual, Money was in the driver's seat while Lovey occupied the passenger seat. The three Professors were secure, between the eight Marines in the back of the Humvee.

"Okay, approaching DZ. Exactly thirty minutes out from location. Opening access ramp," The voice came from *The Meadowlark's* pilot, *Eagle Eye*. Nobody ever saw the man or even knew his real name, except for the General, who worked with him on numerous missions and, for as long as MARSOC had been making these drops. And as always, *Eagle Eye* was the first man Harris called.

The rear end of the huge Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules opened wide; like a shark about to devour its prey. Slowly the Humvee lowered with it, until it was at a 45° angle. The edge of the ramp kissed the sand, ever so slightly, as the Hercules glided silently across the desert. Once everything was ready, the voice of General Harris came through their IFBs.

"Ready to drop, on my count."

Three...

Everyone checked his or her safety belts.

Two...

Professors Radcliffe, Hazelton, and Kostakis held on to their seats for dear life.

One...

"Good Luck, people!" General Harris shouted just as Eagle Eye pulled the release lever, unlocking the wheels, allowing the Humvee to roll smoothly down the access ramp. Its front wheels hit the soft sand first then back wheels, causing the Humvee to bounce and jolt slightly.

Money grabbed the steering wheel and, effortlessly, took control of the huge Humvee. Once he had complete command of the vehicle, he gunned it. The wheels spun slightly in the sand, but it got enough traction to travel in the direction of the expanse of lush vegetation, dotting the expansive, unforgiving sand encompassing them.

The Siwa Oasis.

“Okay, Professor, since we have a bit of time to kill before we reach the oasis, how about you tell us about this Khaos Blade?” Stone asked, wondering what kind of trouble was waiting for him and his fellow Marines, hidden deep within the desert sands.

2110 hours

Siwa Oasis

For the next twenty minutes, Professor Kostakis explained to everyone the significance of the legendary Khaos Blade of Alexander the Great.

“The Khaos Blade was said to have been forged by the god Khaos himself. Its main attributes are the Classical Greek elements: fire, earth, air, and water. Although these elements may not seem all too threatening, consider what they represent on a geological scale. Now, consider the fact that once put together, they are capable of worldly destruction. Volcanic eruptions. Earthquakes. Hurricanes. Tsunamis.

“These basic elements make up the entire existence of every substance known to man. We are merely part of a symbiotic circle that is continuous from the second we are born to the second we die. In fact, in Aristotle’s *Physics* he gave an excellent example of how this works.”

Professor Kostakis took out a piece of notepaper and pen from his laptop briefcase. He proceeded to draw the Greek symbols for each element with arrows linking one to the next. An upside down triangle symbolizing Water was on the left. Across from it was an upright triangle representing Fire. In the middle, from top to bottom, he drew Air- a triangle with a horizontal line across its top point and Earth- an upside down triangle with a horizontal line slicing across its bottom tip- leaving an empty space in the middle.

Kostakis then explained his diagram, “The theory behind this basic elemental diagram is: Air is initially wet then hot; Fire is initially hot then dry; Earth is initially dry then cold; and Water is cold then wet. This cycle is never-ending, but, while Aristotle stopped at the four elements, there is a fifth element that Archimedes regarded to be the most heavenly. He surmised that, since the four basic elements were mortal, capable of corruption, then the heavens and stars must be some otherworldly element. He called this element Aether, or Quintessence. Derived from the Greek word for fifth, this element is more commonly referred to in the physics community as Dark Energy, and is believed to transcend time and space.

“When you combine this element with the basic four, your diagram changes,” Professor Kostakis took his pen and paper again, drawing a second diagram, and labeling it accordingly. He began by shading in one dark square in the center of a hollow diamond outline. Starting at the top of the diamond point, and writing clockwise, Kostakis wrote Fire, Earth, Water and Air on each point. Along the sloping boundaries of the diamond, in between each element, he wrote dry (between Fire and Earth), cold (between Earth and Water), wet (between Water and Air), and hot (between Air and Fire).

“The two squares you see are a combination of the four basic elements and their properties, while in the center is the fifth element; an empty void, nothingness. What the Greeks considered being an unchangeable heavenly, immortal substance, incapable of corruption and therefore perfect.

“It is from this dark void of immortal nothingness that the existence of Khaos first appeared. The Roman poet, Ovid, best described this primordial deity, summarizing it in *Metamorphoses*. In it, he chronicles the creation and history of the world, explaining Khaos as ‘rather a crude and indigested mass, a lifeless lump, unfashioned and unframed, of jarring seeds and justly Chaos named’. Essentially, Khaos was the nothingness from which all existence first appeared.”

“What does this all have to do with Alexander’s pommel, Professor?” Lovey asked, genuinely curious.

“Well,” Professor Radcliffe chimed in, “if Professor Kostakis is saying what I believe he is saying, then, we’re in some serious trouble.”

“I am, and yes, we are,” Kostakis agreed with Radcliffe. “You see, the underside of the pommel is inscribed with Alexander’s name, written in Greek letters. As legend, or myth, whichever you prefer to believe, The Khaos Blade, forged from the nothingness of existence with Dark Energy, once belonged to Alexander the Great. Rumors have long circulated that he obtained it upon his initial visit to the Oracle Temple of Amun at Siwa. After the divine proclamation, the one declaring him the son of Zeus, Alexander was nearly impossible to defeat in battle and many thought it was because of the Khaos Blade, which he mysteriously possessed after his oracle visit. As the legend goes, whoever wields the Khaos Blade shall lead an unstoppable army across deserts, mountains, and oceans, until there is no more world to conquer.”

“Where exactly does this legend come from anyway?” Remo posed.

“*The Nostradamus Manuscript* speaks of four rulers and the ten relics belonging to them. Upon obtaining the relics, the next step is to bring them to the Altar of Judgment, assessing the fate of humanity.”

“Wait, *the* Nostradamus?” Hazelton questioned, “Didn’t he live in the 1500’s?”

“What Altar of Judgment are you talking about? And who are these other three rulers?” Radcliffe asked curiously.

“Firstly, I am not sure where this altar is. Secondly, I do not know who the other three rulers are. In fact, up until a few days ago, from what I gather, no one was sure these relics even existed,” Kostakis answered. “However, there has been speculation among the Theological community of a long-since, defunct secret sect, whose only purpose it was to protect the secrets of not just the Nostradamus Manuscript, but countless other ancient texts and treasures. Unfortunately, that has never been proven, nor has the manuscript ever been found.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re not telling us everything, Professor?” Stone asked, shaking his head in frustration.

“I’ll make a deal with you, Major Stone. If we get out of Siwa alive,” Kostakis smiled back at Stone, “I’ll tell you everything I know about the manuscript, but, more importantly, I will tell you where to find it.”

November 5th, 2012

2145 hours

Aghurmi, Egypt

Oracle Temple of Amun

Major Donovan Stone and his team of Omega operatives, heavy with three civilians, arrived at the ruins of Aghurmi under the cover of darkness. If they were going to pull this off, there had to be no witnesses, no local trouble. As expected, at this time of night the ruins surrounding this section of Aghurmi were a veritable desert ghost town. Nobody was within one hundred kilometers.

Perfect, Stone thought.

“Okay, team, I want clean, tight formations,” Stone spoke into his headset then turned to Captain Richard Emilio.

“Remo, find a spot and set up. Johnny Boy, watch his back. Keep a lookout for any suspicious movements along the tree lines and anywhere else. Anyone who is not us, take them out.” Remo and Johnny Boy grabbed their M14 Designated Marksman Rifles (DMR) from the hatchback and headed off to hole up, hidden among the ruins. Stone then turned to the other eight members of his team and the three Professors.

“The rest of us are getting inside that temple. Lovey, you and Money look after Kostakis. Marley and Rebel you have Radcliffe’s back.”

“Let me guess,” Hazelton tilted her head skeptically, “you’re gonna watch my back, right?”

“Actually, from what I’ve heard, Professor, you could probably watch our backs. Nevertheless, for the sake of me doing my job, yes, I will be watching your back.”

“Excuse me, Major?” Professor Kostakis timidly raised a hand.

“Yes, Professor,” Stone answered.

“I must warn you that we should expect some *unexpected* surprises,” Kostakis said reluctantly.

“Surprises?” Lovey looked at the Professor.

“Yes,” Kostakis waved a hand toward the ruins surrounding them. “You see, like many other sacred ancient sites, the engineers created a system of traps to discourage any robbers or vandals.”

“Are you saying we’re gonna have to watch out for booby traps?” Money was more annoyed than curious.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” Kostakis nodded.

“Great. Any idea what to expect?” Stone asked.

Kostakis shook his head and shrugged.

Stone sighed, “This doesn’t change the fact that we have a relic to find. Let’s move out and hope for the best.”

“Hoo-Rah! I love my job,” D-Boy said under his breath.

2155hours

Temple Complex (North)

The remains of the Oracle Temple of Amun were fragmented at best. Nothing more than a shell of its original structure, the temple rested atop a mound of limestone. At one end, a tower-like structure surrounded the outer walls. Slits for windows and limestone doorways allowed light to enter into the, now hollow, temple. Inconspicuously built among a cluster of date palms and lush vegetation, in ancient times the Oracle Temple of Amun would have been an amazing sight.

The actual oracle was at the north end complex of the temple, inside one of the smaller alcoves. The remains of the temple stood, haphazardly, in a semi-circular layout of ten columns set in the Doric style, holding up the partial remains of lintels, arranged in a ring shape allowing the observer to look up into the stars or down into the depths of the oracle itself.

Quickly and methodically, Stone and his team moved toward the ruined temple. Using hand signals, the three groups took turns taking point until they came to the north doorway leading into the temple complex.

Stone held his Heckler & Koch Mk23 in his right hand, ready for anything. He knew they would have to hurry because, so far, this all seemed too easy. Theirs was not the only government aware of this treasure hunt of sorts- that he was sure of- so he just wanted to get in and get out before anyone else arrived.

Quickly, they entered the complex, heading toward the northern alcove that housed the ruined oracle.

“Okay, now what?” Money asked no one in particular.

Professor Kostakis stepped forward, climbing the five steps leading to the low wall encircling what used to be the oracle, but was now just an empty hole leading into the depths of the limestone plateau. “There has to be something around here that could trigger an opening of some sort. “

They all started looking around using MagLites fastened to their uniform’s shoulder, always keeping their hands free. Everyone started pushing up against wall stones, stepping on the stone floor, trying to twist columns out of place, but nothing was there. No stone was out of place. No raised stone step. No column to twist.

This is all wrong, Stone thought. “Professor, wouldn’t this place have been excavated by archaeologists or at the very least scoured by tomb robbers?” Stone looked around for Kostakis, finding him leaning over the side of the oracle’s center. For a brief second, Stone thought he was going to fall in but he popped up suddenly.

“Major, can you bring one of those lights here, please?” Kostakis asked as he brushed away residue from the limestone wall off his clothes.

Stone walked over to Kostakis, handing him an extra flashlight he kept on him at all times. The Professor took the light and shined it down the hole where the main oracle used to rest.

To his surprise, it was not deep at all. In fact, as Stone leaned over the side he could see the bottom. Twenty feet at the most, but Kostakis was not flashing the light toward the bottom. He was shining it along the curvature of the wall along the oracle’s interior.

“There!” Kostakis exclaimed.

Stone saw it too.

It looked like a stone was protruding slightly from the interior wall. About six feet down, he could make out some sort of inscription on the stone. Stone did not need a PhD in Egyptology to know that it was a symbol used exclusively by Egyptian pharaohs. Called a cartouche, and deriving its name from Napoleon’s soldiers who, upon seeing the symbol likened it to a casing from a rifle’s shell. The oval Egyptian hieroglyph encircled the pharaoh’s name.

“I need to get down there.” Kostakis said hurriedly.

Lovey reached into her rucksack, producing a four-hundred-foot long Dynaspec Sling Rope. She then proceeded to loop it around one of the columns, tying a knot, tugging hard; making sure the rope was anchored.

Kostakis wasted no time. He grabbed onto the rope, tied one end to himself, and swung over the side. Lovey had to rush to hold onto the rope and, with Money’s help, slowly lowered the Professor down into the abyss of the oracle. Once Kostakis came to the protruding stone, he shined his light upon it, and dusted it off. The inscription was easy to read for a man with his background in ancient languages, but even he could not believe what he was seeing.

His eyes widened at the sight of the ancient stone. For years, he had studied Egyptian hieroglyphs but this was the first time he actually felt like he was connecting with the past.

On the stone was the cartouche of Alexander III of Macedon. *The* Alexander the Great! The founder of the Ptolemaic Dynasty of Egypt. Conqueror of civilizations stretching from Greece to India. To see an image from the past in front of him made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Without hesitation, Kostakis carefully placed his hand on the stone and pushed on it. Not surprisingly, the stone slid back into the wall, becoming flush with the others.

Almost immediately, there was a loud grinding noise followed by a blast of hot, dry, acrid air coming from below Kostakis. The sound of the grinding stones made everyone rush toward the edge of the oracle and peer down.

Kostakis looked up at the group and said as-a-matter-of-factly, “It seems we have found the entrance to an underground chamber.”

Not taking any chances, Stone called Money over to him.

Money handed the rope he was still holding to Marley and walked over to Stone.

“You have that new depth gauge?”

“Right here, Boss,” he reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a small circular device. Affectionately nicknamed SLUG, the Sea-Level Gauge measured the depth of how far something, or someone, was from sea level. Reaching depths of up to 500 feet, the SLUG had an easy-to-read digital number display, similar to those used by SCUBA divers.

Money leaned over the side of the oracle, aiming the gauge down the hole, number-side up, and pressed a button on its side. The display’s digital numbers declined into the negatives until it reached negative fifty-feet, seven inches, solid ground.

He showed Stone the display.

“Okay, Professor, I’m going to send two men down on separate lines then, if the coast is clear, you have the green light to follow them. We’ll be right behind you.”

Money and Rebel went down first to secure the location. Once clear, Stone sent Kostakis down as promised, followed by the rest of the team. Lastly, Stone followed, giving one last look around the complex making sure they were still alone. General Harris had pulled him aside just before they left headquarters, warning him there would be other interested agencies, so he should be extra cautious. To his relief they were alone. *For now*, Stone thought.

As if on cue, just as his feet touched the ground, Stone heard a crackling in his ear followed by a familiar voice.

“Major? Remo here. How goes it down there?”

“Making progress; we just entered some underground chamber,” Stone replied.

“Well, get out the party favors and put up the streamers because your guests will be arriving shortly, and it looks like they brought presents. Including, their very own professor.”

“Great!” Stone replied calmly. “How many?”

“Looks like a total of fifty. About five miles out heading for what looks to be the south entrance of the complex, so it looks like you have some time. All of them are armed with Ceska 2000’s and it looks like they’re packing M79 grenades.”

“ETA?”

“Johnny Boy here, Major. I would say twenty minutes.”

Stone glanced at his watch; it was ten twenty.

“Okay. Once they get inside the parameter, take out as many as you can. Then I want the both of you to get the hell out of there, head for the checkpoint. General Harris and Eagle Eye will be there waiting.”

“Roger that. Remo and Johnny Boy out.”

“Okay, people things just got interesting. We got about fifteen minutes to get as far from this entrance as possible, otherwise we are going to have an uncomfortable meet and greet with about fifty armed hostiles.” Stone finally turned around, shining his flashlight around the underground chamber. His mouth dropped open and his eyes widened in disbelief.

2230 hours

“Troublemaker to Faithful One. We are coming up on the location. Looks as though the Americans have arrived ahead of us. Marines by the looks of them. Three civilians, most likely scholars,” Captain Bol spoke into his COMSAT, leading Professor Abdul-Qadir toward the outskirts of the town of Aghurmi and the ruins of Oracle Temple of Amun.

It was almost ten-thirty.

“Set up guards around the oasis. Then move in after them. When they obtain the relic, eliminate them,” Faithful One responded.

“Yes, sir,” Captain Bol clicked off his radio then gave a few commands to his men in Swahili, shoving Professor Abdul-Qadir ahead of him as they slowly moved into the town proper, toward the south entrance of the temple complex.

2245 hours

South Tower

“Come on you bastards. Just a little more,” Remo whispered as the mercenary snuck along the outskirts of the temple complex through the night-vision scope on his M14.

“You ready over there kiddo?” Remo asked Johnny Boy who was on the other side of the 50-foot tall tower, looking down over the entire temple complex and its surrounding area.

“All go, sir,” Johnny Boy responded quietly, without taking his eye off his M14 scope.

“Remo, kid,” Remo sighed. *“Out in the field, you can call me Remo. It’s okay, I promise you won’t get court-marshaled.”*

“Okay, sir. No problem.” Johnny Boy smirked, knowing how much Remo hated being reminded he was getting old.

Remo shook his head, hiding a smile of his own. He took aim, fired. His silencer concealing even the slightest noise.

The mercenary hiding behind a date palm, just on the outskirts of the complex, never saw the bullet coming. It quickly entered his skull from the left side with a clean *Swooth* and exited his right side just as fast. Chunks of brain and blood spewed on some of the vegetation around him. Not one of his fellow mercenaries saw him fall to the soft ground. Other than brushing lightly up against a few leaves, his falling body made no sound.

A second body fell with the same result. This one, a victim of Johnny Boy’s precision.

“Two down, eight to go,” Remo whispered.

“Make that seven,” Johnny Boy said as he took down a man crouched low in the thick vegetation on the southern side of the complex.

No sooner did Johnny Boy say that, than a bullet whip right past his ear, shattering a section of stone from the tower’s short wall behind them.

“Looks like we’ve upset some people,” Johnny Boy smiled.

“Rock and Roll, kiddo!” Remo took aim and in less than a minute wiped out two more mercenaries.

One man hiding behind a wall of the complex was no match for Remo’s marksmanship as a bullet actually traveled through a slit in the wall; lodging in the man’s left temple, as he ran passed it. One minute the man was running, trying to duck for cover. The next thing he knew, he was thrown off his feet. His head exploding in a bloody mess.

The second man was far easier, who tried to make a run for it, shooting wildly behind him. Big mistake. One stream of gunfire actually penetrated a fellow mercenary, causing the man to convulse violently before he collapsed onto the ground in a pool of his own blood. As for the man who fired those shots; his life was cut short by a swift bullet to his head, courtesy of Johnny Boy’s deadly accuracy.

With fire all around them, Remo and Johnny Boy were running out of places to hide as their stone tower was starting to yield to the heavy firepower. In fact, Johnny Boy was taking aim at a man lurking in the vegetation, but had to pull back when a bullet came streaming toward him, *actually* striking him in the left shoulder.

“Sonofabitch!” He exclaimed in annoyed audacity at the man who shot him.

Grimacing under the pain, Johnny Boy crouched behind a piece of stone, took aim and fired in the direction the bullet came. Although he could not see the man fall, he knew he got him because when he peered over the side, in the direction he fired his rifle, he saw the man’s gun fly up in the air haphazardly.

“How many is that, Remo?” Johnny Boy asked, resuming his hiding position behind the quickly deteriorating wall.

“Should be three more out there some...? Oh, fuck me!” The tension in Remo’s voice made Johnny Boy look at his superior.

“Time to vamoose, kiddo!” Remo jumped up, grabbing Johnny Boy under the arm, leading him down the dilapidated tower steps.

Just before they started down, Johnny Boy managed to look over the tower wall. Oddly enough, seeing one of the mercenaries holding an M203 grenade launcher aimed right for the tower, made him forget about his injured shoulder.

20 minutes ago

The Slab Stone and Spear Trap

The enormity of the underground chamber was ridiculous. In actuality, it was more like an underground cavern, than a chamber. The entire width must have stretched at least one-hundred feet while its length was easily as long. Those dimensions, however, were the least of Stone and his team's concern.

Light from eight retractable, foot-long glowsticks, designed especially by Omega scientists for low-to-no light situations, illuminated the entire cavern, which was carved entirely out of the surrounding limestone, polished smooth as silk.

As impressive as the cavern was, it paled in comparison to the twenty-five foot gap and ten, foot long, stone platforms, suspended by thick ropes on either side, over a chasm of nothingness. The space in between each hovering slab could not have been more than a foot and a half, but once those slabs started moving there was no telling which direction or how far each slab would glide. Stone was not sure how deep the void was, and had no time to figure that out, not with a band of mercenaries hot on their heels. They had no time to waste.

Not ten seconds after assessing their situation Stone heard the sounds of something mechanical. Like wheels grinding on one another. He looked across the gap and saw what appeared to be spears, rising up out of the opposite landing, then back down before repeating the process.

Oh, this is gonna be fun, he thought.

First things first. They needed to get across this gap, and they needed a plan. Yesterday!

Stone looked around desperately for an alternative. Nothing provided itself, so he and his team had no other choice but to attempt this perilous leap of faith. The rope looked strong enough, anchored into both sides of the wall with what looked like iron pitons, subsequently looped through iron rings, connecting them to the undulating stone slabs.

"Did anybody ever want to be in the circus when they were a kid?" Stone smiled.

"Oh, you cannot be serious," Rebel looked at his commanding officer incredulously.

"Okay, I'm going to need everybody to follow my lead," ignoring the comment, Stone studied the slabs in front of him. "Once these slabs get started it's going to be hard to slow them down." Stone then looked at Marley, for reassurance, "You have any better ideas?"

"You're the boss, Major. We'll follow you to Hell and back."

If any other person told him that, Stone would have scoffed, but Marley could not have been more serious.

Stone then looked around at the faces of the three civilian professors. He did not think they shared Marley's enthusiasm, but they had no other choice.

"Okay then, on my mark. Single file. Quick simple jumps. Just like hopping over rocks in a river," Stone tried to sound as positive as he could.

"Three... Two... One... Mark."

Stone leaped off the ledge.

Nothingness below him for what seemed an eternity.

Then his foot hit stone and the race across the chasm was on.

Like a finely choreographed ballet, Stone and his team soared from stone to stone. Each jump swaying one slab just far enough to reach the next, before the slab returned back to the previous slab where the next team member would jump on, and so forth.

Hazelton was slightly reluctant, but the alternative of being shot by mercenaries outweighed her fear of not knowing what lay below her as she started her precarious trek across. Marley was next, wasting no time following the lithe archaeology professor across. D-Boy and Rebel were close behind Marley as the three Marines moved with the alacrity and agility expected of them.

The scene portrayed within the limestone mountain of the Oracle Temple of Amun would have made any acrobat cringe with anxiety. Each stone was now swaying back and forth, and, like a trapeze artist waiting for the perfect swing, team members timed their jumps with expert precision. To fail to do so would end in a vertiginous death into a pool of darkness.

Jump. Sway.

Jump. Sway.

Next up were Lovey and Money with Radcliffe in between them. The younger professor struggled a little but made it across just as the last three men began leaping from wobbly slab to wobbly slab.

Jump. Sway.

Jump. Sway.

The dexterity of Kostakis did not surprise anyone. The old Greek professor had been recruited by Omega, and he most certainly would have some skills for them to do so.

Sandwiched in between Tricky and Nicky Rich, Kostakis moved with the elegant gait of a man half his age, as if he were a gazelle being chased across the African savanna by a hungry lion.

As Nicky Rich's foot touched the edge of the void, the last man across, Stone took out his Heckler & Koch Mk23, "They'll have to figure their own way across."

He then fired off six shots into the last six ropes suspending the last three stone slabs. Peering over the edge, Stone waited to hear them hit bottom, but they never did.

No one was paying attention to Stone, however, as he exhaled sharply. They were all looking at the nine, twelve-foot long spears with iron tips shooting out from the ground three-feet apart from each other. More importantly, they were staring at the wall just beyond the spears, which gave no hope of an exit.

"This must have been triggered when we opened the underground passageway," Kostakis said stroking his white beard, ignoring the apparent dead end.

"You think, Doc?" D-Boy rolled his eyes toward the stone ceiling.

"First," Stone tried to remain calm, ignoring the obvious predicament they were in, "we've got to get across this trap, then we'll figure a way out."

It was nerve racking. All they saw and heard were the swooshing, clanking, and clinking of spears darting up and down. There was definitely a pattern here. Like stroking the keys on a piano, sliding a finger one way across the ivories then back again.

Stone was more concerned with the wall beside the spear trap. Inscribed on it were hundreds of cartouches with Egyptian hieroglyphs in them running up and down the entire length of the wall- from where they stood, to the end of the trap. Something was here. Something that could help them get across and through to the next stage of the bizarre treasure hunt, but what?

"Is this what I think it is, Professor?" Stone examined the wall more carefully.

Kostakis walked over to where Stone stood, carefully leaning toward the wall.

A spear suddenly shot out through the floor, narrowly missing the professor's head. "Hoo-boy that was close!" Kostakis exclaimed with a nervous chuckle.

"Holy Christ, Doc! Careful will you!" Radcliffe tensely scolded.

Kostakis ignored the exclamation; instead, he was looking intently at the wall of cartouches. "Amazing! An entire subterranean King's List of every Egyptian Pharaoh. From Menes to," he leaned back, trying to catch a glimpse of the last cartouche, but it was too far down along the wall, "well, I would assume the very last pharaoh, a Roman named Ptolemy XV

Caesarian who co-ruled with his mother Cleopatra. Although, technically, he never ruled himself; he was executed when he was captured in Alexandria by Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, who would later change his name to Augustus.”

Kostakis then oddly added, “Reportedly, before Augustus had him executed he told the seventeen year old ‘Two Caesars is one too many.’ The boy was then most likely strangled.”

“While I do enjoy your history lessons, Professor, we’re a little strapped for time. So, if you can figure out a way to get across these,” Stone swiped his hand toward the spear trap, “You will have a captive audience at your next lecture, I promise.”

“Oh, well yes. It is quite simple really. You see that stone protruding from the wall?” Kostakis pointed to a stone inscribed with a cartouche on, about three-quarters away, on the other side of the trap.

They all looked in that direction.

“My guess is, if you push that in, much like the stone that first opened the underground passage, it should stop the trap. Or at least temporarily stop it.” Kostakis paused, then said quietly unsure, “I think.”

“Very reassuring,” Marley said dishearteningly, “Now, how do you propose we get there?”

“Like this,” Kostakis waited until the spear in front of him rose then dropped down, causing the second spear to rise three feet in front of it. Professor Stavros Kostakis then did something so amazingly stupid that all anybody could do was watch.

He stepped forward, and then waited for the second spear to retract. He stepped forward again, repeating this process several times.

Waiting. Stepping forward.

Waiting. Stepping forward.

Before long, he was standing in front of a cartouche of Alexander the Great, an exact replica of the one from the oracle entrance, just before the fifth spear shot up in front of him. He casually placed his hand on the stone and pushed it.

The sixth spear up shot up but the stubborn cartouche stone did not move.

Sixth spear down, seventh spear up!

Kostakis pushed a little harder, remaining calm for the moment. He should have taken in the fact that thousands of years of aging would have settled the stone securely in place, making it almost impossible to budge.

Seventh spear down, eighth spear up! Kostakis gave a cautious smile back toward Stone and his team, staring at him intensely. Using two hands, he pushed more aggressively on the aged stone.

Eighth spear down, ninth spear up! The last spear rose then dropped, which meant the spear trap would start again from the beginning.

First spear up!

Kostakis leaned hard on the stone, still nothing.

First spear down!

He shoved his shoulder hard onto the stone, finally it budged, slightly.

Second spear up!

Pushing with all his might the stone finally slid back into the recess of the wall.

Second spear down!

As Kostakis removed pressure from the stone, it suddenly started to slide back out.

Third spear up!

He quickly pushed the stone back into the wall, holding it there by leaning up against it.

To Kostakis' relief the third spear retracted and stayed down, so long as he applied the proper amount of pressure.

It was more difficult than he would have thought. The mechanism kept churning from somewhere below, causing immense resistance against the cartouche stone. By now, with the spears temporarily disabled, Stone and the others had reached where Kostakis held the stone in place. From here, Stone could see that a small opening in the floor had opened, presumably leading to another level, just beyond the spear trap.

"We got it from here, Professor," Money and D-Boy offered to hold the stone in place while the others crossed the trap. Once across, Money nodded at D-Boy to run and join the others beyond the spear trap.

Just then, a voice crackled to life in Stone's earpiece.

"Stone, Remo here. We're heading out of the tow..."

BOOM!

Remo's transmission cut out; replaced by a loud explosion shaking the entire underground chamber. As devastating as it sounded, Stone knew Remo and Johnny Boy got out of the tower in time, one way or another Remo always found a way out. In the meantime, Stone had his own problems.

The whole scene played as if it were in slow motion. The explosion had knocked Money off his feet, causing the stone to come loose again, and the big man to fall backwards.

The fourth spear shot up fiercely.

Money never had a chance. The spear entered under his left arm with such force that it punctured right through his Kevlar-lined jacket, exiting through his chest, piercing his heart and a lung. Money gave a hard groan as blood entered his lungs, falling further down the shaft of the spear until he hit the ground. The spear then, just as suddenly, shot back down through Money leaving him bleeding as the next spear darted up, narrowly missing his leg.

As soon as the stone Money was holding was released, the entrance to the next level started to close. Stone looked from Money to the opening then finally back to Money. They both had the same idea.

Stone grabbed the Dynaspec rope from his rucksack, tossing one end to Money, who had managed to crawl to the opposite side of the spear trap, unfortunately the shorter of the two distances, and further away from his team. Lying in a pool of blood, Money was still alert enough to catch the rope, as Stone tossed the other end down the shaft to the next level. Money quickly wrapped the rope around his arms six or seven times until it was taut, while at the same time, Stone was rushing everybody toward the closing entrance, ushering them down the rope quickly.

Everyone shimmed down the rope as fast as they could, leaving Stone as the last one. Just before he started down the rope, Money tossed him his rucksack.

"Ain't gonna need it," he grunted exhaustingly.

Stone grabbed the sack, just as shouts echoed from the opposite side of the cavern. Some kind of Afrikaans, *Swahili*, he thought.

Money must have heard it too because his sidearm was out in a flash and was aimed it in that direction.

A feeling of deep saddening overcame Stone. Money had been on several missions with him. Most notably the one in Bolivia where he saved not only Stone's life but also Remo and

Lovey's as well. He was a valuable member of Omega Sector and would be missed. With one last look at his friend, Stone slid down the rope as gunfire erupted from the cavern above, mostly from Money's M417 SOC Caliber .45 by the sound of it.

Once Stone reached the ground, the rope went slack, falling down the shaft after Stone. *Money must have cut the rope with his Bowie knife.* Stone smiled, looking up at the entrance that sealed shut above them. *Thanks bud; you did not die for nothing. I promise.*

2250 hours

The Oil Pit Trap

Stone was wondering why it was so bright down here. It did not have the feel of the artificial light from the glowsticks. This was more like a natural light, not to mention the heat that overwhelmed him. The crackling and clacking sound confirmed what he thought as he slowly turned around, hoping he would not see what he thought he would.

"Oh, fuck me!" He exclaimed in a long-drawn-out annoyed tone.

Flames shot high in the air, crackling ominously, and spitting sparks from an underground oil pit in front of them. Stone guessed it must have been triggered once the entrance from the first level was opened, which also meant oxygen was feeding the flames from some unknown source of air. If he had more time, Stone would have examined where the source was coming from, but they had no time for that. He could only hope that beyond the huge wall of fire was another opening to another chamber, or possibly a way out.

"Well, this is interesting," Tricky commented, trying to break the uncomfortable silence.

"No time for small talk. Those mercenaries are one level above us," Stone said abruptly, his mind racing with ideas.

Everyone was looking at Stone. No words were needed. They all knew the sacrifice Money made, but they had a mission to complete. Mourning their friend would have to wait.

"Any suggestions, Doc?" Radcliffe broke the silence by asking Kostakis, who simply shook his head.

This time, however, Stone did not need the Professor to help them. He and his team were rummaging through their rucksacks for something. It took them a while but they all finally found what they were looking for. A small, foot-long, black canister, labeled Arctic Purple-K (AP-K).

“I don’t know about that, Major,” Hazelton looked at them curiously. “It doesn’t seem like those little fire extinguishers are going to be much help.”

“These will,” Stone said as each Omega operative unlatched the nozzles from the canisters, releasing the pins.

Stone and Lovey moved as close to the flames as they could without being burned, squeezed the handles together, aiming them at the oil pit. The result was a thick, dry spray of acrid smelling purple powder covering the flames. The powder acted quickly, subduing the fire instantaneously, preventing a chemical chain reaction. It then did something that was rarely seen by civilians; it cooled and froze over the entire oil pit instantaneously. The three Professors were about to ask questions, but Stone raised his hand, signaling there was no time for a question and answer period. Instead, he quickly waved the group across the newly iced oil pit.

Their victory was short lived because another wall of fire, this one twice the size of the first one, blocked their path. This time Lovey, Marley and Rebel squeezed their AP-K canisters aiming at the wall of fire. Lovey ran out of hers after about twenty seconds, but Marley and Rebel kept squeezing away until the flames dissipated, freezing over this pit as well.

“Are you guys for real?” Radcliffe asked incredulously.

“Omega always sends us out prepared for anything and everything. Including all weather environmental field gear,” Tricky explained. “From below freezing to extreme heat, we got it all covered inside this little sack,” he patted his rucksack then slung it back onto his back.

With the flames of the second fire-pit trap extinguished, they ran across the iced oil, coming to yet another fire-pit.

“Oh come on!” Nicky Rich exclaimed.

It was his turn, along with Tricky and D-Boy, as the three squeezed the dry-freeze chemical agent across the expanse of the oil pit. Once the fire was out everyone’s eyes widened as their efforts were rewarded by an opening in the floor, just beyond the last firetrap.

Stone wasted no time, uncoiling the rope Money had cut loose, handing it to Rebel saying, “I’ll hold anchor. You get down there and help the others down.”

“What about you?” Rebel asked.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be down, but first I need to make sure our guests receive a warm welcome,” Stone sneered, watching as Rebel slid effortlessly down the rope, quickly followed by the others.

Lovey was the last to slide down, her eyes meeting his. Nothing was said but he read her thoughts, *don't you leave me too*. Stone did not intend to do that as he heard the grinding of the entrance from the first level slide open. *If you have a plan, Stone you had better make it quick*, he thought to himself.

Without thinking, Stone took out an M84 flashbang and an ALS sting grenade. "This is either going to be a very good idea, or the dumbest thing I have ever done," Stone shook his head, putting special Omega noise-reducing plugs into each ear then pulled out a pair of ultra-violet, Blue-Blocker sunglasses from his jacket, placing them over his eyes.

He pulled the pin and tossed the M84 across the length of the second level, shielding his eyes with his arm. The flashbang bounced and rattled to a stop, just as four mercenaries dropped down from the first level, only to be greeted by a loud bang and stunning flash, causing them to fall to the ground screaming, holding their ringing ears and rubbing their burning eyes. As an added bonus, the flashbang dislodged chunks of limestone from the ceiling, abusing the four men with a barrage of rock and debris.

Stone took this opportunity to pull the pin on the grenade, tossing it toward the injured mercenaries. Before it landed, he pulled out his H & K Mk23, took aim and fired a single shot, at the grenade soaring across the chamber while simultaneously dropping down the hole to the next level, taking the rope with him as he fell. The explosion careened him from one side of the shaft to the other, slowing his momentum just enough until his feet touched the ground of the next level where he tucked and rolled, coming to a stop inches from an enormous precipice.

2320 hours

The Celestial Chamber

Marley greeted Stone, by helping him to his feet.

When he got up, Stone saw everyone staring, not at the huge gap of nothingness dropping into an endless abyss, but rather up at the ceiling, which appeared to have been decorated with a mural of the sky. Stone looked again, more carefully, his eyes widening, "Is that?"

"It would appear so," Kostakis answered, not taking his eyes off the view.

What they were looking at was an endless universe, painted dark blue, almost black, around its corners with faded dots of blue around its inner rim. Just inside this rim of blackness,

the image turned, gradually, into a lighter blue, with dots painted a brighter bluish-white. The innermost portion of the image was also a lighter blue, but it was dotted with a few of these bluish-white dots and an extremely brighter white dot directly in the center.

“What exactly are we looking at?” Marley asked.

“A dark matter halo,” D-Boy answered, his PhD in Astrophysics from Tulane coming in handy.

“What the hell is a dark matter halo?” Tricky wanted to know.

“It’s an astronomical phenomenon, widely accepted in the scientific community that can be exhibited by a gravitational effect on the Milky Way’s rotational curve. Now...”

Stone interrupted, “No time for a lecture, kid. Lovey take as many digital pics as you can, I have the feeling we won’t be coming back here.” Stone then looked across the giant chasm in front of them, “You might as well snap a few shots of *that* too,” motioning at the giant temple-like structure on the opposite side of the chasm.

Lovey took out a simple digital camera, snapping pictures one after the other, while everyone stared across the gap.

The temple was in the typical Greek style. A basic rectangular plan, surrounded by a colonnade portico on all four sides, similar to the Parthenon or the Temple of Hephaestus. The roof was low, slanted on both sides with magnificent terracotta tiles. Its low pitch gable roof structure, common in 3rd century Greek temples, allowed for two triangular pediments, one in the front and another in the back, while the row of lintels above the columns formed the entablature, containing friezes of ancient life in Greece during Alexander’s day.

However, everyone’s interest focused on what lay in the center of the temple. A golden sarcophagus. From what Stone could see on the friezes and the inscriptions on the entablature, no one needed to be told what it was. They were staring at the tomb of one of the greatest rulers of ancient times, the Mausoleum of Alexander the Great.

“Looks like we found what everybody’s looking for,” Tricky commented.

“Yeah, but how do we get to it?” Radcliffe asked.

Stone already had an answer. Rummaging through his rucksack, he pulled out an LBAS and G-gun. LBAS were Load-Bearing Attach/Release Spears fired with a gun capable of G-force pressure, thus wedging the spear into the surface area for maximum weight distribution. Lovey, Tricky, Marley and Rebel followed Stone’s example, loading the spears into the G-guns.

“You sure that’s a good idea,” Kostakis asked, realizing what Stone’s plan was.

“The LBAS is our best bet. Besides, it has a micro-transmitter release button allowing the spear to release once the target distance is reached. The spear can then be retracted while the rope reels itself back in. Unless you can think of something better?”

Kostakis shook his head.

Stone nodded, handing Money’s rucksack to Lovey, a hand on her shoulder, and then turned to Barrington and Lackey.

“Nicky Rich, D-Boy I want you to guard that hole. If anyone comes down, kill them.” The two Marines swung around, scopes aimed for the opening in the ceiling. Stone slung his rucksack onto his back, grabbed Hazelton around her waist, turned and fired his LBAS into the ceiling just a few feet from the opposite edge. The rope went taut.

“Hold on,” Stone said to Hazelton. She did as she was told as they were yanked across the hundred-foot chasm.

They swung for what seemed an eternity until they reached solid ground on the opposite side. Stone let go of Hazelton, who landed safely a few feet from the mausoleum’s steps, then pressed the release button allowing the spear to extract itself from the ceiling, and reel itself in automatically.

With Stone and Hazelton safely across, the others followed immediately. First Lovey and Radcliffe. Then Marley and Kostakis. Followed by Rebel, Tricky and Nicky Rich.

“Are you joining the party, D-Boy?” Stone yelled across.

“In a second, Boss man,” the young Second Lieutenant replied.

D-Boy swung his rucksack off his back, took out his G-gun, loading it and placing it a few feet from the edge of the gap. He then looked through his sack and, given the smile growing across his face, found what he was looking for- a mini AG440 missile. No bigger than a football, this missile was designed for close range attacks doing minimal but precise damage; perfect for situations such as these. He only hoped that the explosion would not cause the entire cavern to cave-in.

Carefully, D-Boy set up a mini tripod just beneath the opening to the second level placing the AG440 on it, turning the timer’s dial until the display read 00:00:10. *Ten seconds should be more than enough time*, he thought. No sooner did D-Boy set the timer than he heard voices

through the opening above him. Without any further delay, he hit the green start button and ran for the gap, continuing the count in his head.

Ten...

D-Boy was two feet from his spear gun.

Nine...

He slid with purpose toward the gap, grabbing his G-gun in one motion.

Eight...

He aimed the G-gun toward the ceiling, firing it.

Seven...

The spear shot out at an incredible rate, lodging into the ceiling.

Six...

Just as he reached the gap, with all his might, he pushed off the cliff edge, propelling him forward and across. Then, suddenly, his gun jerked, and the rope started uncoiling.

Five...

D-Boy began to fall fast, down into the void.

Four...

He pressed a button on his G-gun, stopping his descent. The rope jolted and, without warning, it began pulling him up at an alarming rate.

Three...

Once he was level with the opposite ledge and high enough above the void, he pressed another button, locking the rope. Dangling in mid-air, D-boy began swinging back and forth furiously.

Two...

One more forceful swing back then forward should do it, he thought.

One...

D-Boy pressed the micro-transmitter release button on his G-gun.

Zero...

The explosion was loud, but, more importantly, it was so forceful that the draft of the blast accelerated D-Boy's forward momentum, pushing him across the gap, arching high enough to clear the gap substantially, and landing on the opposite edge just a few feet from the enormous tomb-complex. Stone and Marley grabbed his arms, helping D-Boy to his feet. The young

Second Lieutenant looked up and saw the explosion had actually cracked the roof of the cavern slightly, but otherwise it remained intact.

“See, nothing to it. Piece of cake,” he sighed casually, dusting off his clothes.

“You are one crazy son of a bitch, you know that, right?” Stone smiled, shaking his head like a concerned father.

“I learned from the best, Major.” D-Boy smiled back.

All Stone could do was shake his head, putting his arm around the young Marine, leading him to the mausoleum’s steps, where the others were waiting.

2335 hours

The Mausoleum of Alexander the Great

The Mausoleum of Alexander the Great was impressive. Eight Doric columns on each side held up the roof and its expertly carved entablatures of friezes depicted Alexander’s many conquests. The entire structure was elevated on a ten-foot slab of marble, twenty steps led up to the main attraction.

The gold anthropoid sarcophagus was even more elaborate and ominous now that Stone and his team could look at it more closely. Similar to the famous sarcophagus of King Tutankhamen, Alexander’s coffin was made of pure gold, smooth to the touch and, like the New Kingdom Egyptian pharaoh’s, realistic facial features were painted on the golden mask inlaid upon the sarcophagus. The anthropoid coffin showed Alexander with his arms crossed, however, instead of holding the pharaonic symbol of the crook and flail, he held in one hand a shield and a sword in the other.

“The Khaos Blade and Aegis of Zeus,” Kostakis said breathlessly.

“The Aegis of Zeus?” Rebel asked.

“It’s the legendary shield belonging to Zeus. Homer spoke of the shield in *The Iliad*; about it being created by Hephaestus with golden tassels, a relief of Medusa’s head embossed in its center. It is said to hold supernatural powers, rendering its owner impervious to any kind of assault.”

“Okay, so, should we assume the sword and the shield are in there?” Although the sight *was* breathtaking, Stone and the others did not have time to admire the grandeur of the structure, as he pointed to the coffin, turning to the Kostakis.

“That would be likely,” Kostakis reluctantly answered, knowing what would happen next.

“Normally, I would not suggest this,” Stone sounded genuinely upset, “but, we need that sword and something tells me that shield also. Marley, Rebel, you’re up,” jerking his thumb toward the coffin, nodding at the two Marines.

The two men swung their rucksacks off their backs, digging through them until they found two strips of Composition 4, commonly known as C-4. They quickly formed the strips into long, thin tubes, tucking them along the lip between the sarcophagus’ lid and base. The last thing they wanted to do was use too much of it for fear of ruining, not only the relic, but the mausoleum as well. While they did this, Stone led the others down the marble steps, far enough away from the blast radius.

Once Marley and Rebel were done setting the explosive, they ran the two long detonating cords that were attached to the C-4 and the trigger switch down the steps, joining the others.

“Here goes nothing,” Rebel said as he flipped the switch.

The explosion was muffled and hollow, like a thick balloon being popped inside an elevator, but because of the confined space they were in, it sounded much louder. The damage to everything, thankfully, was minimal. The lid shot upwards, hitting the ceiling of the mausoleum, crashing down with a thud on the thick marble floor, cracking both slightly.

When they finally walked back up the stairs, Stone could see that, other than a few chips to the floor and a column or two, everything else seemed intact. However, what they saw inside the sarcophagus made them forget about anything else.

Staring back at the seven Marines and three professors was the mummy of Alexander the Great, still wrapped in delicate linen, browned with decay still sticky with resin. Curls of light brown hair, poked through strands of linen around his head, upon which rested a crown of solid gold olive branches. Gold and precious stones from all over the world were set in gold necklaces draped around his neck. Lapis lazuli from ancient Mesopotamia. Jades from Indus Valley. Even a golden necklace with a pendent of the Eye of Horus stared back at Stone and his team.

But, what stood out most was what the Great ruler was holding in his right hand, crossed over his chest. In his hand was the hilt of a magnificent blade. Red rubies, blue sapphires, brown topazes and exquisitely, crystal-clear diamonds, bound tightly to the smooth, soft leather of the hilt. The pommel seemed to be broken off at the base of the hilt, but even that minor blemish could not take away from its elegance.

The sword was blade-point down, toward Alexander the Great's feet, and was just as stunning. It was unlike anything Stone had seen before. Instead of being flat or raised slightly, this sword had more of a diamond shape to it. It was easily five inches wide and two inches thick, but the most impressive thing about it was the way it glowed. From blue to red to brown then suddenly the oddest thing happened, it disappeared for an instant only to reappear again, this time a menacing black before quickly turning blue again.

The cycle repeated, while everyone stared in awe at this most sacred relic. It took Stone a few seconds to realize out what was going on. He was about to say so when Kostakis said it for him.

"The five elements have been awakened," Kostakis was so foreboding tone that it sent shivers up Stone's spine.

One more thing stood out that Stone found to be disconcerting; unlike the depiction on the sarcophagus lid, there was *no* Aegis of Zeus. Alexander's left hand and arm were bare, save for the linen wrapping.

"Looks like someone beat us to the shield," D-Boy said what everyone was thinking.

"Don't be so sure about that," Kostakis stood away from the coffin, instead studying the marble base it was resting on.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lovey asked, walking over to where Kostakis was standing.

Carved into the marble base were a series of alto-relievo (high reliefs cut far away from the flat background) and bas-reliefs (low reliefs cut closer to the flat background). Each one of these reliefs was, obviously, a scene from Alexander's life. From his birth- his mother lying on a stone slab, Zeus standing over her, a bolt of lightning in his right hand- to his death- a grand funeral procession of Macedonian soldiers carrying his sarcophagus, *this* sarcophagus.

One portion of the sculpture was of particular interest to Kostakis, who was staring intently at the relief. Two armies fought each other, Alexander atop a rearing horse, his faithful

steed Bucephalus. In his hand, he held a sword with rays of light emitting from it, while in his other hand he held a shield with the head of Medusa carved in its center.

However, it was another part of the relief peaking Kostakis' interest. It showed a cloud-covered mountain summit with Zeus standing atop it. Just under the clouds was Alexander, bent on one knee reverently. His arms were raised toward Zeus. In his hands, he seemed to be offering a shield to the King of Gods. The same shield he was holding during the battle relief.

"Of course," Kostakis nodded approvingly.

"You care to share with us what you're thinking, Professor?" Stone walked over to him.

"Well, you see here," pointing at the relief, "Alexander can be seen holding the Aegis and then, over here, he is offering it *back* to Zeus."

"Okay, but that doesn't tell us where this shield is," Marley joined them.

"On the contrary," Kostakis smiled, pointing to the mountain, "It is obvious this is Mount Olympus. Home to the gods. Moreover, it is *there*, I believe we will find it, secreted away by Alexander, away from everyone. Who better to guard the Aegis of Zeus than the King of the gods himself? And where better to hide it than among the gods," Kostakis scratched his beard.

"That still leaves us the small problem of trying to get out of here," Stone said looking around for a way out. His thoughts were interrupted when a booming explosion rocked the entire cavern.

"Jesus Christ!" Rebel yelled. "Those assholes are using C-6! They're gonna bring this whole place down!"

"All right, everybody stay calm. Look around for some way out. These ancient builders made a way in, they most certainly made a way out. Right, Professor Kostakis?" Stone turned to the Greek professor.

"Yes, there should be an underground passageway around here somewhere leading back up to the surface."

Everyone started looking around frantically while more explosions shook the ground. Rocks began crumbling from the ceiling. First small and pebble-sized, then gradually increasing until they were coming down in chunks; crashing down all around them on top of the mausoleum and everywhere else. Soon they would be crushed under the ruins of a 2500-year old temple. Somebody had better find something fast; otherwise this tomb is going to have eight new residents.

“Major! Over here!” Hazelton said from atop the stairs, near the top of the sarcophagus.

Stone took the steps three at a time and was beside her in less than five seconds.

“Look!” Hazelton pointed to the marble floor where some debris had fallen, cracking the marble floor, revealing a small crack. More importantly, was the air escaping from it.

“Rebel! Marley! D-Boy! Up here on the double!” The three were by their commanding officer’s side in no time. “Help me push this,” Stone leaned against the base of the marble slab the bottom of the sarcophagus was still resting on.

The four men pushed with all their might. After a few agonizing seconds, sweat pouring from brows and muscles strained, the base began to slide to the left, slowly allowing stagnant air to escape. Their effort was rewarded with a flight of stone steps descending deep underneath the structure, giving everyone hope.

Ten seconds later Stone was filing everyone down the stairs. Where they led, he did not care. Anywhere was better than here. Another explosion rocked the chamber, shaking the mausoleum violently. Now was his chance. With one last look around, Stone grabbed the Khaos Blade, tugging it free from a twenty-five hundred year old death-grip.

“Sorry,” Stone whispered to the corpse of Alexander the Great as he jumped down through the opening just as the entire mausoleum’s roof caved in.

He ran down the steps, pursued unrelentingly by a plume of thick, smoky dirt and debris.

Everyone but Marley was already across a narrow land bridge connecting one ledge with another one on the opposite side of an endless chasm. He was waiting for Stone. As the Major reached the last step, another explosion echoed from the level above them.

“Come on, Major, we don’t have much time before this whole place caves in too,” Marley said pushing Stone passed him. The two men were almost across when a huge boulder came crashing down in the middle of the stone bridge, creating a ten foot gap between them.

Marley stopped dead in his tracks, the boulder barely missing him. Stone stopped too. He looked back at the distraught face of his friend and Omega teammate.

Without hesitating, Stone handed the Khaos Blade to Tricky, who was on the other side of the damaged land bridge.

“I think I can make it,” Marley said judging the length.

“You better,” Stone ordering Marley, hoping it would will him across.

Marley ran back to the start of his bridge, took a deep breath then ran for all he was worth. Rocks and more debris fell around him but he kept his eyes focused on one thing, making that jump at all costs. As he reached the edge, he leapt with all the strength he could muster.

His hands were flailing.

His feet kicking at the empty space.

Anything to get as much momentum as he could.

Finally, his foot touched solid ground. And, only the one foot.

The momentum was not enough to carry him forward as he started falling backwards. This was the end for him. After everything they had been through, he was going to fall to...

A hand reached out, grabbing the front of his belt and pants. Pulling him forward with incredible strength, until he fell on top of Stone who quickly helped him up. "I already lost one good man today."

Without saying another word, Stone and Marley ran toward another flight of crudely made, stone steps where Tricky was waiting for them, holding the Khaos Blade. The others were already up and out through an archway found at the top of the staircase. Stone, Marley and Tricky were now climbing.

When they finally reached the top, the three men continued running a few feet outside the opening.

Finally, Stone thought, breathing in fresh air once more. Bent over, hands on his knees, taking short, deep breaths. His exuberance was short lived, however, as he looked up into the barrels of forty automatic weapons.

November 6th, 2012

2405 hours

Gebel al Mawta

A tall, thin, dark-skinned African man was walking calmly toward the three men who just exited the Mountain of the Dead through a small, unmarked opening on its north side. He wore dark green army fatigues with ten medals on his chest.

Stone looked around, his fellow Marines and the three Professors were on their knees, hands on their heads. The Marines rucksacks were tossed aside, well out of reach, their weapons were confiscated, lying in a pile ten feet from the nearest set of hands.

“So, you are from the famous Omega Sector of the United States military,” he spoke English with a slight Swahili accent, waving a hand toward Stone and his entire team.

The tall African then walked up to Tricky, smiling a beautifully white smile. He was looking, not at Tricky, but at the Khaos Blade instead.

“And this must be Alexander the Great’s Khaos Blade. My contingents will be very pleased,” the tall African held out his hands, waiting for the relic.

A plan formed in Tricky’s head, it would not take much to lop the hands from this man, but then he looked at Stone who shook his head, clearly advising against whatever he was thinking. Tricky sighed, holding up the Khaos Blade, allowing the tall African to take the sword from his hands, effortlessly.

From his pocket, the African man took out an alabaster pommel with a lotus flower design; easily reattaching it to the bottom of the sword’s hilt. The sword then did something no one expected. It began to vibrate slightly, emitting a low hum as it continued to glow several colors, just as it did while still in the grasp of Alexander the Great.

The tall African was pleased with himself. Not only had he obtained the Khaos Blade, but he also captured a group of America’s most elite operatives. With them out of the picture, they could now find the other relics, unopposed.

Captain Matata Bol walked away from Tricky, giving a short command in Swahili. The forty mercenaries took their safeties off, aiming their weapons at Stone and his group...

Unexpectedly, gunfire erupted all around Stone. However, it was not coming from the band of mercenaries it was coming from somewhere above. Like a rain shower of bullets from the sky. Stone looked up, The *Meadowlark* swooping down toward their location like a giant metal bird of prey. On the beast’s underbelly was a gun turret raining a hellfire of bullets, guided by General Harris, causing the mercenaries to abandon their orders and, instead, run for cover among the town’s abandoned buildings.

Stone and his group also ran for cover. Grabbing their rucksacks and each other, they ran away from the gunfire, into the thick vegetation of the oasis. Fronds of mallow leaves, slapped

them in their face as they ran around large date and olive palms until, after about twenty minutes, they finally came to a large clearing where the edge of the oasis met desert.

Remo and Johnny Boy were there waiting for them, guns at the ready; although the sling holding Johnny Boy's right arm forced him hold his gun awkwardly in his left hand.

"Nice of you to join us, Boss," Remo said looking at the group emerging from the oasis.

Once everyone was out, Remo looked around curiously, "Money?"

Stone just shook his head.

Remo bowed his head somberly, and then looked up at Lovey who looked like she was still in shock. Although personal lives were just that, everyone knew about the relationship she and Money, futilely, tried to keep hidden. Still, out of respect and privacy, it was something nobody let on they knew about.

A rumble coming from overhead disrupted Remo's somber countenance. They looked up to see *The Meadowlark* descending slowly, its rear compartment open, almost touching the sand. Eagle Eye lessened the big bird's throttle as the Humvee they had left at the base of the Temple of Amun rolled down its ramp. Stone had no idea how they got it back, but, at this point, he really did not care, as long as they got out of here in one piece.

The Hummer stopped in the sand a few feet from where they gathered. Quickly, the entire group rushed into the all-terrain vehicle as Stone took the passenger seat, Lovey hopping behind the wheel. She immediately put it in drive, speeding toward the rear opening of the huge Lockheed Hercules, barely kissing the sand as the aircraft continued to glide just above it, expertly and effortlessly.

Before long, the front wheels of the Hummer touched the ramp; Lovey floored it, deftly steering it back into the cargo hold. Eagle Eye closed the access ramp from the cockpit and, once the Humvee's wheels were locked in place, he pulled on the throttle to soar *The Meadowlark* high into the cool night air.

Without the Khaos Blade.

"I'm sorry General, those mercenaries got the Khaos Blade," Stone apologized to General Harris who was waiting for them in the cargo bay.

"I know. Well at least all of you..." Harris stopped in mid-sentence, realizing someone was missing.

“Any idea who those guys were?” Marley quickly changed the subject, while Lovey walked up the staircase leading to the private cabins without saying a word. None of them stopped her; they all understood her pain.

“They call themselves The African Mercenary Commando Squad. Some forty or fifty men from all over the African continent. We were hoping to avoid any confrontations, but they are working in conjunction with Seal Team Six. Of course our government and several African countries deny either group even exists,” General Harris sighed.

“ST6?” Stone cocked his head sideways, “I didn’t see them anywhere near the site.”

“That’s because they were docked just off the coast of Matruh in an SSN-21 Seawolf. If the mercenaries failed, the SEAL team wouldn’t.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” Stone said sarcastically.

“Need to know, Major,” Harris stiffened. “They won’t be docked for the next mission, though. Seems those in charge underestimated you and your team, Major Stone. All that is important is that we get those relics before they do. Of course, now they have the first relic and, in addition to that, we have no idea where the rest of them are. We were hoping to obtain the first relic and destroy it before they got it.”

“Well, then it is a good thing they stole it, isn’t it?” Professor Kostakis chimed in.

“How’s that, Professor?” The General asked, annoyed that his old friend would be so brazen in front of his men.

“Because, if you destroyed that relic, you would have doomed us for sure. You see, once that pommel was found, it triggered a series of events that could not be stopped. So, if you *had* destroyed the relic, you would have doomed all humanity. The remaining relics need to be found, quickly. Otherwise, we will have much bigger problems to face than a band of African mercenaries. How long ago was the pommel found?”

“Three days ago, as of midnight,” General Harris answered, looking at his watch.

“Okay, so where *do* we look for these other relics?” Remo asked.

“First you need that manuscript, right?” Stone remembered, looking at Kostakis.

“Not necessarily, we already know where the Aegis of Zeus is. And I would stake my career on it that it is the next relic. So, if we can get to Mount Olympus before our adversaries, then we are on even ground,” Kostakis took off his glasses, wiping them with a thin, square piece

of cloth he took from his pocket. How he managed to keep it dust and debris free, Stone did not ask.

“Actually, I have a better idea,” Stone suggested. “We need to split into two teams. Remo, D-Boy, and Tricky, you take Professor Kostakis where he needs to go to find that manuscript,” Stone looked at Kostakis.

“Salon-de-Provence, in southern France,” Kostakis said.

Stone nodded, “I’ll take the rest of the team to Mount Olympus and get that shield before those bastards do. Professor Radcliffe, is fluent in Greek and Latin, so translating whatever we come across should not be a problem. Right?” Stone looked at Professor Radcliffe.

“Right,” Radcliffe answered confidently.

Stone then turned to Kostakis, “Any idea where we should start looking for this shield once we get there?”

“I would start at the bottom and work my way up,” Kostakis answered, then added, “I know at the base of Olympus there is a monument temple dedicated to the Greek gods.”

“Great, more temples,” Stone sighed. “Let’s hope we have better luck there.” Without saying another word, Stone and his team retired upstairs to their sleeping cabins for some much needed rest.

While everyone else went to his or her room, Stone knocked on Lovey’s door. After a few moments, she answered, letting him in. She had taken a shower, her blonde hair, tied in a short ponytail, was still wet. She had also changed her clothes and was now wearing gray sweatpants and a USMC t-shirt, two sizes too big. Despite all that, it did not hide the puffiness of her eyes and the fact that she had been crying.

Stone closed the door behind him, “You okay, Viv?” He asked, sitting in an armchair.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?” She sniffed, fighting back her emotions.

“Look, I know losing someone close to you is...”

“Close? What are you talking about?” Lovey turned her back, wiping her eyes.

“I know about you and Max,” Stone figured it would be easier to just come out and say it.

“This was his last mission. Did you know that?” She spoke in a quiet, soft voice, rarely heard by her fellow Marines, “After this he was going to take a desk job at Fort McHenry.”

“I know. He told me,” Stone paused, then risked, “Everything.”

“I was going to go with him. Get out of this unit. No offense, Donovan but... well, you know, it takes its toll,” Lovey turned around to face Stone.

It had been a long time since Stone noticed how beautiful she was. Usually, she tried to hide behind the hardness of being a Marine and Special Forces operative, but now, in this most vulnerable moment, her soft, delicate features became more noticeable. He also saw that she was clutching her necklace, which she always kept hidden under her shirt. Stone guessed she thought she and Money hid their relationship well, but deep down she must have known that he, as well as everyone else on the team, knew about them.

“You don’t have to finish this mission. I’ll tell the Harris...” Lovey did not let Stone finish his sentence.

“Like hell you will! My Max *did not* die for nothing! Once this mission is over, *then*, I’m done!” She said with conviction.

“Okay, just wanted to be sure you were still in the game,” Stone stood up.

“Oh, you bet your ass I’m in.” She then took the wedding ring attached to the chain around her neck, kissed it and looked away, tears welling up in her eyes again.

Stone smiled solemnly, placing a hand on her shoulder, giving it an empathetic squeeze, and left her to grieve alone while he went to his room to find out as much as he could about Mount Olympus and its surrounding area.

Three

The Nostradamus Manuscript

0212 hours

Airborne over Southern France

While still in the air over France, everyone gathered in the conference room. Set up at the head of the long table was a 42-inch HDTV, attached to a Sony VAIO laptop. Into one of its USB ports, Lovey slid the digital camera's 256MB memory card. Up on the screen popped images from the ceiling of the cavern where Alexander the Great's mausoleum once stood.

"Okay," Stone, addressed D-Boy, "now, what exactly are we looking at."

"It's called a dark matter halo. As I was saying before, if the mass of the expanding halo is not large enough, theoretically, the galaxy's velocity decreases the further away it gets from the galaxy's center, usually only dominant in spiral galaxies, like the Milky Way. By carefully observing the HI's, that's H-I apostrophe s, not H-I-G-H-S," D-Boy looked around at the incredulous expressions he was receiving, answering them, "It's just an astronomical term, referring to neutral atomic hydrogen, don't worry about it. What *is* important is that, by monitoring radio surveillances from spectral line emissions of the atomic hydrogen, it shows that most rotational curves of spiral galaxies continue to keep these curves level, outside the visible matter.

"Now, if any visible matter is absent it could imply the presence of unobserved matter, particularly *dark* matter. The problem most astrophysicists run into is that if we maintain the theory that dark matter does not exist, it would mean that general relativity- the theory of gravity- is wrong. Although possible, most scientists would never admit to it because it would require compelling evidence before most of them would even consider it."

"Well, that clears everything up," Tricky commented.

Stone looked like he agreed, but asked D-Boy, "What does any of this have to do with what we're up against?"

D-Boy thought for a while, and then solemnly said, "I'm not sure, yet."

Thirty minutes later, with clearance from the Salon-de-Provence Air Base, *The Meadowlark* landed at an undisclosed, rarely used runway, taxiing to the nearest hangar, just before three in the morning. To the naked eye, nothing was unusual. As the hub of France's Air Force, planes of various sizes and countries landed there to refuel and replenish supplies. Unlike most aircraft however, the Lockheed Martin C140 Super Hercules stopped only briefly, dropping

off three Marines and one civilian, before taking off again- heading east across the continent, over the Ionian Sea, and eventually Greece.

For Captain Richard Emilio and his team, their itinerary lay along a different path as he led the three men toward a hangar not far from the asphalt tarmac. They would rendezvous with the rest of the team at seven in the morning at Marseille Provence Airport, about 16 miles northwest of Marseille. Their orders were strict. Any later, *The Meadowlark* would take-off. Remo and his team would be listed as a causality of war, and the mission would continue without them. Everyone understood and accepted this decision.

What waited for them inside the hangar guaranteed their arrival at Château de l'Empéri, and subsequently at Marseille Provence Airport, would be prompt- two Bugatti Veyron 16.4 Coupes. Confident they would meet their deadline, Remo took this opportunity to ask Kostakis about the *Nostradamus Manuscript*.

Kostakis complied by giving them a brief lesson on the life of, perhaps, the most famous prognosticator in the history of the world. He went on to tell them how not much was known about his early childhood, except for the fact that he was one of at least nine children living in a small, bleak, two-story home in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. He attended the University of Avignon but, due to one of the many plagues spreading across the European continent, he was forced to abandon his studies. Over the course of the next eight years, he travelled the countryside studying herbal remedies, eventually taking a job as an apothecary. His second attempt at attending University, this time in Montpellier, failed when the faculty there found out he had been employed as an apothecary, something that, in Nostradamus' time, was frowned upon by the school's doctrine.

"Between 1531 and 1534, he and his wife, no one is sure of her name, had two children. Unfortunately, by 1534 The Plague had taken all three from Nostradamus' life, leaving him no choice but to wander across France and Italy for the next nine years."

Kostakis held up a finger, "Now, here's where it gets interesting. During his travels to Italy, Nostradamus met with a contemporary of his, Nicolaus Copernicus. According to historical documents, the two formed an unlikely friendship, sharing views on theology, medicine and astronomy. One such document mentions a conversation the two had about prophecies and apocalyptic ramifications of a non-Christian world. It is believed that this discussion, indirectly, led to Nostradamus' interest in the occult.

“Over the next twenty or so years, after Copernicus’ death in 1543, Nostradamus kept up a written correspondence with his colleague’s pupil, Georg Joachim Rheticus. The two shared ideas, expanding on theories and hypotheses that Nostradamus and Copernicus touched on. While he was writing Rheticus, Nostradamus’ interest in the occult grew, eventually leading to his unique knack for prognosticating. Many of them are known: the Great Fire of London, the rise of Napoleon and Hitler. Some even believe he predicted the attacks on the World Trade Center. But, there is a lesser known work of his that we are interested in.”

“Of course there is,” Tricky interjected.

“Hidden away, vaulted within a long forgotten library, is his masterpiece, *The Nostradamus Manuscript*. Over one hundred pages of detailed maps, floor plans, locations, and riddles that could save mankind from impending doom.”

“If this library is long forgotten, how do you know about it?” Remo asked.

Kostakis smiled, “Because the man who will help us obtain it, is a dear friend of mine, who happens to be a member of the ancient Order sworn to guard its secrets.”

Confused but satisfied, Remo and Tricky prepped the two sports coupes. Both were jet black with two racing stripes of midnight blue running from their front tire fenders to the back of each door. It was simply the most powerful and exotic production car in the world available for consumers to buy. And, with a price tag of just over \$2 million dollars, it was the most expensive.

Each car was equipped with quad-turbo 8.0 liter W16 engines, all-wheel-drive seven-speed automated manual gearboxes, 1001 horsepower, and capable of speeds topping out at 252-mph, going from 0-60-mph in less than 3.0 seconds.

Only three hundred were made in 2008, and the US military branches owned ten of them. Eight of which were available at a moment’s notice to each Sector branch.

One special modification to these Bugattis, which was unavailable to the public was, unlike the normal twenty-six gallon fuel tanks, which burn a lot of gas at full throttle, the fuel capacity for these two Pur Sang models was nearly double that of the consumer type courtesy of Omega Sector’s mechanical engineering division. Not that Remo’s team would need to top out at 250mph, 100mph maybe, but 250mph, not a chance. However, having the option was a nice benefit.

The four men got into the two muscle cars, Remo behind the wheel of one and Tricky behind the other. Kostakis rode with Remo, D-Boy with Tricky. Both engines revved with powerful but silent droning purrs as coordinates were entered into the GPS. Then, under the cover of darkness, the two cars peeled out of the hangar, hitting sixty miles per hour just as they reached the, conveniently, open gates of the Air Force Base, another favor called in by the General.

Like a scene out of a James Bond movie, the two powerful speedsters, in a race against the clock, headed north on highway D113, kept left around two traffic circles at the D538, then headed straight onto Carrefour de l'Arceau, following the D538 for less than a mile before turning onto Cours Gimon then Montée du Puech, and finally onto Montée du Château, which was home to one of the most famous castles in all of France.

0300 hours

Château de l'Empéri

Salon-de-Provence, France

Resting stoically on the rock of Puech, high on the great Crau plain, east of the Rhone River, the Château de l'Empéri was considered one of France's national treasures by the French Ministry of Culture. Built in the ninth century, the castle has been used by archbishops, Holy Roman Emperors, monarchs of France, even as a prison and barracks during the French Revolution. In 1909, an earthquake threatened the super structure, but, surprisingly, the castle sustained only minor damage leading to a renovation in 1926 with the addition of the Salon Museum and, eventually, what is currently showcased there, the Musée de Art et d'Histoire Militaire. Home to more than twenty-thousand artifacts ranging from French Revolutionary War uniforms and weapons, to life-like wax sculptures, as well as valuable works of art from all across Europe; it was no wonder the Ministry valued this magnificent structure, which enveloped much of France's cultural and military history.

Remo and his team entered through, what Professor Kostakis said was, the Porte de l'Horloge gateway leading to an enormous courtyard flanked by high walls and menacing towers. At this time of night, with moonlight shining down into the heart of the structure, Remo could almost feel the weight of hundreds of years of western civilization crush down upon his

shoulders, not to mention the eerie silence of thousands of residences that surely still haunted its halls. Were it not for the lone beam of a flashlight bobbing toward them, the entire scene could have been ripped from a television show about ghost hunting.

A smile grew across the face of Kostakis as he stretched out his arms, embracing his friend. They exchanged a traditional kiss on both cheeks, conversing in French shortly before Kostakis turned to Remo, “François, says all is clear. The other guard went home for the night, but we must hurry before the next shift arrives.”

“Which is when?” Remo asked.

“Five a.m.”

“That gives us less than two hours to find this thing,” D-Boy noted.

“You figure that out all by yourself wonder boy,” Tricky smiled.

“Oh, we won’t need to find it,” Kostakis spoke. “François knows exactly where it is.”

“Why do I get the feeling that’s not all?” Remo sighed.

“Well,” Kostakis sheepishly continued, “while he can grant us access to the Philosopher’s Library, unfortunately we must still go through the trials to gain entrance into the library itself.” He shrugged, adding, “It’s a safety precaution, to deter any would be thieves.”

“Like us,” Tricky commented.

Kostakis nodded, “Like us.”

“Great,” Remo took a deep breath, “let’s get this over with.”

The actual interior of the castle/museum was as impressive as any Remo had ever seen. Everything from Napoleon’s sword and horse’s saddle to leftover bricks and masonry from the castle’s construction. Around every corner were priceless works of art from almost every significant art period known to man. Romanesque triptychs of religious figures. Renaissance works from the likes of Da Vinci, Raphael, and Giotto. Baroque masterpieces by Rubens, Barocci, and Caravaggio. Even sculptures by Bernini and his rival, Borromini. Not to mention the countless military artifacts, ranging from early European warfare through World War I.

After being led around by Kostakis’ comrade for about ten minutes, they stopped at an oddly placed fresco of a white-bearded man, very muscular and broad-shouldered, his right arm and index finger pointing downward, away from the heavenly clouds he stood upon. At his feet, stood an angel with anger in his eyes, pure disdain for the man pointing at him was all too obvious.

“Then the devil who fooled them will be thrown into the lake of fire and burning sulfur. He will be there with the beast and the false prophet, and they will be in pain day and night forever and ever,” Kostakis quoted, staring at the mural above them.

“Revelation 20:10,” Tricky noted, François nodded walking toward the image.

Directly underneath the mural were two candleholders, one on either side. In the center, almost equidistant between the two candles was a stone. Carved into the stone was a circle with a crucifix in the middle. The inner part of the circle lay flush against the stone while the rim and crucifix were raised enough for a hand to grasp. The Frenchman leaned in closely, putting his hand on the crucifix, gripping it tightly, and twisting it counterclockwise.

Once turned, a loud grinding noise from beneath their feet could be heard. François quickly stepped back, imploring the others to do the same, as the large stone he was standing on started to slide into the wall, revealing the top of a stone staircase, descending beneath the castle.

“Guess we go down,” D-Boy stated the obvious.

François answered in French, Kostakis translating. “He says he must continue his rounds but will be back in one hour.” The Frenchman then added, “He says he is sorry but he must close the passageway once we are through.”

Remo nodded his head understandingly, leading the way down. D-Boy, Tricky and, finally, Kostakis, followed after he thanked his friend, who added one last word of caution.

With the entrance sealed, only a glowstick lit their way, as Remo turned to Kostakis to ask him what the Frenchman said, “He said be wary of the faith that guides you in the darkness.”

“That sounds encouraging,” D-Boy scoffed.

Remo sidled next to Kostakis down the dark stone steps, “What exactly is this ancient Order your friend up there belongs to?”

They stopped their descent, waiting for an answer. As usual, Kostakis did not disappoint, “They are called The Order of the Servants of Secrets. Not as powerful as they once were, Popes were known to request their services when undisclosed missions needed to be completed. For centuries, they guarded many of the world’s secrets. Everything from relics to sacred documents. For centuries, most of these texts were kept at the Library of Alexandria, but when the Romans destroyed it in 48 BCE, everything was scattered. The majority of documents housed at the Alexandria Library wound up here, along with many members of the Order. The rest of their brethren were assigned across the continent, and eventually the world.”

Tricky scoffed, “Too bad the next relic isn’t housed here. Kill two birds with one stone.”

“At one time it probably was,” Kostakis smiled knowingly.

“And you’re sure we can trust this guy of yours?” Remo raised an eyebrow.

“Implicitly.”

“Okay,” Remo nodded, satisfied with the Greek Professor’s reply, “Let’s keep moving.”

0315 hours

Catacombs of Château de l'Empéri

“Anybody else hear that?” Tricky asked, responding to the sound of metal scrapping against stone.

“Eyes and ears, everyone,” Remo ordered.

Slowly, the group descended the stairs, the beams from their MagLites leading the way down the narrow, stone staircase. As they approached the last step, the scrapping sound got louder, as they finally saw the source of the noise.

Four steel blades!

Each six feet high, rising out from the floor about ten feet in front of them. Beside these steel blades, aligned along the wall, were large openings with a bronze plaque underneath each one.

“Hey, Doc, you know anything about these?” Remo pointed over his shoulder at the holes.

Kostakis came over, looking at the holes then the plaques. His eyes widened, “Good Lord!” Kostakis exclaimed, studying the names of the three plaques he could read without being sliced in half.

Kostakis read the first three from top to bottom aloud, “Petrus Lombardus, *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum*, 1095-1160; Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis, *De Doctrina Christiana, De Civitate Dei*, 354–430; Abū ʿĀmid Muʿammad ibn Muʿammad al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, 1058-1111. This is incredible! These men were some of the most influential philosophers of their time. To have them buried here, it’s just... just remarkable,” Kostakis shook his head in disbelief.

“Does it mention anything about how to disarm these blades?” Remo could care less about the history of these tombs. They were on a tight schedule and he was more concerned about the mission at-hand and the steel blades preventing them from completing it.

Kostakis shook his head.

“Looks like we need to get creative,” Remo, Tricky and D-Boy shrugged their rucksacks from their backs, searching inside them.

“Maybe not,” Kostakis was looking at the plaques intently. Before the names of the three men were characters, symbolic of the tomb’s occupants.

Beside Petrus Lombardus’ name was the French heraldic design of a decorative lily, more commonly called a fleur-de-lis. Next to Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis was the Greek symbol, labarum, often used to describe Christ- the letter X on its side with the letter P intersecting its center. And finally, alongside Abū ʿĀmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī’s name was the sacred star and crescent symbol, synonymous with Islam.

Like the encircled stone crucifix that allowed them entrance into these catacombs, they too were raised and looked like they could also be turned. “Now, let me see,” Kostakis scratched his beard, “If I am correct, the right combination of the three should interrupt the blade cycle.”

Kostakis examined the three symbols. Then, a thought popped in his head. It was so simple, he was sure it would not work.

First, he gripped Hipponensis’ Christ symbol, turning it counterclockwise. A slight grinding noise echoed through the underground passage.

Next, he grasped al-Ghazālī’s crescent moon and star emblem, turning *it* counterclockwise.

Kostakis’ plan seemed to be working. The first blade slowed down considerably, but was still too fast for them to pass.

Lastly, he took hold of Lombardus’ fleur-de-lis, repeating the process. The grinding stopped, the blade freezing in mid-stream, about two feet off the ground. The grinding, however, was replaced by the sound of straining gears. They took that as their cue to step over the first blade seconds before it started up again. Tricky, the last to leap over the steel blade, felt a *swoosh* behind him as the rush of the blade shot up, narrowly missing his foot.

Once across, Kostakis took an opportunity to examine the next six tombs more closely, tombs of men long dead. Names like Aristotle; Abū 'l-Walīd Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn

Rushd, the Arab world's foremost translator of Aristotle's works; the preeminent Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, Moshe ben Maimon, otherwise known as Rabbi Moses Maimonides; even the 5th and 6th Century theologian and philosopher, anonymously recognized as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

Several men of note to be found here surprised even Kostakis, "Pope Leo I, Leo the Great, later canonized as a Saint, a central figure in organizing the Roman Catholic Church. Rumor has it, he even met Attila the Hun outside Rome, persuading him to turn back his armies," Kostakis smiled, reading the next plaque aloud, giving a brief history lesson on it as well.

"Incredible! Ignatius of Antioch, third bishop and student of John the Apostle. Among one of the earliest Apostolic Fathers who were the first to write down the teachings of early Christianity. Amazing!" Kostakis exclaimed breathlessly.

"All well and good, Doc, but we're on a tight schedule here. So if you don't mind..." Remo pointed to the symbols on the next series of plaques.

"Right," Kostakis studied them intently, and, with a confident finality, began turning each one counterclockwise in the order of when they lived. First, he turned Aristotle's labarum, then Ignatius' crucifix. He followed this by twisting Pope Leo the Great's Papal cross, a three bar cross, and Areopagite's labarum. Lastly he rotated Ibn Rushd's sun with seven rays of light and Rabbi Moses Maimonides' Star of David.

Once he turned the last symbol, the timing mechanism controlling this trap stalled the second blade halfway up, while the first blade slid all the way up, creating a steel wall blocking the way back. *No turning back now*, Remo thought as they leaped over the collapsed blade, where they were immediately confronted by six more tombs.

"No history lesson this time, Professor, please," Remo raised his hand.

Kostakis nodded, studying the names, plaques, and dates, and turning them accordingly.

As expected, the third blade stopped, while the second blade slid up into the ceiling forming another steel wall. Behind the second blade, they could hear the first blade moving up and down again.

Six more tombs and one last blade awaited them. Kostakis solved the last of the traps, disarming it, allowing the team to move down the passage. Seconds after they passed the fourth blade, it shot up into the ceiling remaining there. Behind it, the sound of the first three blades could be heard, as they started moving again. And yet, with through all the danger, Kostakis

could not help but think of some of tombs he had just seen. Some of the most important figures of the religious community were entombed here. Two more Apostolic Fathers, Saint Clement of Rome and Polycarp of Smyrna, as well as two more saints from the early second and twelfth centuries, Pantaeus and Archbishop Sava.

From what Kostakis could gather, others entombed here ranged from Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Roger Bacon, and John Duns Scotus to people who lived more recently- Bishop William Alexander, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, and William of Ockham. Even men and women theologians' tombs from the modern era were here, the American clergyman Aaron Bancroft, the German theologian Adolf von Harnack, the German Jesuit priest Alois Grimm, the unlawful Puritan minister Anne Hutchinson. Remarkably, all of them claimed a catacomb under the Château de l'Empéri as their final resting place.

All these prominent figures, their original works, hidden away for so long! Remarkable! It was all Kostakis could think of as he and the others passed these tombs while climbing down a ladder rooted into the wall and through an opening at the far end of the passageway.

His thoughts of the historical significance of this place were soon replaced when they reached the last rung of the ladder and gazed upon the wondrous sight before them.

He and the others found themselves standing on the landing of an enormous staircase, shock and amazement freezing them in their tracks. From this landing, they could see several massive bookcases, with hundreds of alcoves of various sizes, stretching from floor to ceiling, encompassing the center of the underground chamber, all of which were easily twenty-feet high.

0340 hours

The Philosophers' Library

Even from where they stood, Remo and his team could see hundreds upon hundreds of manuscripts, some that looked to be thousands of years old. Whatever Kostakis had imagined about this place, far exceeded what they would find.

"This is unbelievable! Unheard of even," Kostakis could no longer contain himself.

"Well, Professor, I hope you know what it is you're looking for because we have exactly," Remo looked at his watch, it was almost four, "one hour to it."

Kostakis sighed, as the four of them descended the staircase, ready to take on the arduous task of finding a manuscript holding the secrets of these ancient relics of Doomsday. It was the proverbial needle in one gargantuan haystack.

“This is unbelievable,” Kostakis repeated, staring at the manuscripts before him, curiously locked behind glassed partitions. “Every great philosopher from pre-Socratic thinkers is here in this magnificent collection- Thales and Anaximander of Miletus, Pythagoras and Xenophanes of Colophon to Aristotle and Plato. Even original works by Solon, the man who laid the foundation for democracy in Ancient Greece, and a rare manuscript by Herodotus entitled...” Kostakis stared at the engraved plate under the shelf holding the Herodotus scroll, carefully reciting the ancient Greek text “... *Με ταξίδια και της ιστορίας με τη θάλασσα των Λαών από μακρινές χώρες.*”

“You want to try that last line in English, Doc?” D-Boy asking while he continued looking for anything that could be easily identified as the *Nostradamus Manuscript*.

“*On the Travels and Histories with the Sea Peoples from Distant Lands,*” Kostakis answered as he continued looking from shelf to shelf.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Tricky said from the other side of an enormous bookcase.

“Some claim that, during the entire existence of civilization, ancient cultures were frequently visited by *Sea Peoples*. They are not referred to by any name, so some just assumed they were a wandering tribe, invading lands and conquering, or, in some cases, *trying* to conquer those already there. For many years, some have speculated that the *Sea Peoples* were descendants of the survivors from the Atlantean myth.”

“As interesting as that may be, Professor, it’s another story for another time. For now, we need to find that manuscript,” Remo said as he looked at his watch, ten to four.

After twenty-minutes, Kostakis exclaimed, “Ah, here we are,” staring nonchalantly at a glass door separating him from the manuscript. Remo walked over to where the Professor stood and, without hesitating, smashed the glass with the butt of his gun, much to the dismay of Kostakis.

“Sorry, Doc but we gotta get it and split.”

Kostakis understood, but was displeased nonetheless, as he carefully reached beyond the broken shards of glass, shaking free one of the many manuscripts within the alcove of by

Nostradamus. He read its title aloud, “*Les Prophéties d'un Monde Mourant de Michel de Nostradamus*,” looks like it was written just after the death of Copernicus. It even mentions his and Rheticus’ name in the first few pages as co-contributors to the work.”

Its title in English was literary translated as *The Prophecies of a Dying World by Michel de Nostradamus*. And, for the first time in hundreds of years, it was taken from its glass-encased shelf. Kostakis held it gently, like a specimen straight from a museum vault. It was leather-bound, about the size of a hardcover novel, and at least one hundred pages long. Its cover was ornately emblazoned with a gold-leaf crucifix, atop an image of the Earth, and showed signs of some slight shelf-wear. He delicately turned its pages taking extra care not to crack or tear them.

Kostakis was very apprehensive. He knew the value of such a piece of literature. Not only scientifically but and historically as well.

Kostakis pointed out, “This manuscript, from what I surmise, was completed around 1565 CE, with the help of several sources he does not mention for fear of excommunication.”

Kostakis continued to read the manuscript, staring at it as if he had all the time in the world, for at least ten minutes. He walked the entire length of the bookcase, around it then back, his nose buried in its pages, as if nothing was more important than what was written there. Every so often, he would “Hmm,” or “Ahh, I see.” Remo and the others, stood at the foot of the staircase, waiting.

“Uh, Doc, are you going to share with the rest of the class. Does it mention the other rulers and their relics?” Remo asked anxiously.

Instead of answering his question, Kostakis said, “I fear this has gotten a great deal more complicated.”

“Meaning?” Remo raised his eyebrow quizzically.

“I had assumed this manuscript revolved around the relics we are looking for, but it seems they are part of a much bigger picture,” Kostakis looked up, “According to this, there are a total of ten relics as well as ten mythological objects that must be found. Not to mention...”

Remo held up his hand, sighed, “First things first, are Stone and the others heading in the right direction?”

Kostakis looked down at the manuscript in his hands. Stroked the cover, then looked up at Remo, “Yes, The Aegis of Zeus is one of the relics, and, as I expected, it is at Mount Olympus, in Thessaloniki.”

“Okay, we’re out of here. We’ll figure the rest out on the way to the rendezvous,” Remo motioned his group back up the stairs, D-Boy and Tricky leading the way. Kostakis disappeared behind one of the bookcases for a few seconds before finally emerging; in his hands, he held another ancient manuscript.

“Let’s go Professor. Time’s a wasting,” Remo waved the Greek scholar past him, up the stairs, as he brought up the rear.

As they reached the top of the staircase Kostakis looked down at the wall-to-ceiling bookcase, “How I would love to spend my remaining days among these works.”

“You need to get out more, Professor,” Tricky climbed the ladder back up to the previous level, waiting for the other men to join him.

Retracing his efforts, Kostakis disabled the blades once more. It took him two tries before he recognized he needed to turn them in reverse order. Once realized, it was a matter of turning off and on the blades until they reached the staircase leading back up into the castle. As the four men reached the top, they felt a sense of relief. Everything went smoothly. They even afforded smiles for their efforts.

Those smiles quickly evaporated when they saw standing before them eight men from the same African mercenary force that stopped them at Siwa, all pointing GP-35s at their heads.

“I will take that,” one of the mercenaries held out his hand, a corporal by the look of his uniform. His name stitched on his left breast pocket identified him as Chineu, Corporal Chineu.

“Like hell you will,” D-Boy raised his rifle.

“Terribly sorry, Corporal,” Kostakis said calmly, walking toward the man. “In all the commotion, I did not realize I still had it,” he handed the manuscript over to the confused mercenary in charge.

“No, wait!” Remo lunged forward, but Kostakis held him back.

“It’s okay,” Kostakis raised his eyebrows, motioning toward the doorway, “We will be leaving now.”

“I am afraid I cannot allow that to happen,” Chineu sneered, his Congolese accent heavy, overconfident. It was only then that Kostakis saw the body of his French friend lying in the corner of the room, a bullet hole in his head, a pool of thick, sticky blood surrounding it.

Without hesitation, Remo fired his assault rifle into the ground, spraying a torrent of bullets at the corporal's feet. Chineu instinctively jumped out of the way, as he and his men ran for cover behind display cases and anything else they could find.

Remo's team did not hesitate. They bolted for the doorway and were out the door into their Bugattis and speeding away, leaving the castle grounds just as quickly as they arrived. Beyond the entrance, they passed the mercenaries transport, a green Land Rover 3GT. Feeling generous, Remo only flattened two of its tires and sprayed the engine with a few dozen rounds, puncturing the radiator. They would not be following them anytime soon.

Looking in his rearview mirror, Remo saw the confident corporal appear at the *Porte de l'Horloge* gateway, still holding the manuscript.

"Well, that was a wasted trip," Tricky said frustratingly, slamming his fist on the steering wheel.

"I wouldn't say that," Kostakis answered, a wry smile growing across his face. From under his shirt, Kostakis unveiled a heavy leather-bound book, *The Prophecies of a Dying World* by Michel de Nostradamus.

"Is that?" Remo asked, instantly knowing the answer. "You mind telling me what it was you gave those guys back there?" Remo smiled, taking the slight curve leading back the way they came, this time turning onto Place Gambetta/D538, before heading south on the A7/Aix-en-Provence/Marseille/Avignon ramp, eventually taking them to the Marseille Provence Airport.

"In all the commotion, I figured they wouldn't think to examine the book thoroughly. Both are similar in appearance. Besides, they have no way of knowing exactly what we were looking for," Kostakis said, "Hopefully they enjoy Herodotus' account of his travels with the Sea Peoples." He then began carefully reading over the ancient text. "It's a shame; all those manuscripts belong in a museum. Technically, it is my scholarly duty to procure them for future generations. It just so happens that I decided to start with this one. The other texts, well..." Kostakis' voice trailed off lost in thought.

"Good work, Doc," Remo's grin grew wider. He looked at his watch, five on the nose. They had two hours to go less than twenty miles, plenty of time. "Let's hope the others had just as much luck as we did."

0415 hours

10 miles outside of Marseille

At Kostakis' insistence, Remo took a slight detour, pulling into a deserted parking lot just off the highway.

He turned to Remo, "We might be in for a bit more than we bargained for."

"What else is new?"

"According to Nostradamus, the first Relic of Judgment Day, his term not mine, will initiate a geothermal chronometer that will judge mankind."

"That sounds like some heavy-duty shit, Professor," Tricky chimed in.

Remo turned to Kostakis, "What exactly do you think that means?"

"Bluntly, our deadline just got shorter," Kostakis held the manuscript close to his chest.

"So you were off by a day or two," Remo shrugged, "No big deal, right?"

"But, that's just it. Time is of the utmost importance," he turned a few pages, running his finger down one page until he found what he was looking for. He read the page quietly to himself then looked up.

Kostakis closed the manuscript, taking off his reading glasses, "Many theories surrounding the end of days, some legitimate some far-fetched, are constantly circulating, especially now with the widespread use of the internet and databases. Several of these are floating around at any one time and, although none can be proven, everyone seems to be concerned by them. One of these theories is the Centrifugal-Alignment Hypothesis in which the Earth, the Moon and the center of the Milky Way Galaxy will align with each other. That happens to fall on December 21st. However, there has never been any geological evidence linking that particular date with any doomsday scenario anywhere in recorded history.

"Another such theory, revolves around a planetary object, larger than Jupiter, is on a collision course with our planet. Web-Newsies claim NASA is trying to cover up the severity of this scenario, but colleagues of mine in the astronomy field have assured me that with all the technology out there, anyone with a powerful-enough telescope can see there is no such threat to worry about. Yet, you still have those people that insist upon it.

"The main point to take away from all this speculation is that, on the third of December, from what I gather, a series of cataclysmic anomalies will occur, causing a chemical chain reaction of global events that could possibly spell doom for humanity."

“You got all that from reading a few pages from some ancient psychic’s notebook?” D-Boy asked.

“Unfortunately, I have. And if these calculations are correct, the first ten of these relics must be found before midnight of the last total solar eclipse of this year, while the remaining relics must be found before the stroke of midnight on the third of December.”

“And this means we have how long?” Tricky said over the headset.

“Yeah, when is this Total Solar Eclipse happening?” D-Boy asked.

“November 13th,” Kostakis chuckled nervously.

Remo looked at Kostakis as if he had grown two heads, “You realize that only gives us seven days to fly around the world and find ten relics, whose whereabouts are a mystery to us.”

“*Were* a mystery,” Kostakis patted the *Nostradamus Manuscript*, sat back in his seat and sighed, “It’s the relics after *these* that are still a mystery.”

1959 hours

Marseille Provence Airport

With the *Nostradamus Manuscript* safely in their possession, Remo and Tricky sped their Bugattis northwest toward Marseille. In no time at all, they were arriving at Marseille Provence Airport. Security clearance had been arranged ahead of time, so all they had to do was show their Omega IDs to gain access to the restricted military airstrip.

Sitting on the farthest runway was *The Meadowlark*. Remo stopped his Bugatti about ten yards from the aircraft; Tricky did the same. The four men got out of the two cars, running up the air-staircase leading to the main cabin of *The Meadowlark*.

It was exactly seven o’clock.

“We got it, Major!” Remo yelled when he got to the top of the staircase, entering the cabin, stopping dead in his tracks.

“Good, we were getting worried you got lost,” A tall, broad shouldered man in a Navy SEALs’ officer uniform addressed Remo. He was surrounded by an additional ten SEALs all fully armed. Another twenty SEALs guarded Remo’s fellow Omega teammates, who sat dejectedly in silence.

By this time, the other three members of Remo's team stood next to him, just as shocked as he was.

As he looked around, Remo saw everyone was accounted for, except for Stone and Radcliffe, "Who the fuck are you?"

"I am Admiral Richard Alberts, Commanding Officer of SEAL Team Six, Red Cell Division. And, given the circumstances, I will excuse the manner in which you have addressed me."

"What did you bastards do with Stone?" D-Boy demanded as he took a step forward.

"Unfortunately, he and Professor Miles Radcliffe are dead. And, I am sorry to say Second Lieutenant Daniel Lackey, but, I cannot excuse that tone a second time."

Before anyone could react, D-Boy's face met the butt of an M-16 rifle being wielded a SEAL member standing beside Admiral Alberts, knocking him out, instantly. The young officer fell, unconscious, near the edge of the ramp. Tricky reached for his sidearm, but Remo held his arm as ten M4's were instantly pointed at their heads.

"A wise move, Captain," the Admiral smiled.

It was then that Remo saw two bodies lying face down on the floor, just beyond the forward doors. Both men were knocked out and had their hands and feet bound together with zip-strip restraints.

One man he had never seen before, but with his old fashioned, leather, pilot hat and goggles resting atop his head, Remo could only assume it was *The Meadowlark's* pilot, Eagle Eye.

The other body was General Anderson Harris.

"Corporal Stanton, zip-strip these men, then bring them down to the cargo hold. Search them for anything valuable and bring it to me. Once we're airborne over the Zagros Mountains, dump them!" The Admiral turned, walking toward the cockpit, "And, Corporal?"

"Yes, Admiral?"

"Do not kill them. I want them alive as they plummet to their deaths," Admiral Alberts entered the cockpit, closing the door behind him.

The air-staircase was removed from the side of *The Meadowlark* while Remo, Tricky and Kostakis were forced at gunpoint to sit down and join the others as three SEALs tied their hands behind their backs. The Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules rumbled down the tarmac, presumably

piloted by a SEAL member, and taking off eastwards, to an undisclosed location. It was now nearly eight in the morning.

Remo looked down at the line of remaining members of his team. All looked ragged, crushed. Like they just went twelve rounds with Clubber Lang and never got back up. It was then that Remo saw a large duffle bag, bulging from all sides. He did not have to guess what might be inside; he knew exactly what it held.

“What the hell happened in Greece?” Remo asked the closest person, Professor Hazelton.

She looked up at Remo, tears in her eyes, looked at the duffle bag, then looked down in disgust, “We lost.”

Four

The Aegis of Zeus

November 6th, 2012

0400hours

Macedonia, Greece

Six objects, barely noticeable against the dark night sky, plummeted over the valley town of Litochoro. Had it not been four in the morning, some might have thought they were giant bats or the Gods raining down upon their tiny town. As it were, the name Litochoro in Greek, meant City of Gods, so that may not be hard to imagine for some. However, when six parachutes deployed just beyond the town’s limits, at the base of Mount Olympus, some late night wanderers may have wondered why Gods needed parachutes at all.

The team of six men and two women landed softly on a grassy knoll just a few yards past a grove of olive trees. Quickly they unbuckled their chutes, letting them drop. Stone and Marley had to unlatch two buckles, releasing their passengers, Professors Hazelton and Radcliffe. Once everybody was unbuckled, they hastily ran through the open field, the cover of darkness their only solace. The only light was provided by a full moon, half hidden behind some thick misty clouds. It was the perfect cover for Stone and his team as they headed for the magnificent mausoleum, resting innocuously at the base of Mount Olympus.

It was the highest point on mainland Greece, and was said to be the home of Greek Mythology's Dodekathemon, literary translated as twelve of the gods. If one were to believe the writings of Homer, the first reference to the Twelve Olympians came from his *Hymn to Hermes*. Many have pondered the actual twelve gods in question, but, generally, when speaking of them, scholars are referring to Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Ares, Hermes, Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, and Hestia. Later, around 400 BCE, Greek historian Herodorus saw fit to replace Demeter, Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Ares, Artemis, and Hestia with Alpheus, Cronus, Rhea, and the three Charites- Algaea, Euphrosyne, and Thalia. Some went so far as to include Heracles and Asklepios in the twelve, all though it is never mentioned which of the twelve gods was replaced.

At this moment, thousands of years after the birth of these Greek mythological figures, a team of eight men and women stood at the foot of the mausoleum dedicated to these Gods, ready to enter the realm of these deities. No one guarded this entrance, few even knew about the mausoleum itself, let alone the secrets it held within. They quickly climbed the marble stairs leading to the mausoleum's portico. Had tourists taken the time, they would have explored this structure on the opposite side of Mount Olympus.

Marley took from his rucksack a thick pair of pliers, clipping the Master-Lock like a hot knife through butter, and swung open the wrought iron door. Four glowsticks were cracked by Stone and his team, lighting the interior as they stared at the impressive structure before them.

The dome-shaped roof reached at least one hundred feet high while, along the walls, stretching from the floor to just below the start of the dome, were carved reliefs for each god and what they represented. Painted on the dome, high above the floor was a mural of the war waged between the Titans and the Twelve Olympians known as the Dodekathemon. And, in the dome's center, like the Pantheon in Rome, was a hole where the gods could look down upon the mortals.

Although, nowadays, it was covered over with plexi-glass to protect the mausoleum from the elements.

“Okay, Professor, you’re up,” Stone looked at Radcliffe. “What can you tell us about what we’re looking at and what we should be looking *for*?”

“Well, as for what we are looking for, I cannot tell you, just yet,” Radcliffe walked around the complex studying each relief carefully. Looking for clues anywhere he could find them.

“This relief is of Poseidon and his rescue from his father’s stomach by his brother Zeus- the Sea God and his siblings were eaten by their father, Cronus, shortly after their births. It goes on to depict Poseidon striking his trident into the earth causing the seas to flood the Attic Plain, punishing the Athenians for choosing his sister, Athena, as their patron god. The last portion of this relief shows Poseidon being given jurisdiction over the seas.”

Radcliffe continued walking around until he came to the wall opposite Poseidon’s relief.

“This is obviously Zeus, who, in several portions of the relief, is holding his shield, the Aegis. The main parts of the relief depict his victory over his father Cronus, thus becoming king of the gods. If you look closely at the detail, you can make out him reaching manhood, forcing Cronus to expel the Omphalos Stone from under Mount Parnassus in Pytho, home of the god Python.” Radcliffe kept walking along the relief wall, pointing every so often to particular scenes. “Here, Cronus was forced to, for lack of a better word, vomit up his offspring in reverse order of swallowing. After rescuing his siblings, Zeus then released his uncles- the Gigantes, the Hecatonchires, and the Cyclopes- from Tartarus, the mythological dungeon beneath the underworld. As a reward, the Cyclopes gave Zeus the powers of thunder and thunderbolts, both of which had been hidden by, the Goddess of the Earth, Gaia.”

Radcliffe followed the relief along the length of the wall, continuing, “With the help of Gigantes, Hecatonchires and Cyclopes, Zeus and his siblings overthrew Cronus and the other Titans, in a war to end all wars, the War of the Titans, also referred to as the Titanomachy. It took ten years, but the Titans were finally defeated, cast into the abysmal dungeon region of Tartarus. However, not every Greek Titan’s fate lay within the dungeon walls. As punishment, for fighting against Zeus, Atlas was forced to hold up the sky for all eternity.

“Once the war was over, Zeus and his brothers divided the world between them, Zeus got the heavens, Poseidon the waters, and Hades the underworld. Now, since the Earth could not be

claimed, the three brothers divided her up according to their capabilities. Poseidon controlled earthquakes, Hades claimed the humans that died, and Zeus was ruler over everything else.” Radcliffe came to the last portion of Zeus’ relief, which met with the wall opposite the mausoleum entrance.

Another relief was carved into this wall, the story of Hades. But, Radcliffe was not interested in the life of Hades. He was studying a marbleized bas-relief banner carved above the Hades wall sculpture.

“Find something?” Stone walked up to Radcliffe.

“Maybe,” Radcliffe pointed at the carving, “This here is written in Greek. If the treasure of the King of Gods is what you seek, look past Hades and Poseidon who guard their brother’s shrine, and the power held in his hand. To follow in their footsteps one must walk among them to become them.” He tilted his head, studying the relief closely. Beneath this carving was another. “Recall our names to secure your path,” Radcliffe read aloud.

Only after a few minutes did Radcliffe see it.

The Helmet of Darkness was fashioned for Hades to protect him during the War of the Titans. Made of dogskin and fashioned with two wings on either side, it resembled the wings of Hermes and making its wearer invisible.

This one, of course, was made from marble, but something struck Radcliffe as strange. One wing was slightly raised in the relief, but the other protruded slightly further than the rest of the relief. Carefully he reached up, touching the wing.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, until Radcliffe did something unexpected, even to himself.

He pulled down on the exposed wing.

It gave way, and, to everyone’s astonishment, the middle portion of the Hades relief slid inwards, revealing a five by five foot hole with handholds fashioned against the interior wall, leading down, under the mausoleum.

“For when we threw the lots I received the grey sea as my abode, Hades drew the murky darkness, Zeus, however, drew the wide sky of brightness and clouds; the earth is common to all, and spacious Olympus,” Lovey recited while watching the hidden door slide to a halt.

“Something tells me when Homer wrote that in the *Iliad* about the three brothers, this wasn’t exactly what he had in mind,” Stone said taking a glowstick, and tossing it down into the hole. After about four seconds, it hit solid ground.

“Not too deep. Okay, Johnny Boy, I’m gonna need a lookout. Find somewhere secluded. Don’t try to be a hero,” Stone looked him straight in the eyes. “Anything suspicious, you let us know then make for the checkpoint with *The Meadowlark*. We’ll find a way out.”

Stone took a deep breath, looked at the others then nodded his head toward the hole, “My ex-wife always said I was going to Hell; guess she was right about something.”

0420 hours

Under the Mausoleum

Hades Spine Trap

By the time Stone had reached the bottom of the ladder, Lovey and Marley had two glowsticks lit and were contemplating how they were going to get across the fifty-foot gap which was home to ten spears rising from its bottom, delaying their progress.

“LBAS?” Lovey looked at Stone who had come over to join them.

Stone looked up, seeing nothing but smooth, solid rock above and around them. “You read my mind.”

“You’re not that hard to read,” as she and the other Omega operatives took out their G-guns. They proceeded to load the LBAS and fired them across the gap, into the ceiling above.

Stone took hold of Hazelton, swinging them both across the gap, easily. Lovey and Radcliffe were next, followed by Rebel, Nicky Rich and Marley.

On the opposite side of the gap, cut into the rock was an ascending staircase. They cautiously climbed the steps, waiting for something to happen.

Too many movies put absurd notions in everyone’s head- a boulder rolling out from the ceiling, hot oil or lava pouring down from holes in the ceiling, poisonous darts shooting out from holes hidden in the walls.

But, nothing happened. No boulder, no oil, lava or poisonous darts, instead they reached the top of the stairs without incident. *That was a little too easy*, Stone thought to himself.

Just then, his earpiece to crackled to life.

“Uh, Major?”

“Go, Johnny Boy.”

“You got incoming. ST6, thirty strong. Looks like they’re following your lead, heading for the mausoleum and... Holy Shit!”

“You still there, Kid?”

“Yes, sir, but you might want to speed up the process. Not only do they have thirty-foot soldiers heading your way through the mausoleum, but another forty just parachuted from a V-22, along with two HM-K4 transport vehicles, fully loaded, on the western side of Olympus!”

A V-22 was a Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey Tiltrotor Tactical Transport Helicopter. Only fifty of which were built. It could climb nearly 5 miles into the sky- almost 26,000 feet- could reach speeds of 275 knots, and could hold roughly 47,500 pounds. It was the Rolls Royce of transport helicopters.

HM-K4s were supped up versions of the Humvee, with double plated armor and bulletproof windows. Not only is it virtually impenetrable, but it had one M48 .50 Caliber gun turret mounted above the front passenger side, facing forward, and another on the rear driver side facing backwards.

“Shit! The western side?” Stone said aloud.

“Yes, sir. Not sure what their plan is but I can guess.”

“So can I,” Stone figured they were going to be trailed by one team, while the other team found another way into the mountain, trying to ambush them at some point, trapping them inside the mountain with no escape.

Overall, the SEAL team was *not* fucking around.

“Let me know when the first team enters the mausoleum. Then let me know how far up the mountain the second team is and when they find a way in. Other than that, keep radio silence and stay safe.”

“Way ahead of you, Sir,” Johnny Boy whispered from his perch, thirty feet or so above the ground, in the highest olive tree in the grove. “I don’t need to wait to tell you where they went. The aerial SEAL team split in two. One HM-K4 is transporting twenty up a steep winding road toward a small opening in the western side of the mountain. The second HM is transporting the rest up the eastern side toward a similar opening.”

Stone looked at his watch four-thirty, “ETA?”

“About thirty minutes before they storm. Oh, shit! I’ve been spotted!”

Gunfire erupted over Stone’s earpiece.

“Gotta go, Sir! Johnny Boy out!”

Stone’s earpiece went dead, hoping the young Second Lieutenant got away. Having been mentored by Remo, Stone had no doubt he did.

Thirty-minutes, he thought to himself.

That should give them enough time to get the shield. How they were going to get out with seventy ST6 men converging on the same prize, Stone did not want to think about just yet. One impossible dilemma at a time was enough.

It was only then that Stone saw why everyone had stopped at the top of the steps.

“Great,” Stone hung his head in disgust.

0430 hours

Outside the Mausoleum

Bullets from M-16s riddled the tiny, wooden shack where Johnny Boy hid. At the first sounds of gunfire, he dropped to the cold dirt floor watching the thin wood succumb to the onslaught, swiftly causing it to take on the appearance of a slice of Swiss cheese more than a storage shack for olives and farming equipment. Through some of the holes, Johnny Boy could see the feet of four men, two of which rounded to the opposite side of the shack- surrounding him.

He was trapped. He needed to think of something quick.

As two men approached the front of the shack, Johnny Boy turned from his belly to his back, from his side holsters he brandished two Heckler & Koch Mk23s, took a deep breath and, using his feet like springs, slid on the ground, arms straight out over his head. When he reached the front of the shack, Johnny Boy stuck his arms through two holes courtesy of SEAL gunfire near the floor of the shack, Mk23s loaded and chambered.

The sudden appearance of two massive side arms shooting out from beneath them stopped the two men in their tracks. Their hesitation was the last mistake they would ever make. Bullets pierced them from below, ripping flesh and bones from their legs and groin. The two SEALs convulsed for a few seconds then fell to the hard, cold ground.

Johnny Boy did not hesitate, spinning on his back while simultaneously kicking at the already whittled down wooden planks of the shack's walls. The wood gave away easily, allowing Johnny Boy to storm through the rest of the wall and exit the shack. Before he did though, he left a present for the two remaining SEALs who were just now entering the shack from the opposite side.

KA-BLAM!

The explosion nearly knocked Johnny Boy off his feet as he reached a small group of olive trees. He ducked behind them just as four SEAL Team Six men looked in the direction of the explosion; the remaining members went inside the mausoleum to stop Stone and his team. The sight of the tiny wooden shack being annihilated, and two of their fellow SEALs dead on the ground was cause for some alarm. The four men, M-16's tucked to their shoulders ready for a fight, stuck in tight formation as they shuffled toward the ruins of the shack.

Perfect, Johnny Boy thought as he lay on his belly, sniper rifle aimed steadily at the men completely oblivious of his survival.

The first two SEAL heads exploded so quickly that it froze them in mid-step as they fell to the ground. The third SEAL turned at the sound of his colleagues thudding to the ground, catching a bullet in the side of his throat, causing his jugular to be severed and blood to spurt in a thick mist on the fourth SEAL member, who had sense enough to drop to the ground before Johnny Boy's bullet zipped past his head.

"Give yourself up!" The fourth SEAL shouted. "I might let you live."

Johnny Boy scoffed. *Does this asshole actually think I believe him?* Instead, he said nothing, watching the SEAL scurry on the ground toward the flaming remains of the shack. *You can't hide from me, shithead.*

A bullet from Johnny Boy's sniper rifle stopped the man from crawling as it penetrated the bottom of his foot. The SEAL cursed at Johnny Boy, but he also did what anyone in his situation would do. Trained SEAL or not, he instinctually grabbed for his foot, rising ever so slightly, but just enough to get a bullet between his eyes.

At least his foot will not hurt him anymore, Johnny Boy smiled, grabbing his sniper rifle, ducking and running toward one of the smaller vehicles, a black Land Rover, the SEALs used as transport. With no one else around, and the keys conveniently left in the center console cup-holder, Johnny Boy hopped in, started it up and drove off toward the tiny valley town of

Litochoro, from there he would follow East 75 highway to the coastal town of Pláka and the abandon military base where *The Meadowlark* was waiting.

Johnny Boy hated leaving Stone and the others behind, but it was either that or be killed, and he figured he was more useful alive than dead. After all, Stone told him to stay safe and at the first sign of trouble get to the checkpoint; that he and the team would find a way to safety. And if it was one thing Major Donovan Stone knew, it was how to make the impossible possible. So, with no regrets, Johnny Boy took a slight turn onto the highway, gunning the Land Rover for all it was worth toward Pláka.

Probably have just enough time to watch the sun rise over the Aegean with a nice hot cup of Greek coffee and plate of bougatsa, Johnny Boy managed a smile as the colossal Mount Olympus shrunk in his rearview mirror.

0431 hours

Interior of Mount Olympus

The Stepping Stone Trap

On the left hand side of Stone were thirty holes, embedded into the sidewall. Each one was about ten inches wide, what was inside them was anybody's guess, but whatever it was, was most certainly connected to the one hundred raised stones on the floor below. Each stone was unique in that, carved onto each stone was a single letter of an alphabet; and not just from one singular alphabet, but from at least four different alphabets of the ancient world. Greek, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Sumerian cuneiform, and Indus Sanskrit were all etched onto various stones. Which stones were correct, was the fifty million dollar question.

"Okay, now what?" Nicky Rich said.

Radcliffe thought for a few seconds, remembering what he read on the Hades relief. *Recall our names to secure your path.*

Professor Miles Radcliffe did something that would either save them all or kill him. He placed his right foot forward, onto the Greek letter closest to him, Pi whose character looked like a post-and-lintel doorway, Π.

Nothing happened.

The next letter he stepped on was familiar in the western alphabet as the letter O but in Greek it was called Omicron, o.

“Looks like you guessed right, Doc,” Stone breathed a sigh of relief.

“Just follow my lead exactly,” Miles said, continuing to spell Poseidon’s name using the Greek alphabet.

A fancy, lowercase o with a flaring line at its top came next, σ, the Greek letter for Sigma. It was followed by a backwards number three, ε, Epsilon and ι, Iota.

Then, in an obvious attempt by the trap’s builder to trick whoever was trying to beat it, the next two lowercase letters Delta and Omega- δ, ω- were on the same stone.

The last letter, Nu, Radcliffe had a hard time finding until he spotted it. The Greek letter ν, about three feet to the left, pressed up against the wall, barely wide enough to step on. Taking a deep breath, Radcliffe summoned the courage to leap onto the six-inch wide stone, instinctively gripping the edges of two of the wall holes to keep his balance. He was not sure if he was meant to, but he heard several gasps from the other team members while they watched him precariously hanging onto his position.

Shaking his head, Radcliffe thought, *I am not sure what comes out of those holes in the wall and I am not too keen on finding out.*

But, he then ran into a dilemma, Poseidon’s name only brought him halfway through the stepping-stones. With another ten feet to the stone steps leading up, Radcliffe desperately looked around for an answer.

Obviously, he was right in spelling Poseidon’s name, or else he would have been dead by now. What am I missing? His eyes darted left then right. Looking from the floor to ceiling then caught sight of something, several things actually. More Greek letters scattered about a jumble of cuneiform and hieroglyphs.

Taking a giant leap of faith, Radcliffe stepped on the nearest Greek lettered stones, Αἰδη□, spelling out Hades’ name, then lastly Zeus’ name, Ζεύ□.

The last lowercase letter in the great god’s name must have triggered something else, *the next trap, no doubt*, Radcliffe thought, because now the echoes of metal grinding against stone reverberated throughout the mountain’s passageway.

Stone and his team followed Radcliffe, stepping on each stone that he stepped on, until they reached the next set of steps leading up to the next level.

0450hours

Interior of Mount Olympus

The Blades of Heaven Trap

“Great,” Stone stared at five circular, spring-activated, steel blades. Each blade had serrated edges, adding to the already menacing challenge ahead.

The pattern was a simple one. The first, third and fifth blades all springing down while the second and forth blades remained locked in place on the stone ceiling above. Now, if only Stone could figure a way to get across in one piece.

“I’m open to suggestions, people.”

“Any fancy tricks in that sack of yours?” Hazelton nodded toward Stone’s rucksack.

Stone thought for a second, *If only we could disrupt the pattern somehow*. This trap was triggered when the last stone was stepped on. *Think*.

“What if we somehow deactivate this trap by stepping on the last stone of the stepping stone trap?” Stone suggested.

“Maybe,” Radcliffe began walking down the steps, back toward the stepping stone trap. “I’ll go and...”

“Not a chance, Doc,” Stone grabbed the Professor’s arm. “I’ll go. If this works, these blades should stop until they’re triggered again.”

“You remember the spellings?” Radcliffe raised an eyebrow.

“Not much of a choice. Don’t worry about me. Once this trap is stopped, run.” Stone dashed down the steps, stepping on the last stone, thinking it may just be that easy since the blades were not activated until the last stone was depressed.

No such luck.

Stone had no other choice, understanding what needed to be done, sighing at the daunting task ahead. He had to step on the stone alphabet, in reverse order, spelling Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon backwards, in Ancient Greek no less.

You always have to be the fucking hero, don’t you? Stone thought, preparing to make a mad dash back across the stepping stone trap, hoping that his memory was as eidetic as it had

been all those years ago as he slept through graduate classes, but still managed to finish in the top two percent of his class.

“Go!” Stone heard Lovey yell at the others.

From where he was, Stone could hear the boots of his team shuffling past the deactivated blade trap. If he had not been so concerned about his team, he would have seen the first five men of a team of thirty SEALs converging on the Spine of Hades trap behind him, and six more dropping in behind *them* via the mausoleum entrance.

Fortunately, for Stone the echo of the SEALs weapons cocking reverberated inside the cavernous limestone chamber. Aimed directly at him. A sitting duck atop the stairs, barely one hundred feet away. Waiting until the last possible second, Stone dropped to the ground, laying flat on his stomach, under a hailstorm of bullets. The landing of the stepping stone staircase was high enough for him to avoid being hit, however, a few came closer than he would have liked.

He waited until the firing stopped briefly before abruptly jumping to his feet, Heckler & Koch Mk23 in hand, unleashing a hailstorm of rounds on his attackers.

The SEALs had the unfortunate advantage of not being able to duck for cover. Two fell immediately, victims of Stone’s expert marksmanship, their faces a bloody, pulpy mess. Another two had their hands shot clean off, firearms flying into the air along with several severed fingers and one hand.

His only escape was back across the stepping-stones, down the passage with the spring blade trap. Without thinking, Stone stepped across the stones, carefully, but quickly, spelling out the three gods’ names.

He had to move fast because the four SEALs he shot dead were being replaced by twenty-six SEALs, all of whom were brandishing assault rifles, some carrying huge duffle bags down the rope, but all ready to release a firestorm of hell upon him!

As he reached the last letter of Zeus’ name, Stone hesitated before deciding to jump over the stone, sprinting up the staircase to where, if he thought correctly, the blade trap would still be inactive.

Stone was right.

The blades were suspended in their spring-loaded trap, waiting to be triggered. He ran with alacrity under the dormant blades toward the steps leading up to the next level. Standing there, waiting for him, was Amanda Hazelton.

“The others are on the next level. Miles is trying to figure out how to get past the trap.”

“Give me one second.” Stone took from his rucksack a round clay-like object, a C-2 M6.

The C-2 M6 explosive was another device, engineered by the geniuses at Omega, to be used in situations where its user could not set explosives exactly where they wanted, but was, instead, durable enough to be rolled like a ball toward its intended target from a safe distance. It was less powerful than its C-4 or C-6 counterparts were. But for tight spots like this, it was the perfect choice.

If he timed it right, angled it right, the explosive should land somewhere close to the last stepping stone, triggering the blade trap.

“You can’t escape, Major Stone!” A booming voice echoed throughout the first two levels of the mountainous chamber.

A familiar voice to Stone, “I didn’t think you would actually have the balls to be part of this mission, Admiral.”

“I’m not the same man you knew twenty years ago, Major,” Admiral Alberts said with an undeniable air of arrogance.

In truth, Stone did not know Admiral Richard Alberts personally. When he was younger, the Admiral had been over for dinner a few times, but that had been when he was friends with Stone’s father.

Richard Alberts and William Stone had both served in the armed forces. Stone’s dad was a Marine, rising through the ranks to become a hardened General before being killed on a classified mission in the Arctic. Alberts was part of the Navy SEAL team sent into the Arctic to save General William Stone and his team of Marines. Unfortunately, they were too late. When the SEALs arrived, all the Marines were dead. Shot through their heads, execution style, according to official documents. To this day, the mission’s failure has been covered up, with no organization being held accountable for the deaths of forty-seven Marines.

Stone had his suspicions over the last fifteen years about what really happened up there. He could not prove anything, but he would stake his career that his father’s death was a cover-up for something much bigger. Something his father’s Marine unit found out about, and Alberts’ SEAL team was sent in to keep under wraps, before it leaked throughout the intelligence communities.

Stone vowed when he joined Omega that, if he ever met the man, whom he had no doubt had been responsible for his father's death, he would put a bullet in the man's head. Now, the opportunity had been presented, but Stone had a mission to finish before he exacted his revenge.

"I wish I could stay and talk, Admiral, but I have a job to finish. Just do me one favor," Stone set the C-2 timer for ten seconds, "Don't die just yet. I want the pleasure of killing you myself."

Stone depressed the timer, rolling it down the Blade trap passageway. He watched as it ricocheted off the far wall, rolling down the stone steps. Stone ran up the stairs, counting in his head how much time he had before the explosion, to the next level. Then, with only two seconds to spare...

Ba-Boom!

The next few events happened so quickly that the SEAL team hardly had any time to react. And, if Stone could see what he had accomplished, he would have sanctimoniously smiled at his handiwork.

Stone and Hazelton reached the top step of the Blades of Heaven trap when the C-2 explosive landed on the last Greek letter, exploding and reactivating the trap.

As the C-2 exploded, it sent shrapnel and broken stone chunks into the face of the three closest SEAL men, killing them instantly, their faces a shredded, bloody mess.

The explosion did one other thing; because the pattern for the trap was compromised by the explosion, it triggered the Stepping Stone trap on the lower level, activating the danger lurking within the wall along the stepping-stones.

The remaining ST6 members, still standing on the stepping-stones, clearly were not expecting what happened next. With an incredible suddenness, a blast of bubbling, boiling water shot out from every hole on the wall, instantly burning the faces and hands of the SEAL team. Blisters formed on their severely burned hands and faces as the seven men dropped to their knees, writhing in agony.

From his perch, on the opposite side of the Spine of Hades trap, Admiral Alberts nodded his head, admiring Stone for his quick thinking and inexorable efforts to thwart the SEAL team's advance. He then watched as his remaining team used liquid nitrogen to freeze the boiling water coming out of the wall holes. They then emptied their duffle bags, consisting of several

interlocking metal beams, constructing a makeshift bridge across the increasingly wide gap caused by the explosion from the Stepping Stone trap and leading up to the Blades of Heaven.

0515 hours

Interior of Mount Olympus

The Dodekathemon Chamber Trap

Stone figured they had about twenty minutes before ST6 team made it across the first trap, another twenty before they got through the second one.

“Any idea what we’re looking at, Professor,” Stone asked Radcliffe who was staring at four rows of three horizontal slots, which were embedded into the wall, twelve in all. Each wall-slot had a symbol carved into the wall beside it. At the far end of the chamber, a stone staircase leading up, into the chamber’s ceiling, apparently stopping there. No entrance to another chamber. No hint of an opening was visible anywhere. Just an unassuming staircase leading to nowhere.

“It’s a bit odd,” Radcliffe stared at the wall, “The symbols are obviously Greek, but they are very ancient.”

“Meaning?” Marley asked.

“Well, I’m pretty sure it means we need to find the correct symbol for a member of the twelve major Greek gods.”

“Pretty sure?” Lovey sighed.

“Why can’t we just walk on down the hall toward those stairs?” Nicky Rich pointed at a staircase, on the opposite end of the chamber.

Stone answered the question, raising a glowstick; illuminating three skeletons slumped ominously in front of the wall-slots, their arms, legs and heads disarticulated from the rest of their torso. “I’m guessing those guys thought the same thing.” It was obvious they had been down here for centuries seeing that hardly any flesh remained on their bones.

Beside the first three wall-slots, engraved in a flaring marble banner, much like the one entwined above on the Hades mural in the Mausoleum of the Gods, was something written in Ancient Greek.

“Loosely translated, “ Radcliffe spoke, “it says: ‘Many false shields have been forged, but only the Aegis, fashioned by the God King’s brother, is genuine and will sanction safe passage to the shrine of his brother. All other treasures are deceitful and those who find them will meet with their untimely demise.’ It’s attributed to an ancient Greek poet, Archilochus, who lived around 700 BCE.”

“What a surprise,” Stone muttered sarcastically under his breath. “Any idea where we start?”

“Well, Hephaestus forged the Aegis for Zeus. He’s usually symbolized by a smith’s hammer and anvil.” Radcliffe looked at the symbols, “The last symbol in the third wall-slot column is of, what *appears* to be, a hammer and anvil.”

They peered around Radcliffe, seeing the circular stone protruding slightly from the wall, a symbol raised upon it.

“Do we just walk up to it and press it, or will these other wall-slots slice *our* heads off, like our dead friends lying over there?” Radcliffe nodded at the three skeletons on the ground beside the wall.

“One way to find out,” Stone said, boldly taking a step forward.

He waited a good ten seconds before realizing nothing was going to happen. To everyone’s surprise, no trap was triggered, no deadly blade, no ten-foot long spears shooting up from the stone floor. This section of the interior chamber of the mountain was, seemingly, safe. *As long as you knew what you were looking for*, Stone thought stepping over the second skeleton, whose lower jawbone lay agape with the terror its owner once endured, until he came to the third set of horizontal slots.

Stone stood in front of the three horizontal slots, with symbols of their own engraved beside them. But, he was only concerned with the one.

“Here goes nothing,” Stone pressed the hammer and anvil symbol, making it flat against the wall.

A loud grinding noise, like stone on stone, reverberated throughout the chamber. For a split second, Stone held his breath, waiting to be cut in half, decapitated or both. But, neither of those things happened. Instead, to everyone’s relief, a stone slab slid into the wall of the ceiling, just above the stairs.

“Guess we go up,” Marley said as he and the others walked over to where Stone was standing.

“On the double,” Stone motioned for everyone to run forward and climb the stone staircase, giving them access to the next level.

What they saw when they arrived at the top of the stairs, stopped them dead in their tracks. The Mausoleum of Alexander the Great was impressive enough, but this was one hundred times higher and ten times wider.

It was the lost Shrine of Zeus.

0530 hours

Interior of Mount Olympus

The Shrine of Zeus

Standing before them was a magnificent two story marble structure. The first level, raised at least ten feet off the ground, forming the base for the second story, and consisting of several smaller shrines, dedicated to various Greek gods. In front of each shrine were large bronze cauldrons, eternal flames blazing in its center. But, they paled in comparison to the main attraction of this mountain chamber.

Fourteen rows of Ionic columns, six-columns deep, stoically holding up the second level of the shrine complex, and standing triumphantly among several enormous Ionic columns, stretching from the second level base all the way into the mountain ceiling, was a twenty-foot marble statue of the King of All Gods, Zeus.

The fifty-foot tall marble statue stood guard over the entire mountain cavern. Unlike some other ancient civilizations, the figures of Greek gods and goddess took on the ultimate perfection of the human form. Each muscle of Zeus’ arms, legs and chest were sculpted flawlessly; tight, square jaw lines framed a stoic face. In his right hand was a long, iron-tipped spear with a thick shaft made from oak. But, it was what he held in his left hand, everyone’s eyes focused on.

A four-foot bronze shield, decorated with tassels of pure gold, raised serpent scales covering its entire surface. Engraved intricately, in the center of the shield, was the head of what many scholars believed to be Medusa- one of three Gorgon sisters whom, Perseus, with the help

of Athena and Hermes, beheaded before presenting it to King Polydectes of Seriphus as proof of the Gorgon's death.

"Okay, no time to admire the view. Let's get that shield and get the hell out of here," Stone said as he led his team up the center staircase to the second level.

As big as the shield was, it looked as though it would be somewhat easy to remove. In theory, the sculptor, or sculptors, did not foresee anyone trying to remove it, so, it was not fastened to the statue. Rather, like a real shield, it was secured on Zeus' arm with a thick leather strap. Stone did not hesitate and, within seconds, was climbing up the muscular marble leg, onto the flowing marble loincloth, then finally, onto Zeus' marble arm. Once there, he took out a long Bowie knife from an ankle holster under his jeans, cutting the thick leather hide strapped around the statue's arm. After about a minute and a half, the shield gave way, dropping about fifteen feet into a thick, gray plastic body bag held by Marley, Nicky Rich and Rebel. The three men zipped up the six-by-six-foot bag quickly, waiting for Stone to climb down.

They would have stood around, marveling at the shrine in all its grandeur, if it were not for the fact that, at that precise moment, two long, nylon ropes uncoiled down from above with twenty-two members of SEAL Team Six's Red Cell Division beginning to rappel down both sides of the gigantic statue from somewhere high above the Shrine of Zeus.

Eleven SEALs, down each rope. Fast!

0540hours

Unrelenting pandemonium followed.

The ST6 team was firing randomly while they slid down the ropes causing Stone's team to run down the center staircase, seeking the shelter of the second level, taking refuge behind whatever column or shrine they could find; anything to avoid the torrent of bullets raining down upon them.

Stone, however, was trapped. Still on the arm of Zeus when the SEAL team attacked. Bullets ricocheted off the statue. Stone returned fire from his precarious position.

All it took was four quick shots from his Heckler & Koch Mk23 to hit their targets. One man was shot in the leg, falling head over ass onto the first level, landing with a sickening, bone-cracking *CRUNCH*, snapping his neck under the weight of his body.

The second man fell after being hit in the hand, his M-16 dropping thirty feet to the ground, as he lost his grip on the rope. He never reached the ground as he was unceremoniously impaled upon Zeus' iron-tipped spear- the weight of his body causing him to slide down until his momentum was stopped by the marble god's arm holding the spear.

The final two men fell after Stone nailed one in the face, the bullet entering through the man's left eye, shattering his orbital socket, lodging itself into the man's brain, and causing him to fall onto his teammate, who was shot in the throat by Stone's deadly aim. Both men landed with *THUDS* on the second level, at the foot of Zeus.

Before the last man hit the floor, Stone rabbit hopped down the statue, ran down the stairs, immediately ducking for cover under the second level where he was met with the barrel of an M1911 handgun pointed at his head. "Whoa! Whoa!"

"Sorry," Amanda Hazelton said, putting the gun down.

"Remind me to ask you later where you got that gun," Stone said, grabbing her as they ducked behind a shrine dedicated to Athena.

"Hey, Major, any idea how we're getting out of this mess?" Marley yelled over the gunfire erupting around them.

"Not a one! But it seems our guests have no regard for ancient monuments!" Stone answered, watching as chips of marble from the shrines and columns flew all around them. By now, several SEALs had descended the length of the rope and were cautiously stalking their prey.

Casually, Stone spun from one column to the next, hitting two SEALs in the face with two bullets from his Mk23. As he did so, he looked around seeing Marley and Lovey doing the same, nailing two SEALs who were trying to sneak behind the columns where they were hiding.

"Well, by my calculations, we only have fourteen more SEALs to kill!" Nicky Rich said sardonically from a column just beside Stone.

"Where's Radcliffe?" Stone yelled at no one in particular.

"Back here!" A voice came from beyond the columns.

"No offense, Professor but from where I am..." Stone stopped in mid-sentence as a SEAL surprised him by coming around his column, gun up, ready to fire.

The SEAL was just as surprised to see Stone, standing there like a trophy. Stone raised his gun-hand, but the SEAL caught it in midair, holding it there while Stone did the same to the

SEAL's gun-hand. Both men then twisted and turned from column to column, taking turns at having an advantage over the other.

The SEAL kned Stone in the stomach. Stone returned the favor. He then elbowed Stone in the head. Stone twisted, slamming the back of the SEAL's head into one of the columns, his helmet taking the brunt of the blow.

While this was going on, Stone saw his team engaging in a fight-for-your-life, fierce gun battle with the rest of ST6.

Marley and Rebel took turns running for cover from column to column, firing upon SEALs trying to charge them. Each SEAL who charged, met with unfortunate ends as Marley and Rebel each took out one SEAL.

Lovey and Nicky Rich had the same ideas. Unlike Marley and Rebel, they stood their ground and, when a SEAL approached their column, they pulled the triggers on their Advanced Taser M-45s, pumping 15,000 volts into the central nervous system of their unsuspecting victims. Three SEALs went down that way. Each one convulsing violently, their skin crackling and burning while they foamed at their mouths, their eyes bulging from their sockets.

Even Amanda Hazelton got into the fray, killing two SEALs with, an unexpected, deadly accuracy.

All this was happening, of course, while Stone and his *new friend* were still grappling, neither man wanting to give into the other. It was only a matter of time before one of them would make a mistake.

Eventually, one of them did.

That someone was Stone.

But, with his military training, Stone knew that sometimes making a mistake was the only way to save your ass, *if* you took advantage of your opponent's surprise, which Stone did with pleasure.

As Stone and the SEAL were twisting and turning from column to column, exchanging elbows and knees to various body parts, Stone took his chance by letting go of his gun *and* the gun-hand of his assailant.

Caught by surprise, the SEAL smiled.

So did Stone.

That odd little gesture distracted the SEAL long enough for Stone to kick the man, spinning him face first into a cauldron of fire dedicated to Caerus, the Greek god of opportunity and luck, burning innocently for so many thousands of years. The SEAL was immediately set ablaze by the eternal flame. His screams were horrific as his clothes and face began to burn gruesomely from his skin. Stone bent down, picking up his Heckler & Koch Mk23, placing a bullet between his eyes, putting the poor bastard out of his misery.

It was then that Stone caught a glimpse of a tiny figure curled up in the back corner of the shrine, Radcliffe.

“All right, listen up,” Stone spoke into his mic calmly so that only his men could discern what he was saying, “We got six SEALs left.”

BANG! BANG!

“Four,” Lovey and Marley said simultaneously.

“Right. Now, we can do this. Let’s nail the rest of these assholes and get the hell out of here!”

“And how do we get out anyway?” Marley asked, afraid of what the answer might be. “We have another twenty of these bastards coming at us from the lower levels!”

“We’re not going down,” Stone said, spinning to grab a SEAL who had been trying to sneak around his column, smashing his head into the marble, instantly breaking the man’s nose and jawbone, knocking him unconscious.

“Three more,” Rebel yelled, reacting to Stone’s KO.

BANG!

“Two,” the voice of Amanda Hazelton sounded in their ears.

Nicky Rich and Lovey spun around their columns at the sound of approaching footsteps and tasered one SEAL. “One,” Lovey said.

Stone heard the last man coming around his column. Casually, he showed himself, shocking the SEAL. Before the young pup could react, Stone grabbed the man by his neck. He then shoved him against a column, holding his neck as he shoved the hot barrel of his H & K into the nervous man’s mouth.

Stone looked into his eyes. The man could not have been older than twenty, just a kid. Sent in by some fucking officers without the balls to fight for them.

“If I let you go,” Stone stared intently into the kid’s eyes, “and you come back to try and kill me, or any of my men, you will die. Understood?”

The young SEAL nodded, Stone’s Mk23 still in the SEAL’s mouth.

Stone released the hold he had on the kid’s neck, taking the young man’s gun from his hand, and removing his pistol from the kid’s mouth.

The SEAL immediately ran out from behind the columns, heading for the staircase leading up to the second floor.

“I don’t think so,” Stone scolded the young man, pointing his gun at the SEAL, freezing him in horror. “You’re going that way,” pointing toward the staircase leading *down* into the mountain.

“But how do I get out that way?” The SEAL said, reluctantly walking toward the steps leading into the lower levels.

“Not my problem. Now, go before I change my mind,” Stone pointed his gun at the kid as he disappeared down the steps.

0600 hours

Stone’s team, safe from harm for the moment, emerged from their hiding places, heading up the stairs to the second level of the Shrine of Zeus. One by one, they shimmed up the rope on the western side of the mountain. Since their rendezvous point was on this side, beyond the shadow of Mount Olympus, it seemed the logical choice. Once his team was safely at the top, the Aegis secure in Marley’s rucksack, Stone motioned to Radcliffe that it was his turn.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Stone reassured the Professor.

At precisely that moment, the rope went slack, limp, floundering down toward the two men. Stone quickly ran for the other rope hanging from the opposite side, but that *too* fell to the ground.

“Looks like you won’t be getting that chance after all, Major!” The booming voice of Admiral Alberts echoed from high above.

Just then, six round objects bounced down the inside of the mountain, bounding back and forth, between the statue of Zeus and limestone walls.

“Give my best to your father for me! Tell him I’m sorry I had to kill his son as well!”

Stone and Radcliffe had only seconds to react, and, to Stone's surprise, it was the Professor who grabbed *his* arm, dragging *him* down the stairs, under the canopy of the second level.

"I'm not sure we want to be here when those grenades go off!" Stone yelled, ducking around columns and shrines, following the shrewd Professor.

"We won't be!" Radcliffe pulled Stone toward the back of the first level, just as a resounding explosion rocked the entire upper level.

Marble and rock exploded. The statue of Zeus and its surrounding columns started crumbling under the explosive force produced by the six grenades.

First it was the marble staircase splitting into dozens of pieces as the head of Zeus crashed down onto it then into the wall, cracking the god's head in two; the empty stone eyes of Zeus visible through spaces between the first level's columns. But now those were beginning to give way as well, buckling and crumbling under the enormous pressure and weight of the mountain itself and statue of Zeus.

As the columns crumbled, the smaller shrines of the first level were crushed under the weight of the level above it. Finally, when the dust cleared, nothing but silence lingered. No one could have survived the avalanche of tons of marble, buried under tons of limestone.

In fact, no one had survived.

Had Stone and Radcliffe been under that first level, they would have been crushed to death, but, as luck would have it, they were nowhere near the first level of the Shrine of Zeus when it collapsed.

For, just as the head of Zeus rolled, cracking in two, Professor Miles Radcliffe was leading Major Donovan Stone through a tunnel, burrowed thousands of years ago, hidden behind the shrine dedicated to the god Poseidon.

They had been running down the ancient tunnel for some time now, the only light provided by a lone glowstick Stone held in his left hand when, finally, Stone turned around to ask, "You mind telling me how you found this passageway?"

"Common knowledge among scholars about all ancient architects was that they not only set elaborate booby traps for tomb robbers, but they almost always made sure there was a secondary outlet from their network traps. I just figured if Alexander's Mausoleum had a hidden escape route, then this one should too."

“Okay, I’ll give you that. But how did you know where to look?” Stone asked as they continued crouch running through the tunnel. By Stone’s calculations, using the GPS on his wristwatch, they must have been running for at least thirty minutes and about ten miles.

“I didn’t, but then, when everyone else was forced down under the Zeus statue, I instinctively ran toward the back of the first level, where I started looking around for an alternate escape route.”

“And here I thought you were hiding,” Stone smiled eerily amid the artificial light of the glowstick.

“Admittedly, with no weapon or special skills, at first, I was going to. But then, I figured I might as well make myself useful. So, I tried to put myself in the shoes of an ancient architect. I thought that, since the entrance to this shrine was hidden behind the Hades mural, then its secret exit might be hidden behind the Poseidon shrine. And, if my calculations are correct, it should lead us to...”

They came to the end of the long tunnel. Sunlight assaulted their eyes, the sound of waves crashing against a cliff and the smell of salty seawater filled their nostrils. Somehow, in the span of just under one hour, Stone and Radcliffe covered almost fourteen miles- on foot, underground, and in semi-darkness, across the eastern coast of Greece.

As they exited a small cave, just off the coastline, Stone could not believe his eyes, and their *luck*. They had actually found themselves in the tiny seaside town of Pláka. But, more importantly, just beyond the cave, nestled along the coast, was an old abandoned Greek military airstrip.

Coincidentally, it was also their rendezvous point, the same airstrip where *The Meadowlark* idled on one of the abandoned airstrips. The air-beast was not alone though. Surrounding the Hercules were two Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey transport choppers, armed to the teeth with the latest high-tech military weapons.

The first bird had already been unloaded. However, it was the second chopper that sparked Stone’s interest. He watched as his team was led by gunpoint from the Osprey to *The Meadowlark*, and up its rear-loading ramp. Each had their hands zip-strip tied behind their back.

Not surprisingly to Stone and Radcliffe, walking down from the rear ramp of *The Meadowlark* was Admiral Richard Alberts. As the last of Admiral Alberts’ ST6 team joined him

on the C-130, Stone could swear he saw the Navy man smile arrogantly as *The Meadowlark*'s rear ramp closed slowly behind him.

"Come on, Professor. We're not out of this yet," Stone said, grabbing Radcliffe by his shirt.

"Wait," the Professor following Stone as they ducked, running behind trees and boulders until they were just beyond the airstrip's eastern fence. A simple, dilapidated, chain link fence with most of its links cut allowing anyone access to what was normally an abandoned airfield. "What exactly are we going to do?"

"We have a plane to catch."

0636 hours

Five minutes later, just after six-thirty in the morning, the C-130 Lockheed Martin Hercules transport, nicknamed *The Meadowlark*, took off from its inconspicuous hideout along the Greek coastline. Its pilot, along with most of Stone's team, was now prisoners of its new flight crew. The rest of Stone's team would be picked up in Italy in less than two hours. From there, Admiral Alberts would need to wait until mid-afternoon before they left Italy for their next destination, Baghdad. From there, it was a short flight to the locations of the third and fourth relics.

Were it not for the overconfidence of Admiral Alberts and his team, someone may have noticed two men running toward the rear of the aircraft just before take-off. They may have also observed them unlocking a small hatch, use a keypad located just outside the hatch, gaining access to the area just below the cargo hold, locking the hatch behind them.

Unfortunately, for them that was not the case.

Not one ST6 team member saw Stone and Radcliffe. They sat among one another, obliviously laughing and gawking at what they called the incompetency of the highly touted Omega team they just captured. But, they did not capture everyone, and they vastly underestimated the team's leader.

A mistake they would deeply regret.

One that would cost SEAL Team Six Red Cell Division dearly.

Five

The Orb of Zoroaster

1745 hours

Iran-Iraq Border

The Zagros Mountain Range

Corporal Daniel Stanton and four other SEALs led Remo and the rest of Stone's team down into the belly of *The Meadowlark* at gunpoint. All ten men and women, including General Harris and Eagle Eye, were restrained with lightweight, disposable, heavy-duty, plastic zip-strip handcuffs. The five SEALs then led them around the Humvee in the center of the cargo hold, boxed in a steel reinforced casing toward *The Meadowlark's* access ramp. They were subsequently told to kneel just at the edge of the ramp's opening. Stanton nodded in the direction of the control panel that operated the ramp, while another SEAL walked over to it.

Stanton sauntered over to Professor Kostakis, pulling him up, then started going through his pockets, "You wouldn't happen to have..."

WHACK!

A large Bowie knife flew through the stale air of the cargo hold, lodging in the throat of the SEAL about to press the large green button that would have opened the access ramp. The man instinctively grabbed for the knife, pulling it out, causing more damage to the already severely severed arteries. Blood gushed from his wound as he fell to the ground, choking on blood accumulating in his throat and lungs. He was dead within seconds.

Chaos followed.

Stone jumped up from behind a storage crate, shooting a second SEAL between the eyes before the poor bastard realized someone was even there. Two down, three to go.

The two remaining SEALs and Corporal Stanton did precisely what Stone expected them to. They ran for the stairs leading back up into the cabin, presumably to call for backup. A signal from Stone and Radcliffe appeared from under the stairs with two crossbows, one in each hand.

He fired both weapons like an experienced hunter.

The first arrow hit the lead SEAL in the back of his knee. He fell backwards onto his fellow SEAL teammate, who had not been so lucky. The second SEAL caught an arrow right in his crotch, grinding against his pelvic bone. Both men tumbled awkwardly down the stairs where they were met by Lovey and Rebel, both of whom were still zip-stripped, but that did not seem to matter. Lovey simply waited for the first SEAL to fall, then wrapped her legs around the man's neck and, with one swift professional *TWIST*, snapped his neck. He fell limply to ground. Rebel opted for choking the second fallen SEAL with his zip-strips that he managed to bring to the front of his body by jump roping over his cuffs, tucking his legs close to his chest as he jumped four feet into the air. It only took ten seconds for the man to lose consciousness.

Now, the only SEAL remaining was Stanton. But his time was short, Stone made sure of that, grabbing the SEAL corporal by his collar, dragging him off the staircase, and slamming him into the ramp's control panel, causing the rear access ramp to start opening, slowly.

"The Admiral is expecting my report. He's expecting to see your bodies fall any minute."

"Well then, we wouldn't want to disappoint the Admiral, now would we?" Stone said grabbing a pair of zip-strips from the SEAL's belt, and strapping them onto the man's wrists.

"You're crazy! You won't get away with this!" Stanton turned beet-red, sweat beading on his brow.

"Too bad you won't be around to see if you're right," Stone said, dragging the nervous SEAL toward the edge of the ramp. By now, the other members of Stone's team had managed to cut their restraints and were dragging the bodies of the four limp SEALs toward the open ramp.

Without so much as a smile of triumph, Stone tossed Stanton from the open ramp, out into the cloudless afternoon sky. For all his courage and valor, the SEAL who rose through the ranks to become a corporal in his unit, was a man, just like anyone else, as his cries and screams trailed behind him for a few seconds, before they finally died away while plummeting to the Earth. His fellow SEALs did not fare much better, but since they were either dead or

unconscious, they did not scream like their senior officer. They just flailed, like ragdolls in a hurricane.

“We have no time to lose, everyone in the Humvee!” Stone said unlocking the doors, prepping the vehicle for a high-altitude, high-velocity drop.

1759 hours

From the cockpit of *The Meadowlark*, Admiral Alberts waited patiently. It had been almost ten minutes since he left Corporal Stanton to his task, and another five minutes before he saw the first body drop like a stone. It was immediately followed by four more bodies. *Five down six to go*, the Admiral stoically grinned at the thought of killing the cocky Major Donovan Stone and his Omega team.

1805 hours

“Everybody strapped in?” Stone asked from the passenger seat; Lovey was in the driver’s seat. Out of everybody, she had more experience behind the wheel of one of these things.

“Good to go, Major,” Remo said after a final seatbelt check.

“Okay, on my mark,” Stone took a deep breath. “Three... Two... One... Mark!”

Lovey pushed the button labeled *release*, as the Humvee lurched backwards, sliding on the grooves of *The Meadowlark*’s cargo hold floor. In less than five seconds, they tipped over the edge of the access ramp and fell, sickeningly, into the high, clear, blue sky.

The G-force resulting from this type of vertical drop, from this altitude, was routine for Stone and his men, but from the looks on the faces of the three professors, they were definitely not enjoying the same adrenaline rush; all three looked nauseous.

“We only drop terminal for the first minute,” Stone’s said into his headset mic as his voice reverberated in their earpieces, “Then, the chutes deploy and we float down the rest of the way.” This seemed to calm them for the most part, as they continued to freefall. Although, when he used the word *terminal*, all six civilian eyes widened, and, to be honest, he would be surprised if they heard anything he said after that.

1807 hours

From the cockpit of *The Meadowlark*, Admiral Alberts' smile withered like a sundried tomato when he saw the large, steel-encased Humvee drop from the cargo hold. He flung open the cockpit door vehemently, shoving some men aside, and climbed down the stairs leading to the cargo hold.

When he got there, he cursed under his breath, seeing the open ramp, the missing Humvee, and not one of his Navy SEALs.

Wind was forcefully blowing in from the open access ramp. Admiral Alberts walked over to the control panel to close it. Flapping wildly in the dying wind, securely duct taped to the green open button, was a simple handwritten note.

Five words. But, they were five of the most infuriating words Admiral Richard Alberts had ever read.

The note simply read, Dear Admiral Asshole... You Missed!

1808 hours

Shiraz, Iran

Fars Province

Falling from the dusky sky like a bullet, east of the Zagros Mountains, about fifteen miles from the town of Shiraz, was a steel box-like cage. Inside that cage was an M998, High Mobility, Multi-purpose, Wheeled Vehicle, a standard issue Humvee designed for the United States Marine Corps Special Operations Command units, specifically Omega Sector. Two miles above the quickly approaching ground, six full-sized, reinforced parachutes deployed from the steel cage, slowing the Humvee's descent from a plummet to a glide. Five minutes later it touched ground, opening on all sides, and the M998 was speeding down the ramp, which lowered when the four walls of the cages collapsed. Inside the Humvee, Stone and his team were feverishly plotting their next move.

"Any idea where we are, Lovey?" Stone asked.

"About ten miles southeast of Shiraz, Iran," the First Lieutenant remarked after tapping a few buttons on the dashboard GPS.

“Apparently the gods are smiling upon us,” Kostakis chimed in.

“Why would you say that, Professor?” Stone turned to face the old Greek professor.

“Well, from what I have been reading, according to Nostradamus, the next two relics are in and around the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis. Not far from where we are now.”

“About time we ran into a bit of good luck. Okay, I’m not sure how much time we have before the Admiral turns *The Meadowlark* around, but we have got to figure something out fast,” Stone said to everyone, as the Humvee bounded across the vast desert mountain landscape.

“I wouldn’t worry about them following us just yet,” Amanda Hazelton leaned in from the back seat.

“Why would you say that?” Stone turned to face the pretty archaeology professor.

“While we were waiting on the tarmac in France, we overheard the Admiral tell his pilot that they had to fly to Bagdad He mentioned something about wanting to bring the Aegis to his Commander *before* they made their next move.” She shrugged, and then smiled at Stone, “Guess they thought you were dead and we would soon follow; leaving them no competition.”

“Okay, good news number two. Lovey, set the GPS for Persepolis. Professor,” Kostakis looked at Stone, “why don’t you share some of that manuscript with us?”

“Before you do that,” Remo interrupted, “I think the Professor should explain something we found out while driving back from Marseille,” nodding at Kostakis.

The Professor proceeded to tell Stone and the others everything he and Remo discussed on their drive back from Marseille.

“Well, that makes things a bit more interesting now doesn’t it?” Stone commented. “Okay, looks like our deadline just got tighter, but that does not change our plan. We still need all of the relics. So, let’s worry about the two here, for now.”

Then to Kostakis, “What can you tell us about them?”

“According to this,” Kostakis patted the manuscript resting on his lap, “two relics reside within the borders of Iran. Nostradamus is very specific about locations, traps, and what to expect once those traps are sprung. At first I was skeptical, but I pored over his entries regarding our two previous missions concerning the Khaos Blade and the Aegis of Zeus, and, sure enough, he explained in detail, every aspect of each location as well as the secrets to each trap system. If only we had this from the beginning...” Kostakis stopped in mid-sentence, glimpsing Lovey in

the rearview mirror. He quickly changed the subject, turning several pages until he found what he was looking for, "The actual passage reads as follows:

In the Land of the Elamites, where many ruled but was conquered only by Alexander of Macedon, in the third century before the year of our Lord Jesus Christ, two ancient relics, once belonging to the Great Persian ruler Darius the First, can be found among the ancient empire's most sacred of cities.

One Relic revolving around Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Great King, is thought to have been lost to the sands of time and is the third relic of Judgment Day. The Orb of Zoroaster, was vital to his religion and was thought to hold great mystical powers, even possessing the ability to see into the future. Many ancient texts claim it was this Orb guiding the will of the Persian Empire and its King. Making defeating them all but impossible.

Sometime before the end of Darius the First's reign, it is written that the great king hid the Orb deep beneath his great city of Persepolis, fearing his enemies might try to pilfer the ancient relic for their own advantage. Among this citadel, it is said that not one but several ancient sanctuaries hold secrets to finding the Orb. Many have tried. All have failed. Including Alexander the Great. Only I, Michel de Nostradamus, through countless hours of researching ancient texts, studying hundreds of ancient maps, have discovered the riddles of Persepolis. Written upon these pages is the path to finding this ancient Holy Relic. Follow them precisely and your reward shall be gratifying.

First, one must find the face of Ahura Mazda among the Hall of One Hundred Columns. Follow his gaze southwest until its exact match is found in the palace of Darius the First. Once the two are found, measure the distance between them and, at their exact center, will be the sacred Faravahar marking, the symbol of the ancient mystical religion of Zoroastrianism. Beneath this symbol, a passage will be found, one leading into the depths of the ancient city.

Once found, follow the path into darkness. When all seems lost, only those whose faith is true will the path leading to the Orb be revealed. As it rises upon its pedestal, the second of Darius' relics will be released from its ancient slumber. But beware, for once this first relic is removed, the marvel of this trap system will reveal itself, and if one does not move with alacrity, then all hope is lost.

The second Relic of Darius the First can be found in the hands of the Great King himself. Buried with the Persian ruler in the Tomb of Four Persian Kings, ancient traps set by his tomb builder, Semerdis the Elder, impede any hope of acquiring the Lion Scimitar. If one is fortunate enough to survive these traps, the ancient ruler's blade shall be theirs to possess. Once reunited with its brother relic, the desert sands will reveal a hidden passage leading back, beneath the Great City of Persepolis. But, be cautious, for through this passage, there is only one-way out, ensuring that only the faithful will survive.

As a precaution, for those with the inclination to take on this monumental endeavor, like the previous two relics, I have included maps and instructions vital to deciphering the riddles regarding the trap systems to ensure a safe passage through the Tomb of Four Persian Kings. Follow them precisely, and the Lion Scimitar and the Orb of Zoroaster will be yours to claim. Falter slightly, and death shall claim you.

“The next three pages contain maps and floor plans of the tomb, a secret entrance to a riddle trap, as well as solutions for solving it, and a diagram of an underground passageway leading to the tomb of Darius the First,” Kostakis finished, an enormous grin appearing on his face. His exuberance was received with incredulous stares.

“Okay, but how do we know this Orb even exists? I mean, no one has ever seen it, have they?” Marley queried.

“Well, if we were to believe the ancient texts,” Radcliffe interjected then added, “the Orb once belonging to Darius the Great used to foretell the future and, supposedly, resulted in his ability to outmaneuver his opponents, always. Anytime. Anywhere. Some scholars think it was because of the Orb that the Greek Empire could never beat Darius on the battlefield. It was only *after* the Persian king's death that the Greeks finally defeated the Persian Empire under Darius' son, Xerxes. Ancient historians believe Xerxes' father hid the Orb before his death so no other ruler could use its powers. This, in the eyes of the Persian people made them vulnerable to conquests, leaving Darius as one of history's most prominent rulers.”

Miles looked at Kostakis who was nodding, then followed up with, “The location of the second relic, the Lion Scimitar, is obviously buried with him in the Tomb of the Four Persian Kings at Naqsh-e Rostam. But, according to the mystical philosophy surrounding Zoroastrianism, when Darius ascended the throne of the Persian Empire, he swore an oath to Ahura Mazda,

selling his eternal soul to the chief god of his religion, gaining possession of the god's mighty scimitar Darius wielded in battle with indestructible, supernatural force."

"Okay, so we have two relics within twenty miles of each other," Stone stated, quickly devising a plan. "I'm not sure where or when Admiral Asshole is going to show up with his goon squad, but our best bet is to wait until nightfall, splitting into two groups. One heads for Persepolis, the other for Naqsh-e Rostam. I'll take Professor Kostakis, Tricky, Rebel, Johnny Boy, and Remo to go after the Orb. The rest of you head for that scimitar."

"If I may," Professor Kostakis interjected. "I think we should stay together, go after the Orb first. I realize it may seem risky but," he paused, glancing down at the *Nostradamus Manuscript* and his notes, "the traps surrounding the scimitar are far more complicated than the straightforward path leading to the Orb. Besides, whichever relic the Admiral goes after next, in the end, according to the manuscript, once the Orb is taken from its sacred resting place only then will the scimitar be released, so the Orb needs to be found first anyway. With manuscript in hand, safely navigating through the traps should not be a problem. More challenging, perhaps, but definitely attainable."

"I've trusted you this far, Professor," Stone did not need to ask questions, he just wanted to find a relic and actually hold onto it, before the bad guys got there and took it from them.

Stone turned to General Harris, "Sir, you and Eagle Eye should stay with the Humvee. Hide somewhere secret, somewhere safe. If *The Meadowlark* should make an appearance, do everything in your power to get it back, then let us know where to rendezvous." Stone noticed the vengeful grin growing on Eagle Eye's face at the mention of commandeering *The Meadowlark*.

Satisfied they were finally on the right track, Stone turned to Radcliffe sighing, "At least now I feel like we're making some progress. Professor, you wouldn't happen to have a layout of Persepolis on that laptop of yours, one that you could send to the Humvee's central computer so everyone could see what we're up against?"

"Absolutely," Radcliffe took his laptop from under his seat, where it had remained hidden since yesterday, after they found The Khaos Blade.

Miles flipped open his Apple notebook, turning it on. Once the laptop booted, he typed on his keyboard, clicked the mouse, and before long, the images on his screen were sent to the Humvee's computer and printed out on the wireless printer mounted in the center console.

“The layout you are looking at is not my own. I copied it from an online information site and saved it to my files,” Radcliffe looked down at the image on his laptop; the same one everyone now held. “It’s the most accurate, and updated plan of the ancient city. Most of the city is in ruins now, but, from what I have been able to surmise, the Palace of One Hundred Columns and the Palace of Darius, is intact enough to find- the entrance leading under Persepolis.”

“Which is where?” D-Boy asked, adding, “Because, from what I can tell, this place looks huge.”

“Huge does not begin to describe Persepolis,” Hazelton said as she looked at her copy.

Miles nodded in agreement, “The actual dimensions of this manmade site are far greater than anyone could have imagined. In fact, the first westerners to excavate there, Ernst Emil Herzfeld and Erich F. Schmidt of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, spent *eight* seasons unearthing the ancient city. Their findings were what every archaeologist dreams of- glorious palaces, magnificent columns, spectacularly carved reliefs. It was one of the most amazing archaeological findings, ever. Imagine, an entire city found, for the most part, intact!” Radcliffe was giddy as a schoolboy.

“Let’s stick to the mission, Professor. We don’t have time for long Kostakian lectures,” Stone interrupted, giving the old Greek professor a friendly smile.

“Right,” Radcliffe continued, “The site of Persepolis was conveniently constructed, like many ancient cities, near a river- the Pulwar River to be exact- built on an artificial terrace, measuring approximately 125,000 square meters. This terrace was incorporated into the pre-existing mountain with three retaining walls varying in height and slope. On the southwestern side is a double staircase, each one leading to a terrace and the propylon atrium just beyond it.”

Kostakis interrupted, “Our main concern, are the two structures of the Palace of One Hundred Columns, labeled as *100* on the map, and the Palace of Darius, labeled *D*. Once we measure the equi-distance between the two, we must work fast.”

“And why is that?” Stone asked.

“Well... Now, it’s just,” Kostakis hesitated.

“Just spit it out, Professor,” Marley said, prepared for anything at this point.

“It seems these two relics are linked, somehow, using an ancient timing mechanism. Nostradamus specifically states that once the first relic is found the Clock of Zoroaster begins. But, more importantly, he writes that these two relics must be found by the start of seventh day

before the Total Solar Eclipse. As for those relics, the Orb and the Lion Scimitar, he goes on to say that, upon entering one, the entrance to both shall be revealed, but only for a certain amount of time before the relics will be lost forever, consumed by the sands of time dooming the world to eternal chaos.”

“How very apocalyptic,” Stone shook his head then, “How much time?”

“The beginning of the seventh day would be midnight, tonight.” Kostakis said reluctantly.

“Great,” Stone sighed, looking at his watch. It was half past eight in the evening; they were about fifteen minutes from Persepolis. In fact, Stone could see the ruins of the ancient city just ahead of them. By the time they got there and unloaded their equipment, it would be almost nine o’clock. On top of all that, he was not sure when or where Admiral Alberts would show. His instinct told him the Admiral would wait until the cover of dark, which meant they had between little and no time to get these relics. Stone just had to hope he got a head start.

He scoffed, shaking his head, “Figures.”

2040 hours

Ten minutes later, they arrived at Persepolis.

A small guardhouse was stationed about one hundred yards from the actual site. Upon seeing the unmarked Humvee, the lone guard stepped out, raising a hand for them to stop. Lovey complied, rolling her window down as the guard approached the driver’s side. Before he could ask what their business was, Stone fired a 426mg tranquillizer dart into the guard’s neck.

“That should buy us about two hours,” Stone said as Lovey slammed on the accelerator, bringing the Humvee to a stop, just a few yards from the Great Staircase leading up into the ancient Persian city of Persepolis.

Without hesitation, each member of Stone’s team jumped out of the Humvee, grabbing their rucksacks and weapons from a hidden compartment underneath the rear passenger seats. Marley and D-Boy then grabbed the two remaining items from the hatchback, two duffle bags filled with Omega Tech toys. Once everyone was out, Eagle Eye, climbed into the driver’s seat, the General sitting shotgun.

“We’re going to need *The Meadowlark* to get out of here,” Stone leaned into the open driver side window.

“They took my baby away from me once,” Eagle Eye smiled. “Trust me, if they bring her here, they won’t be leaving with her.”

That was all Eagle Eye needed to hear, speeding away, watching the two men disappear in a cloud of dust. Only when the dust settled, did Stone turn around and stare at the enormity of the ruins before him.

A few “Whoas!” and whistles of amazement from his team echoed Stone’s sentiment.

“Okay, people quit the gawking and start the walking. We got less than three hours to get these two relics. Remo, I need you and Johnny Boy in your usual positions. One on either side of the complex. There’s not much for coverage around here so be careful.”

“Roger that,” Remo left the team, running toward the western mountainside surrounding the complex, Johnny Boy took the eastern side.

Stone looked down at the map of Persepolis in his hand. “Lovey, Amanda, the Hall of One Hundred Columns should be to your right,” Stone pointed in the direction of the ruins. “Once there, you’re going to need to find the face of Ahura Mazda and set up the 410 Laser Meter, aiming it toward the Palace of Darius.” Stone found the palace on the map and motioned to it. “Marley and Miles I’m going to need at that palace. Find its replica of Ahura Mazda, then set up the L-14.”

Lovey and Hazelton, unpacked the equipment while Lovey explained that the 410 Laser Meter was a state-of-the-art measuring device, while its counterpart, the L-14, was a high-tech laser-catcher that absorbed the laser meter’s beam, digitally measuring the distance between two points. Officially, both were still in the process of being patented and perfected. Unofficially, the Omega Sector was in possession of the only pair.

“The rest of us are going to set up around the parameter, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious.” Stone and his team climbed the two staircases, leading up to the ruins of Persepolis.

Lovey, Amanda, Marley and Miles immediately went to work.

Following the print out of the city, Lovey and Amanda headed northeast, past the Propylon terrace. Marley and Miles headed south of them, quickly finding the Palace of Darius. They were followed almost immediately by shouts from Lovey and Hazelton saying they had

found the Hundred Column Hall. Now, all they needed to find was the face of the divinity of Zoroastrianism.

"I sure hope, one of you intellects knows what we're looking for," Marley said into his headset, using a flashlight in the waning sunlight, searching the run-down columns.

"Ahura Mazda looks like your typical Persian of that time," Miles searched with his own flashlight. "He should have a strong, square, powerful face; long, curled beard, but, most importantly..."

"... A crown! Got him," Amanda knelt beside a broken column. It was obviously much bigger at one time, but all that remained was the last two circular, stone drums serving as its base.

A few seconds later Miles yelled, "Us too!"

In no time, Lovey had set up the 410 Laser Meter- adjusting its tripod to the appropriate height- Marley doing the same with the L-14.

"Light it up!" Stone said, coming up beside Lovey while the others stood around them.

Lovey flipped her switch, and the laser meter did its thing. Shooting a beam of solid red, heading southwest, straight across the entire complex until it met up with the L-14 beam Marley had activated. Immediately, the numbers on the digital read-out of the L-14 started to climb until the numbers stopped, registering the distance between the two points. Marley pressed a yellow button on the L-14 marked *AXIS* and the numbers descended, stopping at the precise axis-point between the two faces of Ahura Mazda. Once the center was found, the two lasers shot an additional beam vertically, rising into the sky and onto a location on the stone floor of the ancient city.

Stone went to the spot where the laser kissed the ground, smiling when he saw the figure. Enclosed in a circle the size of a New York City manhole, carved on the stone floor, illuminated by the red laser beam, was the symbolic representation of the human soul before birth and after death, The Faravahar- a winged disc with, presumably, a Holy man holding his hand out reverently.

Stone knelt on one knee, dusting away any dirt and debris around the stone until he could clearly see the symbol; studying it carefully, knowing something was there. Touching each carved feather, stroking the elongated figure. Eventually, his fingers found grooves just below the figure of the man inside the small circle in the center of the winged figure. He placed his

fingers inside the grooves, twisting with all his might. It took some effort, but Stone was finally able to twist the two-thousand year old mechanism until the symbol was a full 180 degrees from where it started. Stale air invaded Stone's air space as the ancient seal was breeched.

By this time, everyone else gathered around the symbol. When they heard the release of air, Rebel and Tricky lent Stone a hand, the three of them managing to lift the heavy stone circle, revealing a set of spiral stone steps.

"Guess we go down," Stone said matter-of-factly.

2100 hours

The Depths of Persepolis

Stone and his team deftly climbed down the narrow, stone steps. If he had to guess, he would say they were about seventy or eighty feet below the surface. But, that was nothing compared to the sight greeting them once they reached the bottom of the spiral staircase.

A second set of steps led from the landing, deeper under the Acropolis mound Persepolis was built upon. However, this staircase lacked a retaining wall; instead it was open on one side. No retaining wall meant Stone and his team could lean forward and peer down into the depths of the chasm before them.

That was a mistake.

The sight was stupefying, so much so that it caused slight waves of dizziness to more than one team member. Most looked quickly then leaned back to avoid such a sensation.

"Well, that's something you don't see every day," D-Boy commented, leaning forward.

It was only then that Stone realized the cavern they were in was not dark. A strange otherworldly glow resonated from the far side of the cavern. When he looked across, Stone saw the source of the strange bluish glow. On the cliff, of the opposite side of the cavern, one hundred feet below and separated by a gap of more than three hundred feet, was a circular hole carved directly into the floor of the smaller cliff. Inside the opening, an eerie blue light shone ominously. Stone knew it could only be one thing.

The Orb of Zoroaster.

"Anything we should know before we proceed?" Stone asked Professor Kostakis while his team cracked open several glowsticks.

“Nostradamus mentions nothing about the steps. All he says is, *when all seems lost only those whose faith is true will be able to crossover to retrieve the Orb*. I’m not exactly sure what that means, but it’s obviously going to take a leap of faith to cross that.” Kostakis closed the manuscript, leaning closer to Stone and the edge of the precipice, “Other than that we have nothing to worry about.”

Stone looked at the professor, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, is that all,” D-Boy said, kicking a small rock off the edge of one of the steps. Everyone waited for the sound of the rock hitting the bottom.

But, it was so deep the sound of it hitting the bottom was lost.

With that, they started their long descent.

“Any idea what’s going to happen once we find all these relics, Doc?” Nicky Rich asked, breaking the silence, as the group continued down the long, straight, stone staircase with the vertiginous edge.

“Yeah, does the world blow up or something?” D-Boy chuckled along with Rebel and Tricky.

“Actually, that’s not far from the truth,” Kostakis answered, more seriously than they had expected, running partially down the stairs, joining the rest of the team. Up until then, he had been lagging behind, admiring the elaborate carvings of Darius the Great alongside various angels and demons of Zoroastrianism, taking up the entire length of the staircase wall.

Kostakis explained his gloomy remark, “I’ve gone over the manuscript numerous times, trying to making heads-or-tails of meanings behind some of the more mysterious portions of the text. The excerpts about the relics are, for the most part, straightforward. Once they are found, however, where to bring them and what happens when there, is quite remarkable.

“In the manuscript, Nostradamus mentions a series of numbers and letters. The first is -89 followed by 13m and 0.1194s. The other is a positive number, 17, followed by another 13m and 0.1194s. It took me a while to realize what they were.”

“Coordinates of some sort,” Stone was listening intently to every word the Professor said, carefully leading his team down the stairs.

“Precisely,” Kostakis smiled at the Marines around him, “I guess I should have asked one of you gentlemen. Anyhow, when we were driving back from our mission in Italy, I keyed the

numbers into my laptop, using a latitude and longitude program I found on the internet. The result brought me to...”

“Tikal,” Hazelton did not hesitate.

Stone and the others looked at her.

“Uh, hello,” she held up her hand at the quizzical stares, “Mayan archaeologist?”

“Right, of course,” Kostakis nodded.

“Actually, it’s a bit strange, because, to my knowledge, there has never been any evidence found in Tikal regarding any doomsday scenarios,” Hazelton added.

“Well, it actually gets better because,” Kostakis continued, “Nostradamus goes on to mention that once the last relic is found, all of them must be brought to Tikal, eventually revealing the locations of the remaining relics,” Kostakis paused then added, “and their subsequent locations, as well as the lost land, in which they are to be returned to.”

“Oh, come on, man!” Tricky exclaimed, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Lost lands, Doc? Are you frigging serious?” D-Boy added.

Kostakis held up the manuscript, “I understand your skepticism, but you have to admit, this *is* a remarkable piece of work. I still have no idea how he was able to comply such a vast amount of information in such little time *and* with limited resources, but...” He trailed off, lost in his thoughts.

Stone asked, “Does Nostradamus mention anything about how we’re to go about this offering at Tikal. I mean, do we just place the relics somewhere and leave, or is there something more?”

“Oh, goodness no. In fact, he is very specific about the procedure we must perform,” Kostakis turned a few pages until he found the right one. “Ah, here it is. Once the relics are assembled at the site, they must be placed at precise locations in a specific order to gain access to the Altar of Judgment.

“That’s some heavy duty shit, Doc,” D-Boy whistled, breaking the tension as they reached the bottom of the long staircase, only to finding themselves standing on top of a second, smaller staircase.

“Are we talking about what I think we are?” Rebel turned to Kostakis.

“If you mean the Apocalypse, the End of the World, then yes. Metaphorically speaking, of course. It is possible he might be referring to a cataclysmic event threatening to destroy the

planet, or something along those lines,” Kostakis answered, everyone’s eyes upon him, as they walked down the last set of stairs.

“That seems about right,” Stone commented sarcastically, reaching the bottom of the last staircase. He saw no reason to continue talking about what could happen, instead focusing on what needed to be done.

The group of Relic Hunters stood at the precipice of enormous proportions. On the other side of this fissure was a smaller cliff, the strange blue light, Stone saw from above, emanating from an opening in the cliff floor. Also on the opposite cliff, Stone noted a cave they could not see from above, but was now visible and, more than likely, led to the second relic belonging to Darius the Great.

Marley took out the laser meter, measuring the distance between the two cliffs. He let out a long, sharp breath, showing Stone the digital read-out.

“Three hundred point seven feet,” Stone leaned over the side of the cliff, peering into the darkness. “Not sure how we’re going to cross this.”

“Pardon?” Kostakis was puzzled.

“We don’t have anything capable of reaching all that way. Our LBAS only go up to two-fifty.” Stone looked up, “The ceiling’s way too high to use it to swing across. I suppose we can scale the wall, but who knows how long that will take.”

“Guess we should have went after the other relic first,” Nicky Rich remarked.

“We don’t need anything to cross it. It’s already there.” Kostakis opened the manuscript, “Remember, *when all seems lost only those whose faith is true will be able to crossover to retrieve the Orb.*”

He borrowed a glowstick from Radcliffe, bent down, grabbed a handful of sand and tossed it over the edge of the cliff.

The sight before the entire group was amazing, even to Kostakis who thought it would be there all along, but had lingering doubts. There, hidden among the blackness, cloaked by the surrounding cliffs and rocks, was a land bridge wide enough to walk across.

“Faith, *and* a little sand,” Stone smiled, leading the team across, periodically tossing sand across the bridge so they would know where exactly they should step.

In no time, they were across the land bridge, standing over a hole in the floor, housing the Orb of Zoroaster. Stone put on a pair of gloves and gently bent down to retrieve their prize. As

he lifted the Orb from its hole, the pedestal it rested on began to rise from the hole, followed by a loud, rumbling noise. At first, Stone thought it might be the entrance to the second relic, inside the cave somewhere.

But, he was wrong.

The raising of the pedestal must have triggered some ancient mechanism, because when it began to rise the land bridge began sliding into the cliff they were on, widening the gap between the Orb's cliff and the one they had just come from- the cliff with the staircase, leading back up to the surface! Moving much faster than they would have liked. Soon, they would be trapped.

The grinding, shaking motion of the retracting bridge, must have been seismic enough, because now the ceiling started to crumble. Boulders, the size of basketballs, began dropping all around them. Narrowly missing them, but close enough for Stone to make a quick decision. He placed the Orb in his rucksack.

"Hate to break up the party, but we have a convoy of at least five Rovers, two jeeps, two Oshkosh and three SuperCobras about forty-clicks out, due west." The voice of Remo crackled in everyone's ear.

"Of course we do," Stone sighed, "ETA?"

"Thirty minutes, tops."

"Okay, thanks, Remo." Then to everybody else, "Run for the bridge!" Stone shouted above the tumultuous noise of the collapsing ceiling. "Doc, Amanda, Miles, stay between one of us! Marines, get those LBAS and G-guns at the ready!"

Without hesitation, everybody ran back across the bridge.

The bridge that was retracting!

Getting further and further away from the staircase to salvation!

Lovey and Rebel reached the other side first, Rebel grabbing Radcliffe along the way; for them, no G-gun was needed.

Marley, Tricky and Kostakis who were next across, were not so lucky. Tricky and Marley had to aim for the top of the lower staircase and leap, Marley with Kostakis on his back.

D-Boy and Nicky Rich went next, both choosing to aim for the edge of the opposite cliff, shooting off their G-guns simultaneously. The LBAS caught hold and the two young Marines jumped, slamming into the wall of the cliff, a few feet below the edge, climbing the rest of the way to safety.

Last on the bridge was Stone and Hazelton, both knew there would be a problem. The G-gun only had a range of two-hundred and fifty feet. Clearly, they were beyond that range because they were much closer to the Orb's cliff than the cliff leading to the surface.

"Do you trust me?" Stone asked Hazelton.

"Do I have a choice?" Hazelton quipped back.

Stone smiled, "Hold on tight. Wrap and lock your arms around the straps of my rucksack. Don't worry; it's fastened tightly around my chest."

Hazelton did as she was told seeing that Stone held two G-guns, one in each hand. "I always carry a spare," answering her questioning gaze. With that, Stone fired his LBAS at the far wall of the cavern, the side with the staircase leading back up. Once the reinforced steel spear caught hold of the wall, he turned quickly to Hazelton, "Just hang on when we hit the wall, 'cause it might hurt. If you need to, wrap your legs around my waist *after* we hit."

They both jumped, falling briefly before swinging toward the wall. The impact hurt, but both he and Hazelton held tight. Carefully, with rocks still falling from the ceiling, narrowly missing them, Stone swung his other hand around, aiming the second G-gun about ten feet higher. He released the first one by pressing the red release button then, on the second gun, he pressed the green retract button, which began pulling them up. They did this several times before they finally reached the very top of the enormous staircase where everyone else was waiting.

Stone looked at his watch.

2200 hours.

It had been about fifteen minutes since Remo radioed them. On top of that, they had just over two hours to get out of here, drive across the desert and claim the second relic. But, first, they had to out run the Navy SEALs.

"Quick! We have no time to lose," Stone hurried everyone up the spiral set of stone stairs leading back to the surface.

By the time they reached the surface, Remo and Johnny Boy were waiting for them. Without stopping, they ran back toward the terrace, down the set of double stairs where General Harris and the Humvee were waiting.

"Where's Eagle?" Stone asked

"We saw *The Meadowlark* not far from here," Harris said moving from the driver's seat to the passenger, allowing Lovey to hop in, taking his place.

“Good,” Stone said, ushering in the last of his team, taking a seat behind Lovey, “because we’re gonna need some transport out of this desert.”

Lovey punched numbers into the GPS, putting the Humvee into drive. It kicked up a storm cloud of dust and rocks as they sped away, eastward to their next target- Naqsh-i Rostam.

One relic down, one to go, Stone thought easing into the backseat.

Patting his rucksack with the Orb of Zoroaster safely inside it, Stone allowed himself a half-smile before looking out the window toward the western horizon, wishing he had not.

What he saw was a caravan of armored vehicles and three helicopters, all heading straight for them. The cloud of dust created by the convoy of chaos, made their approach ominous and foreboding. Stone picked up a pair of binoculars. From the looks of it, there had to be at least two hundred armed men, some SEALs, some African mercenaries, all packed tightly into jeeps, Rovers and two Oshkosh transports. All of them wanting what Stone already had, and what they all were after next, The Lion Head Scimitar of Darius the Great.

3 hours ago

Bagdad, Iraq

Abandoned United States Military Base

Admiral Richard Alberts walked down the rear ramp of the stolen Lockheed Martin transport. He strode with an air of confidence, making his soldiers part like the Red Sea. The escape of Stone and his *entire* team had been irking him for the past ninety minutes, and anyone who got in his way, would mostly likely be shot, or at the very least wind up with a few broken limbs. Although he was visibly upset, he *was* in possession of the first two relics, which he now carried in two large duffle bags. The flight of Stone and the others were of little significance to his superior. *He* only cared about the relics.

Five minutes after *The Meadowlark* landed, Admiral Alberts was standing in the office of the man in charge of this coalition. Inside the hangar of an abandoned military base used by the United Coalition in the last Iraqi conflict, but now headquarters for this covert military organization.

Five-Star General Zachariah Combs was one of the few United States Army men holding the rank of Five-Stars. Medals of Honor adorned his form-fitting uniform. A Distinguished

Service Medal and Distinguished Service Cross, two Army Commendation Medals, three Presidential Citation Awards from three different Presidents, three Valorous Unit Awards, an Army Superior Unit Award, and two Meritorious Unit Commendations were all awarded to him for the service he provided to his country in times of war.

The past few years, however, had been peaceful. No military conflicts. No foreign dictators to take down. Now was the time for unification. Assisting underprivileged countries, anyway the United States saw fit. For General Zachariah Combs, times and circumstances may have changed, but one thing remained constant, he was still a dangerous man to cross paths with.

Six months ago, he was relieved of his cabinet post as the Director of Homeland Security, a position he held under the former Administration. Now, he spearheaded a rouge military unit called the American Militia Movement- AMMO for short- hell-bent on taking down the government he used to work to protect.

Admiral Alberts sat in a leatherback chair in front of the General's desk. On the desk were the two relics his SEAL team stole from Stone. The General sat back in his chair, a smile on his hardened face.

"Any idea where we find the remaining relics?" Admiral Alberts asked.

"Our African friends have been working on that," General Combs stood up, walking around his chair to pull on a drawstring, opening the blinds, revealing a large rectangular window.

On the other side of the window was Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir. He was sitting on a small wooden chair; his arms were tied behind his back. His face was bloodied. Cuts were above his eyes, and his lips were puffy and bruised, all signs of extreme torture. He had been beaten and broken by the two large African mercenaries standing beside him. He held off as best he could, but these men were too much for the mentally and physically drained Egyptian Professor. Reluctantly, he gave the man who had been giving the orders to beat him the password to his laptop, resting on a small wooden table a few feet from him.

Captain Matata Bol nodded to the soldier sitting in front of the laptop who then typed in the password.

Access was granted. Every file Professor Abdul-Qadir had regarding Nostradamus, the ancient relics, traps, locations, and timelines. Everything they would need was now accessible to General Zachariah Combs.

The tall, lanky African captain smiled, looked to the window where the General stood with Admiral Alberts, and nodded.

Combs acknowledged the Algerian captain.

Captain Bol took out his gun, a Vektor Z-88 Double-Action handgun, walked over to Professor Abdul-Qadir, placing the barrel to his head.

General Combs released the drawstring; the blinds fell fast, concealing the soundproof room just as conspicuously as it appeared.

“You and your SEALs leave in ten minutes. My men will accompany you, as well as Captain Bol and his mercenaries. Find those relics, Admiral, and we rule the world.”

“What about Stone and his team?”

“Eliminate them,” the General sat back down at his desk while the files were downloaded from the dead Professor’s laptop to the General’s hard drive.

Ten minutes later *The Meadowlark* took off with Admiral Richard Alberts seated behind the cockpit, the General’s laptop with Abdul-Qadir’s files downloaded onto it rested securely on his lap. Beside him sat Captain Matata Bol, sporting a fresh cut above his left eye. Alberts would have asked what happened, but these mercenaries were always fighting amongst themselves, he just ignored it. Sitting next to the tall, African captain was Captain Fairfield Minnow of the United States Army. Along with the three ranked men were fifty men from SEAL Team 6, 50 African mercenaries and two hundred United States Army infantrymen, scattered in and around the enormous military transport.

Their destination was a long, since abandoned, military airport, used by the Iranian Air Force in the early nineteen-nineties, just west of the town of Shiraz, in the Fars Province of Iran. Waiting for them, would be a shitload of military transports: three Bell AH-1 SuperCobra attack helicopters, five Land Rover Defender 110s, two M151 Multi-Purpose Jeeps, and five Oshkosh Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement transports.

More importantly, for Admiral Alberts, he would get to even the score with the man who bested twenty-two of his highly trained SEAL Team 6 men by killing Major Donovan Stone and his team, the thought making the Admiral smirk, vilely, as he poured through the files from the Egyptian Professor’s laptop.

1 hour ago

Outskirts of Iranian Desert

15 miles west of Persepolis

Captain Charles Murdock was a highly decorated officer. His credentials and feats were legendary among every branch of the United States military. Most notably, he had flown a covert operation during the Persian Gulf War. Deftly maneuvering his bird under the radar, swooping down behind enemy lines, alone- no co-pilot was brave enough to join him. That first mission, he saved twenty-two men, spotting the last man, wounded and unconscious, behind a shell of a building. No one saw the man who had been crumpled, camouflaged among the desert sand. His efforts, and keen eyesight, gained him a Navy and Marine Corps Medal from President George H. Bush.

Then, 12 years later, he was asked to recover a downed helicopter pilot, his crew of five *and* the twenty Marines it was carrying while on a mission during the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003. And, as if history was testing Captain Charles Murdock's abilities, he once more saw some men in the distance, hidden by the surrounding sand- five to be exact- giving his rescue haul for this mission, an astounding, thirty-one men. This mission had earned him another commendation, a Medal of Honor from President George W. Bush.

So, given all his honors and efforts surrounding rescue missions and his total lack of selfishness, Captain Charles Murdock was the first person, recruited into Omega Sector by the only man who had the authority to do so, General Anderson Harris. Ironically, if Captain Murdock had not seen the *then* Lieutenant Colonel Anderson Harris, crumpled behind the dilapidated building in Baghdad all those years ago, he would never have been alive to head Omega Sector. In fact, he was the one who gave Captain Charles Murdock his nickname after his rescue. Now, no one called him by his given name anymore. Instead, they just used his call sign:

Eagle Eye.

The Meadowlark sat on the tarmac of the abandoned Iranian military airbase, guarded by four lightly armed African mercenaries. Ten minutes after they touched down, Admiral Alberts and his caravan of three hundred strong headed toward the ruins of Persepolis with more weapons than some small third world countries.

Just minutes before they left, unseen by all these men, was a solitary Humvee resting idly behind an empty hangar. As Admiral Alberts was readying his team for departure, a man jumped

out of the Humvee, which then immediately sped away, back toward Persepolis, getting a slight jump on the Admiral and his men. The man then crouch-ran around empty oil drums and junked planes until he came to the hangar just beside *The Meadowlark*.

His baby.

Eagle Eye waited for the Admiral's team to leave. It took the skilled military veteran less than five minutes to overpower the four mercenaries. Twenty minutes later, with Eagle Eye back behind the controls and a full tank of gas, *The Meadowlark* was in the air headed for a point not far from Naqsh-i Rostam. There, he would wait for a signal from Stone to come pick them up.

Six

The Lion Head Scimitar

2230 hours

Fars Province

Naqsh-i Rostam, Iran

Naqsh-i Rostam is not a city or town, but rather a place. Located about four miles northwest of Persepolis, archaeologists have been digging there for decades, if not centuries. Looted following Alexander's conquest of the Achaemenid Empire, Naqsh-i Rostam is famous for being the burial place of four of the Persian Empire's most powerful rulers. The tombs are cross-shaped, carved into the façade of a cliff face, with the entrance of each tomb in the center of each cross, and then opening into a smaller chamber inside the rock formation where the kings are buried.

Three of the four tombs are believed to belong to Xerxes the First, most famous for leading an ineffective attack on three hundred Spartan and one thousand Greek warriors in the Battle of Thermopylae -a battle eventually won by Xerxes, losing thousands of men in the process; Artaxerxes the First, son of Xerxes, most notable for funding the Athenian enemies, which eventually led to the Battle of Cyprus; and Darius the Second, the illegitimate son of Artaxerxes, who usurped the throne by killing his brother Sogdianus, beginning an uneventful nineteen year reign as Persian king. But, by far, the most famous and unmistakable tomb at Naqsh-e Rostam is that of Darius the Great.

Amid a storm of controversy and murder, Darius ascended to the throne of the mighty Persian Empire in 522 BCE. His reign was fraught with one revolt after another. The Babylonians revolted twice and the Elamites three times. But, perhaps, the greatest revolt in ancient times was that of the Ionians in 490 BCE, which led to the Persian Empire's ill-fated defeat at the Battle of Marathon.

Still, for all the constant battles fought over his thirty-six year reign, Darius the Great also introduced such revolutionary ideas as enlistment in the army, wages for its soldiers, as well as military training and several innovations for the Persian army and navy. He was also responsible for the conquest of the Pontic nation, in what is now northeastern Turkey, and the Armenians, extending Persian control well into the Caucasus Mountains.

Aside from being an innovator militaristically, he also introduced the religion of Zoroastrianism to the Persian people. Centering around the religious philosophy of the prophet Zoroaster, who himself worshipped Ahura Mazda as the supreme divinity, this new religion was extremely important because it formed an undeniable link between Eastern and Western religious practices of monotheism. Arguably, the world's oldest religion, Zoroastrianism probably had more influence than any other faith, past or present.

Politically, Darius revised an administrative system to include a code of laws enforcing evidence, deposits, bribery and assault. In doing so, he was praised for reforming the legacy of Cyrus the Great. And, with the division of the Persian Empire into twenty provinces, each under the supervision of their own governors or satraps, he was now able to gain control of an expanding empire while allowing each province its own laws, traditions and class system, with one opportunistic advantage- all were obligated to pay monetary tributes to Darius.

Overall, Darius the First, the King of Persian Kings, is considered by most historians as one of the elite ancient rulers who, not only changed the history of their nation, but also changed the history of the world. It is no surprise that upon his death, a great tomb was erected in his honor, complete with magnificent reliefs and sculptures adorning the exterior and intricate carvings and murals on the inside.

The scene unfolding in the desert between Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam was an awesome spectacle to say the least.

One lone Humvee, racing toward the Persian tomb complex, clouds of sand causing a virtual dust storm behind it. Seen head-on, it could be mistaken for an out-of-control adventure seeker looking to speed through the Iranian desert landscape. But, the view from above showed quite a different story.

If a helicopter were flying overhead, shooting a scene for a motion picture, the cameraperson would have captured a lone Humvee ferociously chased by an overwhelming fleet of American military vehicles. Five Land Rover Defender 110s, each capable of holding ten armed men. Two M151 4x4 Multi-Purpose Light Utility Jeeps, equipped with two M12.7mm heavy machine guns and two TOW-2 anti-tank missile launchers, holding five fully armed men. Following the seven smaller vehicles, were five of the United States military's most highly prized and enormous transports.

The 6x6 Multi-purpose Oshkosh Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement transport, usually shortened to MTVR the full specifications of which are highly guarded secrets among the American military, is capable of holding three armed men in its cab, along with room enough for thirty men in its open bed. Multiply that by five, add the three Bell AH-1 SuperCobra attack helicopters carrying an advanced weapons system, flying above the convoy in unison, and Stone knew they were in for a serious asskicking.

Each Oshkosh held about fifty men, more than likely armed with Colt M16A4 MWS automatic rifles, and from what Stone could see at least six rocket launchers. Adding it all up, that was over three hundred men, armed better than some third world countries, with the most advanced weapons available, travelling in style, in the most modern of military vehicles and the predicament Stone and his team found themselves in was worse than he had first thought.

Much, much worse.

As Lovey deftly zigzagged the short distance to their next destination, bullets striking the sand inches from the Humvee, as Kostakis and Stone updated General Harris on the contents of the *Nostradamus Manuscript*. The coordinates of Tikal, the Total Solar Eclipse, the additional relics, the Lost Lands, the Altar of Judgment and the prophesying of the Apocalypse.

As Kostakis, Stone and Harris were discussing the manuscript, D-Boy, Rebel and Tricky, were desperately firing their Colt M4 assault rifles from the vehicle's windows; trying desperately to delay the inevitable onslaught of the unstoppable military force pursuing them.

"I hate to interrupt," Remo interjected, "but can anybody explain to me why our American military is ensuring we *do not* succeed?" By this time, Remo was casually holding a Dynamit-Nobel Panzerfaust 3-IT 600 single shot, disposable, anti-tank rocket launcher. It was especially useful for close range combat with a maximum range of 500 meters (1640 feet) and, considering the convoy following them was closer than that, it was the perfect weapon for this situation. Remo leaned out the back window, depressing the launcher's trigger. A trail of smoke was left in its wake, as the rocket zoomed through the Humvee's dust cloud.

An extravagant wreckage ensued; one that would make any Hollywood studio executive cream their pants.

Not only did the rocket take out one of the Oshkosh transports with fifty men in it, but it also took out two Land Rover Defenders, unable to avoid the debris of the much larger transport. One Rover twisted and tangled up in a fiery, smoky heap; the second flipped several times, tossing soldiers under and around the wreck.

As a result of the spectacular explosion, pieces of shrapnel were tossed all around the convoy, stabbing and gouging a number of soldiers on each of the remaining four Oshkosh transports, while another huge piece of shrapnel tore through the underbelly of one of the SuperCobras, causing it to lose control, tumbling out of the sky in a flaming ball of metal and flesh.

Unfortunately, for Stone, the other vehicles escaped unscathed. Still, approximately sixty or seventy of the opposition's men had been eliminated by Remo's one missile, and, as far as Stone was concerned, that was a good start.

"Nice shot, Captain," General Harris commented.

"Thank you, sir," Remo climbed back in the window. "Now, can you answer my question?" Remo was never one to beat around the bush.

“Well, first it’s not *our* military per se,” General Harris turned to face Remo. “Although, it may be true that some people in our government would like nothing more than to rule the world, the consequence of this little venture is not something they are prepared to risk.”

“Then who?” Remo asked.

“We have reason to believe the man leading this operation is General Zachariah Combs,” Harris answered reluctantly.

“Whoa, whoa! *The* General Zachariah Combs?” Radcliffe leaned into the conversation.

“Yes, Professor Radcliffe. General Zachariah Combs, former Director of Homeland Security. According to reports, he went rogue six months ago, around the same time rumors first circulated about the possibilities of acquiring ancient relics that would assist him *and* his organization to rule the world, uncontested.”

“Wait,” Stone held up his hand, “what organization?”

“They call themselves the American Militia Movement, AMMO for short. A band of military officers, hell-bent on world domination in the name of the United States. And they will stop at nothing to gain these relics- even if it means risking everything and everyone on this planet.”

“Boys-with-toys,” Hazelton shook her head at the pomposity.

“And the US government can’t step in and stop them?” Stone asked.

“Our government denies they even exist. Just imagine the embarrassment, the ramifications our country would endure. We would lose overseas trades, military alliances; our economy would suffer more than in recent years. No country would trust another United States military outfit within their borders. If we cannot control our *own* military, how could we be entrusted to protect another country’s borders, let alone train their army? Politically, it would be disastrous for us to acknowledge this group of renegades. Instead, the United States government chose to deny their existence, setting out to quietly dispose of them, sweeping this entire matter under the rug.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Remo leaned out the window, fired a rocket, blowing out the tires on one of the Jeeps, then came back in, “Why wouldn’t we just send our troops in, blow these assholes away? Prove to countries around the world that we won’t tolerate violence or private armies threatening us within our own government!”

“Because General Combs, along with an entire army unit loyal to him, has disappeared from our military radar.” General Harris pulled out a digital photograph, “That is, until two weeks ago, when we received this image from our uplink satellite in orbit over Bagdad.” He handed it to Stone.

“Is that who I think it is?” Stone stared at the grainy satellite image of two men. One man was the former Director of Homeland Security. The second man wore a military uniform, his back to Stone. But, it was all he needed to see.

“Yes, the man with General Combs is his second in command, Admiral Richard Alberts,” General Harris studied Stone’s reaction, carefully.

Stone stared at the image, burning hatred into the back of the Admiral’s head.

“I can’t let this get personal, Major,” the General said sternly. “We have more at risk than your personal vendetta. Our prime directive is to obtain these relics. Personal grudges will not be tolerated. If that’s going to be a problem, let me know now.”

“None at all,” Stone answered the General’s challenge by handing the photo back to him.

“Good, because as harsh as it seems, we’re on our own out here,” Harris sighed sitting back in his seat. “Those orders come from President Sanders himself. If we succeed, no one will ever know our names. If we do not, well then, none of this will really matter anyhow. According to Professor Kostakis, we need all ten relics to perform this offering ritual. Without the relics, our mission is a failure and the world is doomed. With them, we are silent, reluctant heroes.”

“Looks like I gotta call my agent and cancel Letterman and Conan,” D-Boy quipped as Lovey pulled the Humvee to a stop a few feet from the tomb entrance of Naqsh-i Rostam.

Everyone jumped from the Humvee as General Harris climbed into the driver’s seat. Lovey, Marley, Rebel and Tricky unloaded the weapons. D-Boy and Nicky Rich quickly led the three Professors into the tomb structure carved into the rock face of a small mountainous outcropping.

Stone took Remo and Johnny Boy aside, “I’m gonna need you two to ride with the General. Throw everything you got at them. Don’t try to be heroes.” Stone then turned to Harris, “Do not engage with the caravan directly. In fact, I need you to drive right passed them. Do not stop until you reach Persepolis. Get Eagle Eye on the horn; hopefully he got *The Meadowlark* back.”

“Wait,” Remo said, climbing into the back seat of the Humvee, readying another PzF 3-IT-600, “what about you guys?”

“We’re not coming out this way,” Stone called back over his shoulder, darting for the tomb entrance. When he got there, he turned around in time to see the Humvee speeding away, curving wide left, as two long streams of smoke streaked out opposite windows.

The rockets Remo and Johnny Boy fired from their windows hit their targets. One hitting an Oshkosh transport and the Jeep behind it, the other blowing up a Rover and a third transport. Remarkably, none of the six remaining vehicles turned to pursue the Humvee. Instead, they stayed on course, about a mile and a half away from the entrance to Naqsh-i Rostam.

Once inside the tomb structure, Stone began barking orders, “Marley, Tricky, Rebel, I want C-4 surrounding this archway. Professors we need a way out of here fast. You got about two minutes to figure out how we get out of here and back to Persepolis through that secret passage.”

Everyone moved with purpose.

The three Professors quickly went about finding the secret passage leading to the next relic; carefully looking at reliefs and sculptures. They had no time to admire the magnificent architecture surrounding the interior tomb complex.

Hazelton and Kostakis had some idea what to look for, but Radcliffe *knew* what to look for.

Before Stone finished telling them to figure a way out, the astute Professor of Mesopotamian Archaeology was walking to the back of the tomb where, resting on a simple stone slab was a smooth stone sarcophagus. This one was not as intricate as Alexander the Great’s, or some Egyptian pharaohs. Just an ordinary stone-carved coffin with some cuneiform etched into its stone lid and around its sides.

Radcliffe immediately surmised that this was not the final resting place of a great ruler such as Darius the First. The body inside was most certainly a fake; adorned in a kingly fashion- a stone hand, holding a stone replica of a scimitar with a lion pommel made of polished stone.

Amateurs, Radcliffe thought.

Professor Radcliffe found what he was looking for almost instantly, the Faravahar symbol. Etched into the wall, just beyond the stone sarcophagus, hidden among a sculpture of an

offering to the Altar of Ahura Mazda. He was positive it would lead them to the actual tomb of Darius the Great.

Quickly, he examined it. As expected, like the Faravahar at Persepolis, this one too had grooves just below the figure with a small circle resting atop the winged figure. And, just as Stone had done before, Radcliffe grasped the symbol, turning it counterclockwise. After some effort the symbol finally began to turn and he was soon able to push it farther into the wall. Then, leaning into the wall, pushing hard with all his might until a portion of the wall yielded a concealed passageway.

Stone saw him and started moving everyone toward the passage.

Meanwhile, Marley and Rebel finished packing two, thin, foot-long strips of C-4 on either side of the entrance, while Tricky wired the two explosives.

Marley and Rebel ran for the secret passage.

Tricky carefully finished what he was doing then ran the length of the tomb, a remote detonator in his hand.

Unfortunately, it was too late; the convoy stopped only a few hundred feet from the tomb entrance. Men by the dozens piled out of the remaining Rovers and MTVRs. The SuperCobras landed, swirling a cloud of dust, revealing an additional twenty men jumping out.

One SEAL knelt a hundred yards from the entrance, a Honeywell AT4-CS (Confined Spaces) missile launcher resting calmly on his shoulder. Commonly, it was used as an anti-armor weapon against tanks and other vehicles, but not tonight.

As another man inserted a single-shot high-velocity 84mm warhead missile, ducking for cover, the first man took aim, and fired.

WHOOSH! BOOM!

Just as the SEAL fired his missile, Tricky held on tightly to the remote, pressing the red detonate button. He lunged, head first into the passageway as blasts from the inside and explosions from the outside rocked the tomb structure. Debris fell erratically around the Second Lieutenant as he rolled through the entrance seconds before the wall sealed, a plume of dust and rubble slamming against sealed doorway to the hidden passage.

“Cuttin’ it pretty close, huh Trick?” D-Boy said, helping his fellow Marine up.

Tricky dusted himself off, “Nah worked out just the way I planned it.” Then to Stone, “I sure hope we got a way out, because there’s no way in Hell we’re getting out that way,” Tricky jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the sealed entrance.

“We’re working on it,” Stone said, holding up one of several glowsticks now illuminating the narrow passageway.

Radcliffe was standing at the edge of what looked like stone steps. Beyond it, he could see two more sets. Imbedded into the wall just ahead of them he could make out several round holes with, what appeared to be, boulders stuck inside them. Obviously, some ancient mechanism to stop those not worthy of passing this test. He smiled, turning to Kostakis who was thumbing quickly through the manuscript.

“Ah, here we are!” Kostakis pointed to the page, “Nostradamus called this little trap *The Incantation Text Trap*.”

2310 hours

“Well, you had better figure out what the fuck that was or I’m gonna use your empty skull as a shovel to dig that crap out!” Captain Fairfield Minnow was livid as he addressed the SEAL who fired on the tomb. He wanted answers and he wanted them now.

The first explosion happened just seconds before the SEAL’s missile struck, just above the entrance of the tomb structure. Everyone ducked for cover, giant boulders and rocks thrown around them and into the air by the massive blast. Overall, ten men were dead; their bodies crush by massive boulders and debris. Everyone stumbled to their feet, looking around, trying to help those who needed help. It was utter and total, confusion.

Thirty minutes had passed since the initial blast. Thirty valuable minutes, which saw men regrouping, clearing rubble, trying to get into the tomb structure. It was only after all this time passed, that Captain Minnow finally lost his patience. He started scolding the men around him, beginning with the SEAL who fired the 84mm warhead, which was a big mistake.

Admiral Alberts glared at the young Army Captain, “I will only say this once, Captain, so you better perk up those pretty little ears of yours. No one talks to my men in that tone. The next time you do, I’ll crush your skull and send it home in a nicely wrapped boxed for your Mommy to open on Christmas morning.” Alberts looked around at the assemblage of men.

His SEALs were standing, calmly awaiting orders. Captain Minnows' men, although clearly enraged at the Admiral for speaking to their commanding officer in that manner, dare not instigate any riot at this stage- the prize was far greater than the risk. Captain Bol's men, a motley crew of rag-tag mercenaries, stood around smoking cigarettes and could care less.

Admiral Alberts turned to Captain Bol, "Have your men dig these rocks away from the entrance. I'm sure the young Captain Minnow here wouldn't mind helping you himself," the Admiral started to walk away.

"Wait!" Captain Minnow shouted, "Where are you going?"

Admiral Alberts motioned for his entire SEAL Team 6 division of fifty to follow him to an Oshkosh transport. The Admiral, turned, finally answering the young Army Captain as he got into the passenger seat, "Persepolis."

2315 hours

The Tomb of the Four Persian Kings

The Incantation Text Trap

"It appears we must find the proper ancient prayer text honoring the divinity, Ahura Mazda, as the Supreme Creator, in order to pass the first set of stone steps. The words must be stepped upon in proper order, in accordance with the primary Zoroaster liturgy collection, the *Yasna*." Kostakis looked down at the stone steps immediately in front of the group. Written on each step was one word. Each word different, carved into the stone. All written in ancient Persian.

"Interesting," Kostakis scratched his beard.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing, Doc?" Stone asked.

"Well, Nostradamus makes it easy enough. He wrote down each word in the order in which they must be stepped on. He just didn't write them in Persian."

"And that's a problem?" Stone glanced over at the somewhat perplexed Greek Professor.

"Uh, no, I don't think so," Kostakis examined each word carefully, looking down at the stone steps, then at Radcliffe.

"I got this," Radcliffe looked at the first set of inscriptions. He was looking for the word Radiant. He just hoped his memory of ancient Persian was accurate, or else he would be crushed

by the boulder waiting to spring from its ancient trap, but for the time being, remained dormant inside the wall, waiting for one false step.

Then, he saw it. The Persian word for Radiant.|

“Got it,” Radcliffe took a confident step onto the stone he was almost certain was Persian for radiant. If he was right, they could step to the next stone. If he were wrong... well, he just would not think about that.

Nothing happened, which was a good thing.

He proceeded to step on the next stone word, Glorious.|

Again, nothing.

Allowing a slight grin to spread across his face, confident of his translation skills, Radcliffe turned to Stone and the rest of the group, “Step only where I step and we’ll be through this in no time.”

Everyone followed the young archaeologist. Stepping only where he stepped- fourteen different times. Each stone describing the Supreme Creator of ancient Zoroastrianism.

The Greatest.

The Best.

The Most Beautiful.

The Most Firm.

The Most Wise.

Of the Most Perfect Form.

The Highest in Righteousness.

Possessed of Great Joy.

Creator.|

Fashioner.

Nourisher.

The Most Holy Spirit.

It was because of Professor Radcliffe’s expertise in translating ancient Persian script that they were able to get through the trap system in seven minutes.

They now headed for an opening in the floor of the narrow passageway, which had been triggered when the last word of the trap was stepped on by Radcliffe. The floor revealed a set of

wide stone steps, leading down, stopping a few feet from a wide chasm. Not as wide as the one at Persepolis, perhaps a couple hundred feet less, but that was wide enough.

2324 hours

Stone immediately went to the edge of the cliff, looking across the drop and toward the far side of the cavern. There, about fifty feet below them, on the other side of the precipice, was an opening to a cave. Just as Stone as expected.

Without hesitation on his part, Stone took out his G-gun, LBAS and a coil of Dynaspec rope. Quickly, in one smooth motion, he knotted one end of the rope into one LBAS, loaded his G-gun, and fired it straight up into the ceiling.

TWACK!

The force with which the load-bearing spear entered the stone ceiling, lodged it deeply, securely. He then took the opposite end of the rope, now hanging from the LBAS in front of him, and, knotting it onto another LBAS, fired it clear across the cavern, into the area just above the cave entrance. It too, lodged firmly into the limestone rock but, more importantly, the tautness of the Dynaspec formed a zip-line from one side of the rock face to the other.

Stone reached into his rucksack, producing a thick nylon rope with a rubber-handled grip and titanium cable clamp. Inserting the rope through the clamp's opening, he clipped it onto the zip-line, "Amanda grab hold of me. The rest of you, follow us." With that, Stone held on tight to the grip as he and Hazelton glided down the makeshift zip-line, fast. They both jumped off once they neared the mouth of the cave, landing in a tuck and roll that would have put a smile on Béla Károlyi's face, their momentum carrying them into the darkness.

The rest of Stone's team followed their intrepid leader. Tricky with Radcliffe. D-Boy with Kostakis. Then Lovey, Marley, Rebel and Nicky Rich.

By the time everyone arrived on the opposite side of the gorge, Stone and Hazelton had cracked a few glowsticks and were examining an exquisitely carved sarcophagus inside the cave, complete with a magnificently detailed mask made of stone. The man's face was unmistakable, it adorned the outer façade of Naqsh-e Rostam, was etched all over the interior structure of the tomb, and was carved on the cube-like towers the Persians called *Ka'ba-ye Zartosht*- literally the Cube of Zoroaster- just beyond the main entrance to the Tomb of the Four Persian Kings.

Radcliffe had no doubt they were looking at the true resting place of the greatest king Persia had ever known, Darius I, the Shahanshah-Great King- of Persia. Otherwise known as Darius the Great, the greatest of all Achaemenid kings.

And, to everyone's surprise, resting in an alcove just to the left of Darius' tomb, was his Lion Head Scimitar, the second treasure of the Persian king and the Fourth Relic of Judgment Day. Until the removal of the Orb of Zoroaster, it remained hidden behind a secret section of the wall, which had now lowered into the stone floor of the alcove, exposing its hiding place.

Stone wasted no time. He knew they were not only racing the clock, but also Admiral Alberts. The cocky Naval Commander was smart and it would not take him long to realize what Stone had in mind- mainly, to travel underground back to Persepolis, via the secret passageway from Naqsh-i Rostam.

Stone glanced at his watch. It was now eleven-thirty.

Only twenty minutes had passed from the time the entrance was blasted, to getting through the Incantation Trap, to zip lining across the cavern, and actually holding the scimitar. But, Stone knew they needed to find the passageway, make a mad dash through it, hope the land bridge across the three-hundred foot chasm under Persepolis righted itself, climb three flights of stairs, up an additional spiral one and hope that, not only did Remo, General Harris and Johnny Boy arrive back in Persepolis in time to unlock the Faravahar hatch, but that Admiral Alberts did not get there first. Not to mention, hoping Eagle Eye procured *The Meadowlark*.

Wouldn't be fun if it wasn't this close, Stone thought to himself.

Radcliffe immediately found the familiar symbol of Faravahar, with its raised center and grooves. And, just like its predecessors, it did not disappoint, as Radcliffe turned it counterclockwise. The symbol turned and, after two agonizing minutes, he was able to push the section of wall open, revealing the passageway back to Persepolis.

They ran for all they were worth.

Not lost in all this mayhem was the fact that they needed to remove both relics, physically, *before* the clock struck midnight. On the surface, it was approximately seven miles from Persepolis to Naqsh-i Rostam. Underground, because of the way they were connected, it was half that length. So, a journey on foot normally taking about twenty minutes, took less than ten before they finally reached where the Orb used to be, but was now securely aboard the Humvee.

Radcliffe wasted no time, grabbing a handful of sand, tossing it over the side of the cavernous crevasse, pleased to see the land bridge had indeed been restored. The entire team followed the alert Professor as he ran across the bridge, tossing sand every few feet in front of him so they could see where they were running.

Just then, the entire cavern shook violently. The ceiling began to crumble then collapse as sand poured in from above by the ton. Luckily, most of them were across the land bridge and reaching the first set of stairs when the larger pieces of debris started to strike the land bridge moments before it surrendered to the burgeoning barrage of limestone.

Without hesitation, they flew up the staircases, barely touching the steps as they too began cracking and crumbling.

"Major? You have an ETA on your arrival?" Remo's voice crackled in their earpieces.

"About three minutes," Stone shouted. *"Why?"*

"No rush. Just about fifty ST6 headed this way in a fully armed Oshkosh," Remo shouted back over the increasing noise of seismic activity.

"Figured as much. Where are you?"

"Waiting on your asses, outside that Fara-thinga-majinga. General Harris and Johnny Boy got the Humvee running at the bottom of the site."

"Okay, we're more than halfway up the long staircase. Should be there in less than two."

"Roger that. I'll be here," Remo paused, adding, *"You'll be happy to know that Eagle Eye got The Meadowlark back. He radioed us about five minutes after we left you."*

"Great news," Stone said ushering everyone up the spiral staircase leading up to the surface, *"We're coming up."*

True to his word, Remo was waiting for everyone at the top of the entrance, helping them up, motioning them to head for the Great Staircase leading down to the waiting Humvee. Stone arrived last; Remo lent him a hand, as both men ran for all they were worth toward the Humvee as the entire complex of Persepolis shook, its standing ruins collapsing, finally succumbing to the violent tremors after all these centuries.

As they reached the Humvee, the earthquake stopped, but their troubles were only beginning. Ten seconds after they piled into the multi-purpose transport and drove away from Persepolis, Admiral Alberts and his team arrived, seeing Stone's Humvee speeding away, and,

without so much as braking, the Oshkosh, loaded with fifty SEALs and twice as much ammo, chased after Stone and his team.

The scene unfolding picked up where act one of this desert action/adventure flick left off. Stone's Humvee and his entire team driving northeast, kicking up enormous dust clouds, chased vehemently by Admiral Alberts' team, packed into the huge Oshkosh transport, inching ever closer to its prey.

But, Stone had a weapon the Admiral did not count on. One that seemed to take forever and a day to get to them.

"You guys need a lift, Major?" The voice of Eagle Eye, thankfully, buzzed in Stone's ear.

"If you can," Stone said, holding onto the roll bar inside the Humvee while it jumped and jostled over the rough terrain.

"Not gonna be able to land. It'll have to be a Snatch-and-Go."

"Do what you gotta do," Stone answered, not particular about the type of extraction that would be need to be used. "Just get us the fuck out of here!"

"Roger that."

An Aerial-to-Ground Lift-Off, or Snatch-and-Go, was a high-velocity, high-risk maneuver that only the experienced of pilots would ever attempt. It was not recommended, unless the situation and the team were in imminent danger. Only then would an extraction of this magnitude be even suggested. Stone was mission leader, even though the General was with them, this mission was Stone's to call. And, figuring fifty irate SEAL Team 6 men, carrying grudges and weapons constituted as a dire situation if there ever was one, Stone verified the high-risk maneuver.

The concept of a Snatch-and-Go was straightforward, and Eagle Eye wasted no time, putting his expert skills to the test. From the cockpit, he flipped a switch. In the cargo bay, the belly of *The Meadowlark* opened revealing an aperture, not unlike the rear access ramp, except this secondary access hatch slid into the belly of the plane, the same way an elevator's doors might slide into a wall. Eagle Eye then pulled a lever, controlling a winch system just above the now open door. From the winch, a steel cable with a thick, steel clamp-hook uncoiled downward, reaching the target extraction vehicle.

Theoretically speaking, on the ground, the plan was simple. Stone waited for the steel cable and clamp to reach the Humvee, not an easy task as it came whizzing down fast, swinging

wildly. Actually, the hardest part about this extraction would be trying to catch the hook while avoiding a barrage of bullets raining down on the Humvee, while Lovey swerved back and forth, trying desperately to avoid the steel hook from slamming into the windshield as well as the constant gunfire.

Reluctantly, Stone opened the moon roof, while Remo, Johnny Boy and Tricky fired round after round at the oncoming Oshkosh. After an agonizing thirty-seconds, Stone finally caught the hook, quickly clamping it to the reinforced steel loop bolted to top of the Humvee, specifically for this reason. He then ducked back into the Humvee, telling everybody to hold on tight to anything within his or her grasp.

“Clear!” Stone gave Eagle Eye the all clear.

The next two minutes happened fast and furiously. The Humvee was yanked upwards; jolting back and forth, as the winch quickly did its job. Inside the Humvee, Stone and his team were holding onto whatever they could as they were lurched up into the sky.

2348 hours

The scene from the passenger seat of the Oshkosh was both infuriating and interesting to watch, unless you were Admiral Alberts, who watched as the Humvee was plucked from the chase, lifted off its wheels, pulled into the sky. He slammed the dashboard, cursing at the audacity. In one final effort, he ordered a missile to be shot at *The Meadowlark*.

2350 hours

The beeping in the cockpit of *The Meadowlark* was a dead giveaway and Eagle Eye was instantly aware of the impending danger. He waited until the last second then, from the tail-section of his giant Lockheed Martin, dropped several bogeys. The missiles immediately picked up the signals emanating from them, tracking them until they connected, causing no damage to *The Meadowlark*, but resulting in an enormous BOOM as thousands of pieces of shrapnel fell from the sky.

Luckily, by the time the explosion of the bogeys occurred, the Humvee was inside *The Meadowlark*, albeit dangling over the opening in the belly of the cargo bay, which was just now

closing. Once closed, the Humvee was lowered onto the floor of the transport plane. Lovey put the vehicle in drive, until the wheels met with the onboard locking system, thus securing it for another day.

The Meadowlark then flew away, north. Eagle Eye's only concern, to get as far from here as possible.

As the team exited the Humvee, General Harris went into the cockpit, taking a seat beside his friend, and pilot of the Hercules transport. Stone and his team walked up the stairs, into the lounge area, the two relics they had come away with securely in Stone's backpack, while Kostakis clutched the manuscript of Michel de Nostradamus.

Stone looked at his watch, eleven fifty-seven and twelve-seconds. Nearly three whole minutes to spare. He allowed himself a wry smile, finding a seat at the head of the long conference table, placing his rucksack on the floor beside him.

When everyone was seated around the table, Stone spoke, "Any idea where we head to next?" The question was not directed to anyone in particular, but everyone looked at Professor Kostakis.

"It doesn't look like any relic *specifically* needs to be extracted in any kind of order. That is until Suryavarman II's relics. The Sudarshana Chakra Disc and Kaumodaki Mace of Vishnu. The first must be found three days before the Autumnal Equinox, the second, two days before. So, the 9th and 10th of November."

"Okay, which relic are we closest to, right now?" Stone asked.

"The closest relic is the Pschent of Ramesses the Second, otherwise known as Ramesses the Great," Kostakis, seeing some confused looks, explained, "It's the Royal Crown, the Double Crown worn by Pharaohs to be more specific, depicted in many hieroglyphs as one long white conical crown, called the Hedjet Crown, of Upper Egypt, and a red crown of Lower Egypt, called the Deshret Crown, shaped almost like a high-back chair, but sweeping upwards in the back and having a long curled feature incorporated into its design. The two crowns, when worn as one, is believed to have signified the unification up Upper and Lower Egypt. In any instance, Nostradamus writes that it is buried with the mighty Pharaoh's treasures, in Wadi Biban el-Muluk, or Gates of the King," Kostakis answered.

"The Valley of the Kings, you mean?" Hazelton asked.

"Yes, that is what we call it today," the Greek professor nodded in response.

“Wait, I thought Ramesses’ tomb was opened in antiquity and looted,” Radcliffe pointed out, adding, “Not to mention the constant flooding of the Nile into the tomb causing it to overflow with dirt and debris. Nothing is supposed to have survived”

“That is what we are led to believe. But, from what I have read in the manuscript, there is more to KV7 than meets the eye,” Kostakis smiled. “There is one slight problem, however.”

“Of course there is,” Stone sighed.

“By the time we arrive in Luxor, it will be mid-morning; the Valley of the Kings will be teeming with tourists, not to mention it will be near impossible to get passed the guards who will be posted everywhere. Our only recourse is to wait until the evening hours before we assault his tomb. Besides, I need to stop by my office to pick up a few items.”

“Can’t you just Google it, Doc?” Marley chimed in.

“Not this. For this, it will go much smoother if I have the books in front of me.”

“You got all that, Eagle?” Stone spoke into his headset.

“*Loud and clear, Major,*” the voice of *The Meadowlark*’s pilot remarked, as Stone felt the plane bank to one side, turning toward their next target, “*Thessaloniki it is.*”

Therefore, everyone except Kostakis and Stone retired to their cabins. The two of them decided to go over a few details concerning the next relic. It would be a few of hours before they reached Greece, and Stone wanted to make sure he knew as much about everything, before they got to Luxor.

Five hours later, after a brief and uneventful stopover in Greece so Professor Kostakis could get the three books he felt he would be necessary for this mission, *The Meadowlark* headed south, toward Egypt, where General Harris arranged a safe landing at an undisclosed military base. Since it would be around eleven in the morning when they arrived, the group collectively decided it would be best to shower and rest, before leaving under the cover of darkness in a traditional Egyptian sailboat, called a felucca, travelling up the Nile, to the west bank of Luxor, where the real fun began.

Seven

The Royal Crown of Ramesses the Great

November 7th, 2012

2300 hours

Luxor, Egypt

If Stone had his choice, they would have been on their way to the next relic. But, all three professors agreed, going after Ramesses' Royal Crown before sunset would risk running into tourists, not to mention the heavily guarded tombs in the Valley of the Kings. No, this was their best bet. Anytime after eleven p.m. was safe. No tourists, less guards. The only downside being, that Admiral Alberts would wait until the cover of dark as well. Most likely, past midnight, this gave them at least an hour's head start.

Currently, they were about ten miles from the Valley, gliding on the famed Nile River, in a large felucca General Harris arranged for them to use. Stone was sitting beside his men, the three professors opposite them. Kostakis, as usual, was giving them a brief history and layout of the Valley of the Kings.

"... The Theban Hills was a natural choice for Middle Kingdom pharaohs to use as their final resting place. Ancient Egyptians called this place *ta dehent*, translated, literally, to The Peak. If you gaze at the range on the west bank," Kostakis pointed in that direction, "you can see, even in the moonlight, a pyramidal rock formation shaped naturally over time. The Ancient Egyptians saw this as a sign from the gods for the pharaohs to be buried here starting around 1539 BCE with the Amenhotep I and Thutmose I of the Eighteenth Dynasties, lasting until 1075 BCE, ending with the reign of Ramesses the X or XI. Scholars are still in dispute about which pharaoh. In all, the entire Valley of the Kings consists of at least sixty-three tombs, most of which remain a mystery.

“Unlike royal tombs in other parts of the world, the valley was not just for Pharaohs and their Queens- who have an entire valley dedicated to them, not far from the Valley of the Kings. In fact, nobles, scribes, members of the royal family, as well as several unmarked pits and caches with embalming equipment, can also be found there. Oddly enough, of the sixty-three tombs found there only twenty belong to pharaohs. That leaves, an astounding, forty-three tombs, either unmarked or used for embalming.”

Stone was listening to every word Professor Kostakis said, his eyes darting from the east to west banks, watching for unwelcome visitors, “Anything about these tombs we should know?”

“Such as?”

Stone sat up, “Layouts, hidden niches, alcoves, things, like that.”

“Well, nearly every tomb has alcoves and niches where treasures for the afterlife were stored in large and small canopic jars- everything from organs to valuables- in some cases, even mummified pets could be found within the burial chambers.” Kostakis scratched his beard, “Egyptian architects followed three basic patterns for tombs in both the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens, depending on when the tomb was constructed.

“Two of these are similar. The jogged-axis tomb is a long passageway descending into the Theban limestone, consisting of decorated walls and continuing, more or less, straight, with side rooms for funerary items the departed took with them to the afterlife, before leading into the pharaoh’s large burial chamber at the tomb’s end. These particular tombs were popular in the Amarna Period, a time in Ancient Egyptian history when monotheism was favored over the more common practice of polytheism.

“Similar to the jogged-axis design is the straight-axis tomb, which is typically found in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties. Its name indicates exactly what you might expect to find upon entering the tomb: a long, straight passageway with a central access room just before the burial chamber. Nothing fancy, but gloriously decorated, nonetheless.

“But,” Kostakis smiled excitedly, “it’s the Eighteenth Dynasty design, we archaeologists call the ‘bent-axis’ formula, that we’re about to enter. This tomb, belonging to Ramesses the Great, is labeled KV7- KV for King’s Valley, seven for the order in which it was discovered- and consists of a long straight passageway with decorated walls, descending into the Theban limestone. At a certain point, it then extends at a ninety-degree angle, either left or right, with alcoves and niches at various points. Some tombs, such as this one, have large rooms with

columns, additional alcoves and side rooms, again, all of which are decorated with flattering hieroglyphs of the tomb's owner. Eventually, the passage angles once more, revealing the entrance to the burial chamber, which as you might expect is huge and extravagant."

"Does the manuscript mention anything about booby-traps we should watch out for?" Radcliffe asked Kostakis because, when it came down to it, the only concern on everyone's mind was, what could they expect to find in the way of traps?

"Yes, he mentions quite a bit. It's why we needed to stopover in Greece; so I could retrieve these," Kostakis reached into his satchel, pulling out four paperback books with hieroglyphics adorning their covers, its titles written in English: *The Book of the Dead: Spells For Coming Forth By Day*; *The Book of Gates*; *Amduat: That Which Is In the Afterworld*; and *Pyramid Texts*.

"A little light reading, huh Doc," Nicky Rich scoffed, shaking his head in amazement.

"Major?" The voice of their felucca captain called out. In reality, the man was not officially a captain, but it *was* his boat, and Stone respected the man as such.

"Yes, Captain," Stone answered.

"We are coming along the west bank where you must depart if you do not wish to be seen by the guards on the opposite side of the Nile," the captain edged the modest Egyptian vessel toward the shore.

"Good, thank you."

The small Egyptian then smiled, "I paid the Valley guards in advance for their silence."

"You're a good man, Salam," Stone handed the man five-thousand US dollars. Not worth much these days in America but, here in Egypt, the man would be able to feed his family for a long time.

Salam gladly took the money, smiling as he pocketed the cash, "Not a problem, they are my wife's cousins."

2325 hours

The Valley of the Kings

The large felucca pulled up onto the dark shore of the west bank. Stone and his team grabbed their gear- not much, one rucksack each. They quickly jumped out of the mid-sized Egyptian

sailboat, and in less than one minute, Salam and his boat were off again, as if he had never stopped.

With the Nile now at their back, the moon their only light, the group of twelve ran low against the Valley desert, climbing over a slight rise leading into the valley where six guards were posted at various points around the valley, but, as promised, they ignored the men and women about to assault one of the tombs they were entrusted to protect. Such is the value of a dollar these days, whether American or Egyptian.

King's Valley 7, or KV7, is located in the main *wadi*- an Arabic word meaning a ravine, or valley, cut naturally by the flow of water. This particular section of the Valley of the Kings lies in the eastern part of the valley, opposite the tomb of Ramesses the Great's many sons, KV5. This is both important and tragic because the location of KV7 has made it susceptible to water damage and flash flooding over the years. Periodically, the Nile fills the tomb with floodwater and debris from the rest of the valley, making KV7 a very dangerous place to wander into, a fact not many tourists are aware of until they arrive here, leaving disappointed. Despite all this, some wall scenes of Ancient Egyptian life are still visible, albeit slightly water logged and flaky in some areas.

2328 hours

Well Shaft of KV7

It was nearly half past eleven when Stone and his Omega team arrived at the entrance to the tomb structure, minus Johnny Boy and Remo who had taken up posts on the opposite sides of the valley; they would meet up with the rest of the team once the mission was complete. Marley unlatched the chain, which was conveniently left unlocked, and led the group down the stone stairs, into the darkness of the limestone tomb. Once everyone was inside, Stone looped the chain link back onto the steel padlock, snapping it shut, tugging on it, ensuring it was securely locked. They would not be coming back this way.

At the bottom of the stairs, Johnny Boy, Rebel and D-Boy lit their glowsticks. Kostakis walked up to them, gazing upon a large seal carved into the center stone of the small entryway's floor. The seal was unlike anything Kostakis had ever seen. Depicted on it were two figures central to Ancient Egyptian religion, Isis and Nephthys. Each standing on either side of a central

sun disc, overlaid with an ankh- the Egyptian symbol for life- their arms were outstretched in submissively votive poses.

By the light of the glowsticks, Kostakis walked up to the seal on the floor.

“According to Nostradamus: *If the life of Egypt is joined as one with the sun disc, Ra shall rise and the path to the afterlife will be chosen.* He then adds that one should: *take these life giving objects, for they will be used as Anubis would.*”

“Is anybody else wondering what any of means?” D-Boy questioned rhetorically.

Kostakis ignored the sarcasm and, on bended knee, reached for the center of the seal. It was stone, like the rest of it. Slightly raised, but nothing out of the ordinary. Then, with all his might, Kostakis placed his hand on the ankh, putting all his weight behind it. Slowly, the ankh began to sink into the sun disc. Once they merged with each other, the seal did something so expected that everyone jumped back, including Kostakis, who stood up quickly.

The seal glowed bright orange forming an outline of itself on the ceiling above. It then twisted a full 180 degrees, rising straight up, revealing a cylindrical stone column, until it met the superimposed image in the ceiling above. Once it completed its turn, a square stone slid down into the column, revealing a hidden alcove inside the stone cylinder.

Kostakis stepped forward, seeing four objects vital to sacred ceremonies of Ancient Egypt. Before he could explain anything, an intense grinding noise echoed throughout the passage.

“Quick! We must hurry!” Kostakis said, running into the darkness ahead, chased by Stone, Marley and D-Boy, glowsticks in hand, lighting the way as much as possible.

Everyone else followed the four men, holding glowsticks of their own high in front of them, ready for anything.

The passageway from entrance to well-shaft chamber was not that long- only about 153 feet- but in almost total darkness, made it feel like an eternity. Images of Egyptian gods flashed by them, glowing ominously in the eerie light of the foot-long glowsticks.

Kostakis reached the shaft first. Without so much as a second thought, he leaped across the ten-foot gap, dive rolling like a seasoned acrobat. At first, Stone did not know why he did it. Once he reached the shaft, he saw the reason.

Stone reached the edge of the well shaft, saw Professor Kostakis on the opposite side. He looked back. Marley and D-Boy were coming up behind him. He looked down. The shaft, which should have been eleven feet below them, was less than half that. Worse, it was rising!

“Oh, fuck me!” D-Boy exclaimed looking over the edge.

“Just jump!” Stone said, coaxing the young Marine with a shove to his back. Marley and Stone quickly followed.

As his foot landed on the opposite ledge, Stone turned and saw that the well-shaft floor was now even with the actual floor. Except, the well shaft did not stop, it continued to rise.

Fast!

Stone glanced down the passage they had just come from; his remaining team was approaching rapidly, the lights from their glowsticks bouncing in the darkness. A horrifying realization suddenly occurred to Stone. They were not going to make it! The well shaft stone was rising; eventually it would reach the top of the passageway, sealing any chance of them joining each other.

Lovey and the others finally arrived at the well shaft, Stone and the other members stood on the opposite side, watching helplessly. The well shaft was now almost halfway up. Instinctively, she shoved the two civilians ahead of her, up and across. They practically crawled over the top to the other side, sliding head first into the waiting arms of Marley and Stone.

Lovey then helped Nicky Rich, Tricky and Rebel over the rising stone, all three of whom had to army-crawl on their bellies as the threat of being crushed to death lingered a few feet above them. One after the other, they dropped head first onto the opposite side, Rebel’s boot catching, momentarily, between the ceiling and the well shaft stone. With the help of his fellow Marines, his foot was tugged free as he tumbled down the rest of the way.

A sudden realization struck Lovey. She knew she was not going to make it, watching as the well shaft encompassed the entire passageway until it finally wedged into the ceiling. Sealed shut, blocking any chance of her joining the rest of the team.

Stone was feebly smacking the large stone blocking them from Lovey. “Vivian! Vivian!” He shouted unsure if she attempted to crawl over the top, before the well shaft sealed shut. If she had. *Oh, God, please!* Stone thought.

“I’m all right!” Lovey yelled back through the stone, her voice partially muffled by its density, “I’m okay!” She yelled once more.

Stone barely heard her, “Don’t worry,” he yelled back. “Stay there!”

He turned to Kostakis, an askance expression upon his face, wondering if they could reverse the trap. But the Professor just shook his head, “The only way out now is through Ramesses VII’s tomb,” he practically whispered, ashamed of his answer.

“Don’t worry about me,” Lovey yelled, as if she heard, which she did not, “I’ll see you on the other side.” With that, Lovey ran down the passageway, back toward the entrance.

Stone could not quite make out everything she said, but heard the faint sound of boots running from where Lovey stood, slowly dissipating until they were gone.

“She’ll be fine,” Rebel put a hand on Stone’s shoulder, “she’s the toughest woman I know, and I know a lot of women,” Rebel smiled then sheepishly looked at Hazelton, “No offense, Professor.”

Hazelton just shrugged, “None taken.”

“Right,” reluctantly, Stone turned to Kostakis, “What’s next?”

“My guess is we have to get through that,” Marley answered instead, raising his glowstick just beyond the alcove they found themselves in, revealing KV7’s next surprise.

“Wonderful,” Stone sighed.

2350 hours

Lovey went from pitch-black darkness to the moonlit darkness of the central valley. She hunched over, breathing in the sweet night air. From her back pocket, she pulled out a piece of paper. The same piece of paper Professor Kostakis made for everybody, in case they found themselves separated. It was a map of the tomb locations for the entire Valley of Kings. On it were two markings: one for KV7, the tomb of Ramesses the Great, the other for KV1, the tomb of Ramesses VII.

She stood up, studied the map, got her bearings, ran north, then west toward Ramesses VII’s tomb; the sign, written in Arabic and English, posted in front of the tomb entrance was also very helpful. She folded the map, replacing it with a schematic of KV1, also Professor Kostakis’ idea, looking it over once. She then proceeded to crack a glowstick, its chemicals mixing to achieve the familiar green hue. Taking a deep breath, she entered the darkness of the Valley

tomb. She could only hope that this tomb did not include any booby-traps she would have to contend with.

2352 hours

“Did that seem at all strange to you?” Remo whispered over his headset, his frequency set to communicate only with Johnny Boy on the opposite side of the Valley.

“Hey, the way things are going for us, I wouldn’t be surprised if an honest-to-god mummy walked out of one of these tombs,” Johnny Boy replied.

Remo chuckled, “It’d be downright disappointing if it didn’t.”

The two snipers smiled, maintaining the radio silence they were expected to keep. Had it not been silent, neither of them would have heard the engines of several motorboats and the two HM-12 transport barges roaring up the Nile toward them.

Remo’s best guess was they would be here in less than twenty minutes. Until then, he would let Stone and his Omega colleagues do their jobs without any unnecessary distractions. They had been in there for almost an hour and should be well on their way to finding the Royal Crown.

As for Lovey, Remo could only hope she had some sort of plan.

2355 hours

The Book of Gates Ceremony

Stone counted one-hundred and sixty-seven.

Fifty-seven spears shooting up from the floor. Fifty down from the ceiling. And thirty from each of the two walls. Of course, that was only counting the first of the two-corridor spear-trap. If he had to guess, when the final count was tallied, Stone would have estimated about three hundred spears, standing between them and safety.

Kostakis stood in front of the eastern wall of the room they occupied. He was trying to make out what little of the sacred paintings remained. Somewhere in this room, he knew he would be able to find a depiction of the Book of Gates ceremony. Thanks to archaeologist Kent Weeks who, for decades, had done extensive research in this part of the Valley. It was this

research of the tomb of Ramesses the Great, along with the guidance of the *Nostradamus Manuscript*, as well as the several books Kostakis now carried, that would help them get through this part of the relic hunt safely. He hoped.

“You all right over there, Professor?” D-Boy asked the inquisitive-looking Professor Kostakis.

“Hmm, oh, yes. Yes,” he scratched his beard, “I was just admiring the artwork, trying to figure out which part of the ceremony was depicted on this wall.”

“How many are there exactly?” Rebel tilted his head curiously, visibly bothered by this next step.

“No one knows for sure. Hundreds. Thousands. They are really just a series of magic spells used to guide the king through the demons and supernatural aspects of the Underworld. As for the ceremonies themselves, it depends on the ruler and the tomb’s architect to decide which ones to use,” Kostakis smiled then added, “Not to worry, I know what we need to do.”

Kostakis was staring at the wall of judgment before him. On it, Osiris sat regally in his throne while, on the floor in front of him, the heart of Ramesses was weighed in the balance of life using a set of scales. If one led a good, just life, then they would be rewarded with a peaceful afterlife. Wrongdoers were condemned, sentenced to be, metaphorically, eaten by the crocodile god, Sobek, who lay in wait beneath the scales.

Out of all the items depicted on the wall, Kostakis noticed something missing. There, in the center of the scales, was a small indentation. To the naked eye, it looked as if a piece of the wall was chipped, nothing to be bothered with really. In this part of the world, especially in the Valley, natural erosion and destruction of tombs were expected. Therefore, when a minor fragment of a wall painting went missing, there was no cause for alarm.

However, Kostakis knew differently. Not because he was smarter than anyone was, or more astute. No, the answer was far simpler.

He held in his hand that missing scale piece.

One of the items he took from the Isis-Nephthys podium before all hell broke loose. Unlike the rest of the wall, this piece was metal. Bronze to be exact. In addition, from what he could tell, it was from an actual Ancient Egyptian scale.

Slowly, carefully, he placed the missing scale piece into the hole in the wall.

Nothing happened.

Spears were still shooting in and out every hole at a phenomenal rate.

Kostakis then realized what he needed to do.

He opened his copy of the Book of Gates. Looking at the wall painting, he found its twin in his book then, feeling rather silly, recited the verse accompanying it, in Ancient Egyptian. *“Oh, he who judges, most high and honored Osiris, judge me. For my life has been blessed by having you as my Father. My Lord Protector over this most great and holy land. You have guided me to make just and noble decisions in the name of Ra. It is with these words I, humbly, ask to join you in the afterlife. To serve you as I always have and to rule this great nation from the heavens.”*

“Kudos to you, Doc,” Nicky Rich commented as the spears suddenly stopped when the Professor uttered the last syllable of the last word.

“Yeah,” Marley smiled, “I don’t know what it was you said, but it worked.”

“Let’s just keep moving,” Stone said taking point, “Let’s get moving.”

“I agree,” Kostakis said, closing his book still in disbelief that his idea actually worked, “we only have a few moments before they start up again.”

“You gotta be kidding, Doc!” Rebel sighed, following everyone down the first of two long corridors.

“How much time,” Stone asked, running down what was mapped out as Corridor G, coming to an archway and entering the second corridor, Corridor H.

“Unfortunately, Nostradamus does not specify. All he says is that one will have sufficient enough time to get from the first Book of Gates to the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony and still be able to perform the ritual opening the path to the Book of the Dead alcove.”

“What pa...” Marley did not get a chance to finish his question because the next sound everyone heard was a loud THUD! Then, “Son of a bitch!”

“He should have been more accurate in his description,” Kostakis said as he and the others caught up to Marley lying on the floor in front of a limestone wall, rubbing his head. A three-inch cut bleeding from where his head and the wall apparently met.

“You think?” Marley said, getting a helping hand from Rebel.

Kostakis, in the meantime, was looking over the wall of Corridor H, the light from several glowsticks showing him what was next.

November 8th, 2012

2415 hours

The Opening of the Mouth Ceremony

Before him must have once been a glorious site. The Opening of the Mouth Ceremony was one of Ancient Egypt's most revered rituals. Performed by only the holiest of priests, it was essentially the last rites before the body of the deceased was entombed. A priest would hold a variety of instruments to the dead body's mouth or nose, in essence, giving the individual the ability to breathe and awaken the senses so they may be used in the afterlife.

Kostakis worked quickly, not knowing exactly how much time he actually had. From his pocket, he took another item he had taken from the entrance podium. This one was also made of bronze but was long and crooked. Like a fishhook, but bent inwards in its middle and, instead of hooking into a loop at one end, it was more flat and square-shaped. Once again, there was a notch in the wall shaped like the hook.

Without hesitation, Kostakis opened his copy of the Pyramid Texts. Voraciously, he thumbed through the worn pages until he came to the image depicted on the wall. Below the image in the book was the second incantation he needed to recite: *"Breathe the gift of life into this spiritual being so that they may afford the life after death that they most truly have earned. Ignite the senses so that they may afford the same fruitfulness that was enjoyed in their life before death. May their kas be blessed everlastingly by the most revered, Ptah."*

As the wall at the end of Corridor H began to open, rising into the stone ceiling, the entrance back into Corridor G began to close, sliding slowly down into the floor.

Without waiting for the wall of Corridor H to rise fully, Stone ushered everyone through to the next chamber. If he had to venture a guess, Stone figured once the door rose fully, and the other door descended, the spears would activate again.

As if on cue, the spears started their ferocious rise and fall once the entrance to Corridor G was closed off. Luckily, everyone was inside the next chamber before that happened. Unfortunately, two things started happening just at that moment. Two things that neither Stone nor, any of them, could have guessed.

First, the entrance they had just come through began to slowly slide back down into the stone floor. That, however, was the least of their problems because, at the same time the door

was closing, the alcove they were in began to fill with sand. Tons of sand. Each grain falling at a remarkable rate so that by the time the wall closed entirely, the sand was already ankle-deep.

“Oh, this is *not* good,” D-Boy stating the obvious.

2430 hours

The Book of the Dead Alcove

Professor Stavros Kostakis did not let a little thing like ankle-deep sand in the burial chamber of an Egyptian Pharaoh two hundred feet below the Valley of the Kings bother him. Instead, the seasoned Professor of Theology and Ancient Greek History, representing Aristotle University, glided effortlessly through the thick, deepening sand until he came to the far wall of the 12 X 12 alcove. He looked at the wall art. *Such a shame*, he thought. *These all must have been such a remarkable sight in Ancient times.*

Upon studying the wall, Kostakis realized this was going to be much more difficult than the previous two incantations. He did not want to alarm anyone, but, from what he read in the *Nostradamus Manuscript*, if he did not recite this part just perfectly, the entire ceiling will “*open and Anubis will rain upon you until you are consumed by time*”.

“No pressure, huh?” Stone came up behind Kostakis, patting him on the back.

Kostakis smiled, *If only he knew*, he thought. Secretly, he was more nervous than he had ever been in his life. And, if he wasted any more time, that would not be much longer.

He took the last remaining item he had taken from the entrance podium, an ivory shaped cartouche with Ramesses’ name written in hieroglyphs down its center. Where to put it was simple enough. He saw four spots on the wall where it was missing. Although, like the others, it too looked as if the area had wasted away with the rest of the wall. The four empty slots went from floor to ceiling. The bottom most about the height of his waist, the top most about three feet above his head.

Sand continued to pour into the chamber. It was easily up to everyone’s knees by now, rising rapidly.

Quickly, he took out his copy of the Book of the Dead, thumbing through the worn pages until he found the page matching the wall in front of him. From what he could recall,

Nostradamus stated that the incantation must be read several times with the cartouche being placed in each empty slot, one after the other, in the correct sequence.

The first incantation was a hymn to the celestial ferryman: *“Awake in peace, Ramesses. The ferryman of Nut comes to honor you as she guides you across the heavens on your most sacred journey.”* Kostakis then inserted the ivory cartouche into the empty slot. They could all hear a loud grinding, ancient stonemason mechanisms at work, but sand continued to fall.

Waist deep, rising with no end in sight.

Kostakis moved to his left and the second incantation, taking the ivory cartouche with him, as the French soothsayer instructed. This next wall painting was dedicated to the almighty god, Atun, and his acceptance of Ramesses as his son in heaven. He did not hesitate once he came to it: *“Oh, great and honorable Atun, your son, Ramesses, comes to you. Hold him in your arms. Seat him beside you so that he may rule the heavens by your side.”* He placed the ivory piece into the second slot.

More grinding stone, more nothing. The sand still fell furiously, reaching their stomachs.

“Uh, doc? I don’t want to alarm you but we’re in a bit of a hurry,” Tricky said, arms above his head, holding his rucksack and gun.

Kostakis did not bother answering. Instead, he waded heavily through the thick sand, his feet and legs feeling as if they had been fitted for a pair of cement shoes, as he came to the wall opposite him, ready to recite the next spell. With the cartouche in hand, he found the scene in the Book of the Dead, this one barring the commoners from the same rights in heaven as their king. *“Stand before the gates of heaven and hinder the common folk from standing before you and your great almighty father, Geb. May he hold your hand and rejoice the coming of your eternal soul.”* He immediately inserted the ivory cartouche.

Still, nothing but more grinding and stone thumping. Everyone was now holding their rucksacks, backpacks, guns, rifles, whatever was in their hands, high above their head. The sand was unrelenting. Heavy and thick. Like standing in a vat of molasses that just continued to pour in.

Kostakis came to the last incantation, finally understanding the genius of this trap. One had to recite each incantation in their proper order *and* place the stone cartouche inside each slot. Eventually, the trap would be stopped but, when it came to the last incantation, sand would be so overwhelming, the height of the last cartouche slot so high, that failure was inevitable. Most

ancient Egyptians were small in stature. Not many of them grew past six feet. This was also the case for Kostakis. He was only five-feet ten inches. The slot on the wall was at least ten feet high. Too high for him to reach he realized.

He, like so many tomb robbers before him, would be casualties of the great Egyptian architects. But, Kostakis had one advantage the ancient Egyptians did not have.

“Might I borrow your shoulders, Second Lieutenant?” Kostakis asked Tricky.

Tricky tilted his head quizzically, wading over to Kostakis, who was by now chest deep in the Egyptian sand. For Tricky, however, it was only up to his stomach. Therefore, with some assistance from the others, Kostakis climbed onto Tricky’s shoulders.

Kostakis did not bother to wait until he was all the way up. He began reciting the last incantation, this one honoring Osiris and Ra, while he was still climbing. *“Oh, great heavenly, Ra, you whose head rises above all other gods. Honor me with thy touch and I will be in everlasting peace. Lo, Osiris has come and he shall bestow upon me the gift of everlasting life with the celestial beings that honor me by speaking my name!”*

Kostakis lunged forward, inserting the cartouche into the last slot. He then looked down, seeing everyone but Tricky’s head nearly covered in sand.

Just then, an intense, loud grinding noise- much different from the previous thumping and grinding noises- was followed by the sound of rushing sand. This time, however, it was emptying into tiny holes carved into the floor and walls. As the remaining sand emptied just as quickly as it entered, Stone could see the relieved, sand-speckled, faces of his team. They had been pushed to the edge so far on this mission. And, for their sake, he hoped in the end it would be well worth it.

Once the sand was entirely gone from the Book of the Dead alcove, the wall on the western side opened, revealing the next chamber. No one needed coaxing. Everyone rushed beyond its archway.

2445 hours

The Amduat Ceremony

They did not have much time to celebrate their narrow escape from a sand burial. Nor could they admire the artwork of the burial chamber they found themselves in. They could not appreciate

the glory and splendor of the ornate murals, still visible and awe inspiring. Nor could they study the intricate artisanship of the architecture forming the lintels over the doorways.

For, upon entering the next chamber, the wall they had just come through started to close, and all hell broke loose.

“Aw, hell! What now?” Nicky Rich’s question was answered almost immediately as the wall fully closed.

The next phase of the Incantation Trap System was put into effect, just as flawlessly and efficiently as it had worked nearly thirty-two hundred years ago. The results of this portion was simple: if the previous trap was meant to drown you in a sea of sand then this was the complete opposite as it threatened would-be tomb robbers, who somehow got through the well shaft and three previous traps, to be crushed to death. That became apparent when the ceiling of the chamber they were in started to descend, slowly. But, not before you were left to contemplate how you got here to begin with; as several archways, tantalizingly within their grasp, sealed shut the moment the trap system was activated.

Kostakis did not need to be told what to do next as Stone calmly, “What now?”

“Well, this wall,” Kostakis pointed to the northwest wall, “is a replica of the first Book of Gates chamber, the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony and the Book of the Dead traps. The southwest wall, however, is the Amduat ceremony, which is what we need to concern ourselves with. Granted, the items from the previous traps need to be placed in the allotted wall slots but, our main focus should be the incantation spells of That Which is in the Afterworld, or Amduat.”

“Anything we can do to help?” Hazelton asked as she and Radcliffe walked up to Stone and Kostakis.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Once I finish the incantation spell, I will need the three of you to insert these items into their proper slots,” Kostakis handed Stone the Book of Gates bronze scale piece, Hazelton the Book of the Dead cartouche, and Radcliffe the Opening of the Mouth ceremonial hook. “Then, run like Hell, because what happens next cannot be stopped.”

“Right, of course,” Radcliffe took the hook, joining Stone and Hazelton by the northwest wall, which, because of the dropping ceiling, was becoming shorter by the minute.

Kostakis walked to the southwest wall while the remaining five Marines stood in the center of the chamber ready for anything.

The last remaining item from the entrance pedestal- a golden sun disk about four inches in diameter- was now in Kostakis' right hand, his copy of the Amduat book in his left. Opening it, he recited the text pertaining to the missing sun disk on the wall. It was the last part of the story of Ra. The part that gives the names of all the gods and monsters spiriting the dead pharaoh so that, if need be, he may call upon them in the afterlife.

Finishing the spell, Kostakis placed the sun disk in the wall then motioned Stone, Radcliffe, and Hazelton to do the same, which they did. A loud creaking sound reverberated throughout the chamber as the ceiling began its ascent, only to be followed by another creaking, followed by the sound of thousands of tiny feet rushing toward them.

Only it was not feet. They should have been so lucky, because within seconds of the chamber ceiling reaching the top and the archways sliding open, an enormous rush of sand came pouring through hundreds of holes in the ceiling and walls. Not to mention the tons of sand coming through the previous entrance to the open Book of the Dead alcove!

"Hurry this way," Kostakis screamed over the cacophony of sand, running for the northeastern most archway.

Stone and his men did not need to be told twice. They followed quickly as millions of grains of sand assaulted them from every direction, no matter which way they went.

When they finally caught up with Kostakis, he was in the farthest side chamber of the entire tomb. Rather than an inescapable chamber, Stone and his team saw a false door, used by many Egyptian architects to thwart would-be tomb robbers, was actually opened.

"We only have thirty ticks of the sun, according to Nostradamus, before the door seals shut trapping us all," Kostakis yelled as Stone reached him first. "There's a staircase on the other side."

"Go!" Stone pushed Kostakis through while the others caught up, following the wily Professor into the darkness.

Stone was the last to go, seconds before the false door slid shut.

"Jeez, that was..." Stone did not finish his sentence. He was too busy taking in the splendor that stood before him.

0100hours

Burial Chamber of Ramesses the Great

“I see wonderful things.”

Stone recalled the immortal words of Howard Carter when he gazed upon the treasures found inside the unopened tomb of Tutankhamen in the early Twentieth Century, not far from where he and his team now stood.

If Howard Carter were alive today, he would need a new list of adjectives to describe the wondrous splendor stretching before them. Stone saw the look of amazement on all three professor’s faces, knowing this chamber was unlike any they had ever seen, or any they would ever see.

Marley took out his handheld 410 Laser Meter and, standing at the top of the staircase looming high above the floor of the chamber, pointed it in various directions.

He whistled, “Man alive!”

“What is it?” Stone came over to him.

Marley tilted the meter’s display screen toward Stone.

“531 x 420 feet and nearly 100 feet deep,” Stone shook his head. “Talk about the proverbial needle in a hay stack.”

“*Major?*” Remo’s voice crackled in Stone’s earpiece, barely audible under all this limestone.

“Go Remo.”

“... *about five min... you... have... isitors.*”

“What else is new? How many?”

“*Thirty ST... en my grunt... bout...enty mercen....*”

“Got it. We are in the burial chamber. Shouldn’t be too long, depending on how quickly we find this crown.” Stone motioned for everyone to go down the stairs, unsure of how much Remo actually heard. He then asked, reluctantly, “Have you guys seen or heard from Lovey?”

“... *Major,*” Johnny Boy this time, “... *damnedest... ing... unning out...ur tom... en orth... other... omb.*”

Stone smiled, not catching all of what Johnny Boy said but catching enough to know what she had in mind. *I only hope she was successful*, he thought.

“Okay, great news! In the meantime, I have something that I’m gonna need you guys to do,” Stone proceeded to tell Remo and Johnny Boy his plan.

0105 hours

Stone joined everyone at the base of the stairs where they were all admiring the art and architecture surrounding them.

“This is amazing,” Kostakis commented, staring at the numerous columns before them. “It’s unlike anything I have ever seen. This chamber has all the markings of Innei the Younger. For years, archaeologists wondered who designed the tomb of Ramesses the Great. Several names have been rumored to be the brains behind it. This, however, is proof of, at least, the architect of this chamber.”

“All very interesting, but we need to find this crown and get the hell out of here,” Stone barely finished his sentence when a huge explosion rocked the burial chamber.

“Let me guess,” Marley sighed.

“Sounds like they just blasted through the well shaft,” Stone looked at his watch, “We have about ten minutes before they blast their way down here.” Then, to Kostakis, “Any suggestions?”

Kostakis was already looking around for a sign as to where the Pschent may be hidden while, at the same time, taking in the splendor surrounding him. The ceiling was magnificently decorated with reliefs mimicking the night sky. Azure skies painted brilliantly, stretching from one end of the chamber to the next. Dotted across the night sky were immaculate golden stars and, stretching among them, arching her elongated frame across the entire length of the ceiling, was the goddess of the sky Nut; protecting the earth and all of her domain.

The ceiling was not the only thing that struck Kostakis as immaculate. Each wall was adorned, clean and crisp as the day they were painted, with depictions of Egyptian wall paintings similar to those in the KV7 tomb. A relief of Judgment Day stretched across the eastern wall—two scales weighing the heart of Ramesses the Great before the seated figure of Osiris while the crocodile god, Sobek, rested beneath the scales, waiting to devour the heart of the unjust. Ramesses was not one of them.

On the opposite wall were thousands of hieroglyphs that Professor Kostakis knew were not merely tomb decoration but rather the famed Pyramid texts once common in nearly every Old Kingdom pharaoh’s burial chamber and their sarcophagus. This representation, however,

was unlike any he had ever seen. Covering the entire length of the western wall were hundreds of incantations, spells that Ramesses would use upon entering the afterlife. Spells for his first breath. Spells that would enable him to talk. Walk. Even a spell to help breathe life back into his servants, represented by the hundreds of ushabti statues littering the floor.

“Amazing,” was all Kostakis could muster under his breath.

“Professor?” Stone put a hand on Kostakis’ shoulder, waking him from his reverie.

“Yes, yes the crown. Right, let’s see.” He walked around the columns, which were crowded with alabaster jars of all shapes and sizes, filled with everything from jewels and gold, to the pharaoh’s organs and intestines; or so the hieroglyphics on the jars indicated.

Scattered among these jars was an elaborate array of everyday items Ramesses would have used over his sixty-plus year reign as pharaoh of the mighty Egyptian empire. Items he would need for the afterlife.

In the center of the enormous chamber, was a golden sarcophagus- engraved with hieroglyphs and decorated with rubies, lapis lazuli, and other rare jewels- resting atop a smooth stone slab. Kostakis walked up to what was to be the final resting place of Ramesses II, knowing very well that the remains of the great pharaoh were not inside. They had long ago been whisked away, along with many other mummies, hidden in a secret cache not found until the late 1800’s. Ramesses’ final resting place since then has been the famed Mummy Room in the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, in Cairo Egypt.

Knowing the sarcophagus would most likely be sealed; Kostakis did not bother trying to open it. Instead, he walked to the head of it, studying the inscription engraved on the very top of the pharaoh’s golden coffin.

He touched the raised hieroglyphs, reciting them aloud, “None above. None below. Behold the symbol that unifies. It rests forever with Osiris.”

Kostakis stood from the crouching position he assumed to read the inscription. Looking around the chamber, his eyes stopped on the Judgment Day mural with the weighing of Ramesses’ heart before the god of the underworld, Osiris.

“Interesting,” he said, hurrying over to the mural for a closer look. Upon examining the relief, his eyes widened, scrutinizing the image of Osiris sitting upon a golden throne overseeing the ceremony.

“Good Lord!” He exclaimed as he was joined by Stone and the others.

“What is it?” Stone asked.

“The perfection of this relief hides Ancient Egypt’s most glorious treasure!” Kostakis reached up, touching the crown of Osiris, which was not part of the actual relief but was in fact real!

The real pschent of Ramesses the Great! The real Royal Crown every Egyptian Pharaoh had worn throughout their reign. Once thought lost to time, some scholars speculating it was shared among pharaohs. Passed from one to the next, never meant for a burial chamber but rather as a constant symbol for unification between Upper and Lower Egypt.

“Amazing! Hidden flawlessly among this relief!” Kostakis shook his head in disbelief.

“Can it be removed?” Radcliffe questioned.

Stone reached up with both hands, digging his fingers into small creases in the wall surrounding the crown. He then took out his Strider SMF knife and, working quickly, was finally able to nudge the crown from its secret niche.

“Got it,” His exuberance was short lived when an explosion blasted through the door at the top of the staircase leading back to KV7. Debris showering down into the chamber as several SEALs ran through the opening, Heckler & Koch MK23 Uzi’s at the ready.

The moment the SEALs had entered the burial chamber, they were assaulted by round after round of semi-automatic fire, dropping them like stones. The gunfire did not come from anyone on the floor of the chamber. Everyone looked up, across the chamber to a second staircase, no one noticed until now, where the gunfire came from. *It must lead into the tomb of Ramesses VII*, Stone thought.

Standing at the top of the second staircase, holding an M1911 semi-automatic in one hand and an M417 SOC Caliber .45 in the other, the latter once belonging to Money, was First Lieutenant Vivian “Lovey” Dario.

Stone smiled, then without hesitating, shoved his team toward Lovey’s staircase, firing his Heckler & Koch Mk23 over his shoulder at the opening created by the SEAL team. No one faltered while running up the second staircase.

Several more men tried to gain access to the chamber, but between Stone firing his Mk23, Lovey firing her two handguns, and Marley and Tricky taking up positions behind some columns firing their weapons, their enemies never stood a chance as four more men were felled after being assaulted by the barrage of gunfire.

In no time at all, Stone and his team joined Lovey at the top of the second staircase, escaping into the darkness of Ramesses VII's tomb. As they slid the slab of stone disguised as a false door, but was actually an exit from Ramesses the Great's burial chamber, Stone saw a swarm of Army men, SEALs and mercenaries run down the stairs into the burial chamber. He could only imagine the bewildered looks upon their faces when they found the chamber, seconds before alive with gunfire, now plunged into darkness. As dead as the pharaohs of Egypt itself.

The glowstick Lovey held up illuminated the room they entered. A stark contrast to the enormous burial chamber they just came from. This room, Kostakis explained, was once the burial chamber of Ramesses VII, it being just big enough to hold Stone and his team of ten, and not much more.

"Now what?" Rebel asked, as the green light from several glowsticks held by a few of his team members causing his face to glow eerily.

"No worries," Stone said confidently, "I took care of that problem."

I think. He risked a look at his watch. One-thirty.

By the light of the glowsticks, Lovey led them through the simple, straight-axis plan of Ramesses VII's tomb structure until they arrived at the entrance.

10 minutes ago

Valley of the Kings

Remo watched as Admiral Alberts' entourage filed into the Valley from the eastern valley entrance. At least sixty men followed him in several Jeeps and one Oshkosh, all focused on their one goal: enter KV7, stop Stone and retrieve the Royal Crown of Ramesses the Great.

Focus that Remo would use to his advantage to accomplish the plan him and Stone discussed.

The Admiral's team pulled their transports close to the opening of KV7, the Oshkosh leading the way with the three Jeeps behind it. Dozens of men exited each vehicle, rushing into the tomb, Admiral Alberts included.

Remo was pleased to see that one man guarded each vehicle. A smile grew wide across his face. He looked across the ridge of the Valley, signaling Johnny Boy, before slowly and

quietly, slid down the steep rocky terrain, making a mad dash for the docks where Admiral Alberts' team arrived.

Johnny Boy took a different route. Carefully sneaking into the Valley where the last Jeep lay idle, its guard not paying attention to his surroundings. Quietly, Johnny Boy came up behind the mercenary, wrapping one arm around the man's throat, the other across his head. The man was out cold in less than twenty-seconds. He dragged the unconscious man around the back of the Jeep, placing him on the ground. Next, he took aim with a CR-24 tranquilizer gun, crouching low- using the Jeep as a shield- taking aim. Three quick, silenced shots found their targets as the three remaining men guarding the vehicles dropped consecutively, all grabbing the back of their necks, wondering what just stung them.

With no opposition, Johnny Boy jumped into the nearest Jeep, started the engine and floored it. Turning the wheel, he made a u-turn toward the eastern valley entrance, and Ramesses VII's tomb.

0137 hours

Stone and his team exited the tomb almost exactly same moment Johnny Boy arrived with the Jeep, stopping just beyond the entrance, sand and silt kicking up a dust cloud behind it.

"Need a lift?" Johnny Boy asked, casually leaning an arm out the window.

Stone smirked, climbing into the passenger seat with everyone else piling into the back of the Jeep. Once they were all in, Johnny Boy shifted into gear, driving off toward the docks, where Remo was executing his part of the plan.

Five minutes later, they pulled up to the western shore of the Nile where Admiral Alberts left four men to guard two M-64 hovercrafts. Those men now lay bound, gagged, and unconscious a few feet from the shore. Leaning against the rear of one of the hovercrafts was Remo, its ramp in the down position, kissing the cool Egyptian shoreline.

"Took you long enough," Remo stepped aside allowing Johnny Boy to drive the Jeep onto the M-64 military sea transport.

"We decided to take an unguided tour," Stone hopped out as Tricky and Rebel retracted the ramp, starting up the craft's engines and guiding it across the Nile to the east bank of Luxor.

Thirty minutes later, they boarded *The Meadowlark* at Luxor International Airport and were in the air, flying off with another Relic of Doomsday while Admiral Alberts, no doubt, wondered how they slipped through his fingers this time.

It was a quarter to two in the morning on November 8th. Five days to gather the remaining five relics and bring them to the Altar of Judgment in Tikal. Their next mission would prove more challenging than the previous ones, if that was at all possible.

Stone sat at a computer console in the rear of *The Meadowlark*. He was studying the topography for the jungles of Peru, specifically Machu Picchu. High in the mountains, with an elevation of 8000 feet above sea level, their endurance would be tested. On top of that, access to the mountain city was limited at best. Flying in would be impossible, although Eagle Eye would argue against that. They would need to land in Lima and drive several hours to Cuzco before finally taking a train to the remote town of Aguas Calientes just outside Machu Picchu.

The flight from Egypt to Peru would take almost 18 hours. That meant they would arrive in Cuzco around ten-thirty in the evening. Couple that with travelling through the dense Peruvian jungles at night without any guide- a task that was not high on Stone's bucket list- and it, all but, reeked of disaster. But, it was the only way to guarantee complete access to the site without endangering innocent people. Not only were the jungles of Peru teeming with fierce local tribes, mercenaries and ferocious predators, but also the terrain itself was not friendly. With fallen trees and rocky precipices only inches from the road. Not to mention the drastic change in altitude that will almost certainly affect the performance and possible health of each team member, and you have what is sure to be one the most dangerous mission for any of them.

Eight

The Stone Mace of Pachacuti

November 8th, 2012

1030 hours

Lima, Peru

It took nearly 17 hours for the Meadowlark to fly from Luxor to Lima. During that flight, after everyone got some much-needed rest, Stone had each member of the team meet in the lounge area of the refurbished Lockheed Martin. He had asked Professor Amanda Hazelton to brief the entire group on the histories of the ancient civilizations of Mexico and Central and South America.

Although her educational background was more along the lines of Mesoamerican civilizations- the Olmecs and the sites of San Lorenzo and La Venta; the Mayan sites of Tikal and Palenque; and some Aztec sites such as Teotihuacán and Tenochtitlan- familiarizing herself with South American civilizations was part of her graduate studies at UNC Chapel Hill. Never had she been more grateful for all those boring classes with Professor Jamison and his lectures on Hiram Bingham and the mighty Inca Empire.

“Our understanding of the Inca come from documented accounts of European conquerors, namely Francisco Pizarro and his Spaniard army, which marched through the coastal valleys of Peru in 1532.” She left-clicked the mouse button on her laptop and the image on the overhead screen switched from a map of Mexico and Central America to a close-up of the western coastline of South America. Highlighted by a colorful map of Peru, the Inca Empire, which she explained were called Tawantinsuyu by the native Inca and can be divided into four regions: Chinchaysuyu and Collasuyu in the north and south and Antisuyu and Cuntisuyu in the center. She faced the members of her team and continued briefing them.

“The Inca were not always the powerful Empire we’re all familiar with. Only through a series of conflicts between Cuzco and neighboring Chanca, which eventually seized the city of Cuzco, did it become what we know it to be today. If not for the heroic deeds of Cuzco’s Incan ruler, Cusi Inca Yupanqui, we may be talking about the glorious city of Chanca. According to legend, Yupanqui had a vision of a supernatural being foreseeing his rise to power. Rallying

behind their leader, the army of Cuzco drove out the advancing Chancas. As a result of this victory, Yupanqui was crowned Sapa Inca and, subsequently, renamed Pachacuti Ninth Sapa Inca in the year 1440.”

She clicked the mouse button again and the map of Peru was replaced with an image of a man in fanciful headdress, a stoic expression on his hardened face, the fur of a jaguar draped majestically from one shoulder down the length of his body. In one hand he held a stone mace, spiked and fierce-looking. The other hand gripped the hair of a decapitated enemy, most-likely a Chanca warrior. The message was clear: Pachacuti was ruler of the Inca and no one dare challenge him.

“What you’re looking at is an image of the most powerful ruler the Inca Empire has ever known,” Hazelton continued her talk. “While he was king, Pachacuti expanded the Inca Empire like none before or after him. He sent ambassadors to weaker provinces in need of military protection. Extended a road network stretching the Pacific coast from Santiago, Chile through western Argentina and Bolivia, up the length of the Peruvian coastline and into Ecuador. He and his administration even advanced their methods of keeping accounting records by introducing the use of the quipu, which was a thick rope with knots in it used as a method for counting, much like a Japanese abacus. Because of these and other technological advancements, some scholars, as well as Spanish chroniclers, say he held some sort of supernatural power. Many believed that power came from the weapon he holds in his right hand, which has been dubbed The Stone Mace of Inti, and it was its mystical energy that caused enemies to cower before the Inca ruler.”

She clicked the mouse to bring up the next slide, a close-up of the stone mace Pachacuti held. It was fashioned in the shape of a triangle resting atop a square base. Made from one solid piece of volcanic rock called rhyolite, roughly ten inches long and five inches wide, the mace was embedded with golden spikes and attached at its base with resin and thick coarse hemp to a thick wooden shaft.

“This is what we’re looking for. And,” she clicked the mouse again, “this is where, according to legend, we will find it.”

It was an image of one of the most recognizable archaeological sites in the world. Once lost to time and space for centuries, until an expedition, headed by Hiram Bingham, in 1911 stumbled upon it high in the Andes Mountains. Hidden on a mountaintop, between two enormous peaks and overlooking the Urubamba River, it has recently been declared one of the

New Seven Wonders of the World and has long been protected by UNESCO's World Heritage Foundation as a place of great importance to humanity.

In the native Quechua language of the Inca, it was called Machu Pikchu meaning Old Peak.

To the rest of the world it is known as Machu Picchu.

"Remarkably, very little is known about this impressive reminder of the architectural skills of the mighty Inca Empire," Hazelton clicked a few keys and, seconds later, the printer resting on the table alongside her laptop whirred to life, spitting out a detailed map of the ancient site for each member of the team.

She then went into a more complete description of the newest Wonder of the World.

When Hiram Bingham stumbled upon the site in 1911, he was so impressed by it that he is reported as saying, "The glorious wonderment before me is most spectacular. Never have I felt closer to God than I do now." Nearly a century since he uttered those words and, still, archaeologists are no closer to unlocking all of its mysteries.

Several burials found there suggest that Machu Picchu was not simply used as a safe haven, or fortress, by the Inca nobles and royalty as some scholars once believed. The current consensus is that it may have been some sort of spiritual retreat, not just for the elite, but also for every member of the Inca social class.

Access to the site could only be gained through gates and removable rope bridges, but its ceremonial center was limited and could only be entered by walking through a large stone gate. Many of its structures reflect Pachacuti's obsession with religion and cosmology, not uncommon in ancient societies. It is because of this strong belief that many believe he chose this location to be one of the most sacred sites in the Incan world- the idea that resting atop the mountains was as close to their gods as he and his people could get without joining them in the afterlife.

Hazelton explained all this to Stone and the others, concluding with: "One of the more intriguing aspects of this ancient site is a small non-descript cave thought to be used during the winter solstice and located just below the sacred Temple of the Sun. It is here many scholars believe the remains of Pachacuti can be found and, with him, his Stone Mace of Inti."

She then turned to Kostakis who was studying the map of Machu Picchu intensely, "Does Nostradamus mention anything about the temple?"

The wizened professor nodded, "And then some."

Lima to Aguas Calientes

That was nearly ten hours ago. Since then, everything went off without a hitch. They had landed in Lima around 10:30 in the morning. They quickly unpacked all the necessary equipment and weapons, loaded themselves and everything they took into three rented, red Jeep Wranglers, and started the long drive to Cuzco. Flying was not an option since Cuzco's tiny airport could not accommodate the bulk of *The Meadowlark* at that time.

Following a predetermined course they drove east, Lovey and her Jeep sandwiched between Stone in the lead Jeep and Marley bringing up the rear, along Route 20 for 95.1 miles through the towns of La Victoria, Chaclacayo, and Rio Blanco in the region of Liberec then merged with Route 3 for an additional 99.6 miles through La Oroya, Concepcion and Huancayo in the Junín region.

Those 194.7 miles were nothing compared to the next 96.2 spent driving through local towns of the Huancavelica region. The roads here were rough, pocked with potholes that dipped their wheels almost entirely into mud and rock, jarring them from their seats more than once causing some to bang their heads on the roofs. Halfway complete with their journey they drove through the ancient and sacred city, Esmeralda, which was currently in the midst of a local celebration- Our Lady of the Holy Shrine. They briefly slowed their pace out of respect of the locals, that and the streets were filled with dozens of worshippers throwing themselves at the feet of a giant statue of the Blessed Mother being carried through the town by six burly men, so driving was near impossible.

Once they arrived in the more modern capital city of Ayacucho, famous for its thirty-three churches representing each year of Jesus' life, all of which were utilized during the religious celebrations of Holy Week, they turned back onto Route 3 and drove, painstakingly, for the next 214.5 miles until they reached the region of, and city of, Cuzco.

From there they had two options: hike the famous Inca Trail that took five days, which they did not have or board the Hiram Bingham Express. They boarded the train. Usually it stopped making runs after six in the evening but a well-placed call from General Harris granted them access to the entire train. The two-hour train ride would take them through the scenic mountains of the Andes, 7,000 feet above sea level. The train was not typical, with wide

cushioned seats, plenty of legroom, complimentary food and beverages, pan flutes and Inca music being pumped through the speaker system, it gave everyone the impression they were on vacation, which normal people who rode the train were.

When the train finally pulled into the little town of Aguas Calientes, it was nearly ten-thirty at night. Stone and everyone had agreed that renting a few Jeeps and following the trails tour buses used would be the best way to get to the site. But they need to wait until after midnight, when the last tour bus arrived back- the party bus the locals called it with discontent.

Since they had a few hours before they would leave for Machu Picchu, everyone decided to grab a bite to eat at a neighborhood restaurant frequented by the locals, an excellent sign of good food Stone had once heard, but not before some dissent from Kostakis and Radcliffe.

“We should keep moving,” Radcliffe had said.

“No telling when the Admiral will arrive,” Kostakis added.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Stone smirked as he led the group toward a small eatery on the edge of town. They were all dressed in casual wear- jeans, t-shirts, sneakers- so garnering looks from the local townspeople would not be a problem.

“And why is that, Major,” Hazelton asked, everyone stopping just short of the entrance.

Stone took from his pocket a small GPS unit. He touched the screen a few times then said, “Because according to this little guy the Admiral and his team are still in Baghdad, which means they won’t arrive here until tomorrow morning, at the earliest.”

“When did you manage to slip a transponder on the Admiral?” Lovey asked, realizing that at some point Stone must have somehow done just that.

“Not the Admiral. The Aegis of Zeus,” Stone could not help but smile. “While I was hanging in front of it in Mount Olympus, I attached a small tracking unit to the underside, just below the leather grip. Figured, in case they got that relic like they did the Khaos Blade, at least we’d know where they are at all times.”

Stone could see that Kostakis wanted to talk shop, but Stone held up his hand, “First we eat. Then. when we’re back on the road, we talk.”

That is precisely what they did. Ordering practically the whole menu and enjoying all the local delicacies that had a distinct blend of both Andean and international flair. From the sweet local roasted potatoes doused with an infusion of local herbs and spices to the imported cheeses and freshly baked tortillas. No one drank of course, but Stone promised that if they came through

this mission safe and sound he would buy each of them a case of everyone's favorite wine. Nobody argued with that.

Two hours later, they emerged from the local tavern and returned to their Jeeps, which had been parked just outside the restaurant, so that they could keep an eye on them and the equipment inside them. At the same moment, they reached the doors they all heard simultaneous sounds.

The clicking of rounds being slid into the chamber of a gun.

"I have to hand it to you Stone; you are a cunning little bastard." The voice was unmistakable.

Stone slowly turned to face him. "I have my moments."

"That you do," Admiral Alberts calmly walked toward the Jeeps, twenty armed men, SEALs and African mercenaries, holding Glock-40s and Colt M16A4s aimed straight for every member of Stone's team. "I wouldn't have found the transponder if I had not been such an egomaniacal prick. You cannot imagine the power I felt when I strapped that shield to my arm," he smiled then, adding, "Then, I found your little toy," the smile disappeared.

"I'm glad you liked it."

"I never said I liked it. You see, once I discovered it I made sure it stayed right where you thought it would be." Alberts got right in Stone's face. "While *I* was not."

"You're a genius, what can I say?" Stone shrugged.

"You are the most insolent, sorry excuse for a Marine I have ever seen," Alberts turned and paced toward his men. "What would your dear father think if he knew what a smart-ass his son was raised to be."

Blood boiled inside Stone's head but he held his tongue.

"Nothing?" Alberts asked as he turned to face him. "Yes. Good. Well, that saves us a lot of time because I can't afford for you to be dead just yet."

"And why is that?"

"Who else will retrieve my relics?"

"Go to Hell!"

Alberts raised his hand and one of his men fired his gun into the chest of nearest member of Stone's team.

Second Lieutenant Nicholas “Nicky Rich” Barrington fell, tumbling backwards then rolling down a steep incline, hitting his head hard on a protruding rock. If he was still alive, Stone was not going to be allowed to check on him. Hopefully the kid was smart and took the proper precautions.

While everyone was in shock, Alberts continued his conversation as if nothing had happened, “You were saying?”

“You sick mother...”

“Ah-ah, you wouldn’t want to be responsible for a third man’s death,” Alberts quickly stole a glance in Lovey’s direction. “At least not before we get those treasures.”

Stone sighed, “Fine. Let’s go then.” The choice was hard but Stone knew that as long as he cooperated his team was safe, for now.

“Excellent!” Alberts smiled. “You and I shall ride together, along with the young woman,” he motioned toward Hazelton.

“What about the rest of my team?” Stone asked.

“They will stay here for the time being,” Alberts watched carefully as one of his men zip-cuffed Stone, shoving him into the backseat of one of the Jeeps. Hazelton was also cuffed but she sat in the front passenger seat next to another one of Alberts’ men who was driving the jeep.

As for Admiral Alberts, he climbed into the back next to Stone, turning to his men who were still aiming their weapons at Stone’s team, “If I do not return by 0330 hours, shoot them all.”

Stone looked at his watch; it was half past midnight. Three hours to drive to and from Machu Picchu- almost an hour’s drive both ways. That would give him about sixty-minutes to get in, and get out with the Stone Mace of Inti. He just had to hope Hazelton was up for the challenge as well.

November 9th, 2012

2450 hours

Stone sat in the backseat of the Jeep. He remained silent for the entire trip from Cuzco to Machu Picchu. Hazelton sat, rather calmly, in the front passenger seat. On her lap rested the

Nostradamus Manuscript and her laptop, which she had been allowed to take with her, they would definitely need both Admiral Alberts had explained.

The only person who seemed to be talking, in fact, was Admiral Alberts. He kept droning on about how Stone had better learn to keep his mouth shut or else his entire team would suffer the same fate as the man who died- he didn't bother to use Nicky Rich's name- how he had bested Stone because he had underestimated the intelligence of a great Navy SEAL officer such as himself. He mentioned how, because of Stone's mistakes, he would become one of the richest and most powerful men in the world once everything was said and done.

Apparently, Stone thought, *they do not teach observational mathematics in the BUD/S training program*. If they had, the all-knowing Admiral would have noticed that, although twelve of his team entered the tiny restaurant- General Harris and Eagle Eye had stayed with *The Meadowlark*- only ten exited before the Admiral pounced upon them.

Remo and Marley had not come out the same time as Stone and his team. Remo stayed behind to settle the bill, while Marley was using the facilities. It was the only thing helping Stone block the image of Nicky Rich being shot, falling backwards down the embankment before his and everyone's eyes. Hopefully the kid was still wearing his Kevlar. He somehow had to believe that his team would get the better of the twenty men holding guns to their heads. By quickly assessing the situation, he casually observed that only seven of them were SEALs, the rest were hired guns from the *Le Mercenaire Afrique Brigade de Commando*. If he were a betting man, he would lay down the deed to his house that once those SEALs were taken out the mercenaries would drop their weapons or run or both.

Now, however, he had to concentrate on what loomed beyond the windshield of the Jeep as they drove along the Inca Trail leading high into the clouds. Often referred to as The Lost City of the Inca, Machu Picchu is one of the most impressive ancient structures ever built. And now, as Stone stared up at the winding mountain path, remodeled centuries ago into terraces used for crops, farmland and, most importantly, its ability to keep invading troops at bay while Inca warriors waited to thwart any advancing army, he could see why and how it had remained hidden for centuries.

0100 hours

The Lost City of the Inca

If it were not for the intrepid adventure seeker, Hiram Bingham and his guide Melchor Arteaga's curiosity one balmy July afternoon in 1911, the ancient city may have remained hidden to this very day. Then, in 1912 and 1915, Bingham returned to Peru, fully funded and backed by Yale University. In that time, he and his crew cleared away rubble and catalogued, meticulously, every aspect of the Lost City of the Inca.

Now, one hundred years later, Stone was entering the ancient site and immediately recalled what he had read about its architecture and design. Built in the classic Inca style, the central buildings were normal sized dry-stone walls, polished and smooth. The method used was referred to as the ashlar technique in which stones were fit tightly together, without the use of mortar- much like those of the pyramids in Egypt. Because of Peru's susceptibility to earthquakes, this technique was highly useful in that the mortar-free stones were less of a hazard to collapse during any seismic activity. The trapezoid-shaped doors and windows tilted inward from bottom to top, offsetting from row to row, was another ingenious way to eliminate earthquake damage, as well as the L-shape of the corner blocks, tightening the entire structure, making it more secure.

Stone remembered reading that, although the Inca had knowledge of the wheel- some children's toys had them- they did not use it for construction purposes. Nor could they use draft animals because of the rugged terrain and heavy vegetation. So, once more, like the pyramids on the Giza Plateau in Egypt, how the Inca were able to move the stones into place remains an archaeological mystery.

All in all the complex of Machu Picchu is comprised of 140 structures, including temples and houses, once topped with thatched roofs; flights of stone steps- more than one hundred of them- carved from single blocks of granite; numerous water fountains, once alive with fresh crystal clear water, interconnected using channels and drains running directly through the stone blocks- like a modern day irrigation system. The site was truly a marvel of ancient engineering.

As Stone was led by gunpoint by Admiral Alberts and Hazelton by the driver, Stone looked around him and recalled how archaeologists divided the site into three districts: The Sacred District, The Popular District and the District of the Priests and Nobility. The two former districts were simply housing for the lower class people- the Popular District- and housing for the nobles and holy members of Incan society- the District of the Priests and Nobility. Of course,

the housing for each of these classes differed greatly, the nobles and priests' residences being much grander in scale as well as more holy, than the lower classes'.

But they were heading toward neither of these sections. Stone was being led to the most revered part of the site- the Sacred District. There, structures dedicated to the sun god, Inti, dominated the landscape. Two of these structures, The Intihuatana stone, a ritual stone thought to harness the power of the sun inside it and The Room of the Three Windows, a small square room, maybe six-feet wide by six-feet long, overlooking the entire valley of Urubamba, did not interest the treasure hunting party. Instead, Stone, Hazelton, the Admiral and his crony walked straight toward the most sacred structure at Machu Picchu: The Temple of the Sun.

The building was unimpressive now and all that remained were in ruins. A shell of what once was. But 500 years ago it would have been the single most sacred site at Machu Picchu. Dedicated to their sun deity, the Temple of the Sun was more long than wide, about twenty-feet at its longest, and housed three main sections. The main offering chamber was open to everyone and the structure's center room once you entered the temple. Then, off to one side lay a smaller chamber, this one more secluded and used only by priests and the Inca king. The last room of the temple was hidden away in a large circular tower and was only entered by the most sacred and holy of Inca priests.

Once they reached the ruins of the Temple of the Sun, Stone was shoved down a long set of stairs that inclined and led into one of the many ceremonial niches found around the ancient site. To one side were Royal Tombs where dozens of mummies had been excavated by archaeologists. Opposite the tombs, was a small non-descript cave, thought to have been used in rituals during the solstices honoring the god Inti. The cave was damp with some lichen, moss growing on its walls, and bore a set of stone steps leading nowhere, stopping at the rough rocky wall fifty feet into the dank cave.

The Admiral cracked a glowstick, illuminating the entire cave in an eerie orange light that seemed to bring out the fire in his eyes.

"What do we do now, Professor?" He asked Hazelton.

Hazelton exchanged worried glances with Stone.

Stone nodded and Hazelton took from his backpack the only item that could save their lives.

0115 hours

The Temple of the Sun

Hazelton read from the manuscript, *“Below the belly of Inti find the raised stone where life meets death. Follow the divine path into the depths of the Old Peak. There you shall find the chamber of the great Ninth Sapa Inca. With him lies his holy weapon, but to obtain it, a falsehood must be found while the pendulum bears down on the unsuspecting traveler. Do not let fear consume you, watch for the second, for only it shall be your sanctuary. If thou shall be fortunate to pass through death, climb the Sealing Stones to observe the underworld, which will rise and fall with each careful step. Be wary, traveler. A false step on your climb will seal your fate. Time your steps carefully and it will be on your side. Falter and your demise will be sealed. Four stone glyphs found in hellfire must be joined with the final resting place of the Ninth Sapa Inca. But be forewarned, seeker of ancient treasures, once the Sealing Stone closes, forever are you bound in Hell.”*

“Sounds just peachy,” Stone sighed. “Okay let’s break this down into stages. *Below the belly of Inti*, that is obviously under the Temple of the Sun, which we are now. *Find the raised stone where life meets death.*”

Stone took in his surroundings. They all looked around, the Admiral not sure where to look while the SEAL just stood guard at the door. Then Stone and Hazelton saw them. Hazelton knew exactly what they were. Two sacred symbols intertwined- the snake representing the underworld or death and the jaguar, life- carved into a stone lintel above what many believed to be a false door.

Stone saw Hazelton’s reaction, recalling the next part of the riddle. *Follow the divine path into the depths of the Old Peak*. He looked down, and sure enough, against the farthest wall, meeting the crease between it and the ground, was a stone, slightly raised and just below the two symbols for life and death.

“Got it,” Stone walked over to it, applying a fair amount of pressure to it with his foot, causing a hidden stone door to slide down into the ground.

He adjusted his headset and turned to Hazelton, “I’ll talk to you through the headset from now on.” He took a step forward, his foot still resting on the raised stone, looked into the darkness, cracked a mini-glowstick, looked back at Hazelton and said, “I’ll see you in a few.”

Stone then stepped into the passageway, beginning his descent. The hidden door behind him sliding back up, sealing him in the dank narrow passage.

A few feet from where he entered, Stone found himself at the top of a steep spiral staircase leading down. He sighed and started descending the narrow stone steps carved from into the mountain itself, much the same way the steps on the exterior were carved.

After about, what he estimated to be a hundred feet and five minutes, he found himself at the top of a wider set of stone steps. He quickly clambered down those and stopped at the edge of the landing which looked down into an immaculate burial chamber. The drop was only about ten feet from the stone steps' landing, so Stone knelt down on one knee and jumped the short distance.

0130 hours

The Burial Chamber of Pachacuti

He found himself staring at a modest but impressive burial chamber. Maybe twenty feet by twenty. The walls were covered with pictographs of snakes and jaguars, scenes depicting battles with severed heads being held by who he could only assume were the victors. One large mural, on the far side of the chamber wall, was that of a man with a mighty headdress of colorful plumage seated on a large throne. Bowing in reverence in front of him were many people; Stone was not sure if they were Inca or enemies but seeing that they still had their heads attached to their bodies he would have to assume the former. One thing he did notice, though. The man in the mural was holding a long fierce mace with spikes coming from its stone head.

Dominating the chamber, however, was a large stone sarcophagus intricately carved with additional pictograms of the mighty Inca and their king. Adorning all four sides of the stone coffin were more pictograms, but Stone noticed these were different- they were symbols. On one side of the stone coffin, he examined four, square holes where some sort of stones looked as if they might fit.

"Talk to me, Major," Hazelton's voice startled Stone for a second.

"I'm in a burial chamber. Pachacuti's, I assume. There is a bunch of murals. One with someone holding what appears to be a stone mace." He leaned over, gazing at the carving on the topside of the coffin. "It's also on the lid of the coffin."

“Congratulations, it sounds like you found the chamber of the great Ninth Sapa Inca,” she paused, then, “The next part says *a falsehood must be found while the pendulum bears down on the unsuspecting traveler.*”

“Sounds inviting.”

Stone heard her give a slight chuckle. “There’s probably another false door in there somewhere. Most likely the same type that was up here.”

He began to look around. Feeling every inch of the wall for any kind of sign. After five minutes of searching, he still had nothing. Think, he thought. Slowly he brought the glowstick up to eye level and began a careful sweep of the entire chamber. Finally, at the foot of the stone coffin on the adjacent wall, he spotted a stone lintel similar to the one inside the cave entrance. Like the one in the cave, this one too had a snake intertwined with a jaguar. Stone walked over to the wall, examined the floor and found a smooth raised stone at its base. He applied pressure with his boot heel and like before, a stone door slid down into the edge of the chamber floor.

As the door finished sliding down into the floor, Stone heard the swooshing of metal and closed. He raised his glowstick, turning at the sound, causing him to shake his head in disgust.

0145 hours

The Pendulum Blade Trap

The sight of three long curved blades swinging on thick wooden fulcrums was something of a marvel. Astonishingly, the blades looked as sharp as when they were installed and just as imposing. They each swung in unison. Nothing fancy. Just long, sweeping, back and forth motions.

“I found the pendulum,” Stone said into his headset. “I’m guessing I’m the unsuspecting traveler.”

“Listen to me, Major. Nostradamus is very specific. He writes *watch for the second for only it shall be your sanctuary.*”

“Really because by the looks of it, it’s going to be my ass.”

“Concentrate, Stone. I know you can do this.” Hazelton pleaded.

He could only imagine how she must feel. Admiral Alberts breathing down her neck. Gun to her head. There was no way he was going to let her live once Stone found the Stone

Mace. He saw it in the Admiral's eyes. He saw it in hers too. She knew Alberts was going to kill her. That was why, somehow, someway, Stone was going to have to kill Admiral Alberts *before* he could kill Amanda Hazelton.

Carefully Stone watched each blade swing. The gentle undulation was hypnotic. Slow and steady all three rocked left to right. It was then Stone noticed something. Every second swing the blades hung in the air for about three seconds, gearing up their momentum for another drop.

Three seconds was not a lot of time, but timed right it was plenty of time.

Stone took a deep breath, watched the blades swing once more, and then on the next swing upwards Stone ran for all he was worth.

His legs burned as he dashed the length of the chamber as the blades quickly reversed their swing and followed him just as swiftly.

Never more than now did he wish he ate healthier, did more squats or ran like a running back. The entire sprint took no more than four seconds, but those four seconds were magnified because of impending death that loomed behind him.

As he approached where the last blade swung, he spotted a glow emitting from a hole in the floor on the far side of the chamber. With one last burst of speed, Stone lunged forward, headfirst, in the direction of the hole and slid down into it, just as the third blade swung inches from his foot.

So close had his escape been that, once Stone stopped rolling down a short flight of stone steps that had been below the hole and gained his footing, he noticed his bootlace had been sliced in half. He exhaled deeply at his narrow escape, "That was too close."

Stone could hear Hazelton sigh, then, "Thank goodness!"

"Time's wasting, Major Stone," Admiral Alberts spoke loud enough for Stone to hear him through Hazelton's headset. "You have twenty minutes to return back to the surface with my relic or else your men will die. Starting with this lovely young woman here."

He heard Hazelton yelp, as if her hair had been pulled unexpectedly.

"Amanda? If you can hear me plead with the Admiral," Stone whispered into his headset.

"Just give him a chance," she pleaded, "I know Stone will get the relic."

That was enough for Stone to realize she could hear him without the Admiral eavesdropping. “Once I’m out of here I’m going to need your help eliminating our two friends there.”

“You should see a set of stone steps in front of you because the next part of the riddle reads, *climb the Sealing Stones to observe the underworld which will rise and fall with each careful step*. Do you see them?”

Stone walked down the short passageway with steps identical to the ones he had just rolled down. “Climbing them now.”

“Be careful Major. The next part says something about *one step on your climb will seal your fate. Time your steps carefully and it will be on your side. Falter and your demise will be sealed.*”

Just as Hazelton read him the next excerpt Stone stepped on the last stone step at the top of the staircase, pressing it down into the previous step. His action was immediately followed by the sound of a slowly grinding stone coming from behind him. He looked back and, from his perch atop the stairs, saw a long thick stone slab the entire width of the passageway rise very slowly from the floor.

But that was the least of his problems. The opposite side of the landing appeared to be glowing bright orange. As he stepped closer to the other side, an intense heat could be felt and the loud gurgling of some kind of liquid could be heard- like a pot with furiously boiling water kept on the stove for too long.

He slowly approached the edge of the landing, triggering yet another trap, to what he did not know yet. Warily he peered over edge. Directly below him was about a twenty-foot drop to a smaller landing, maybe five feet wide. But that paled in comparison to the three undulating, circular stone pillars rising and falling sequentially into a boiling pool of thick lava.

0205 hours

Lava Chamber and Glyph Stones

There was no way to describe what he saw before him. If he ever got out of here alive, and someone asked him, he would say to him or her just imagine what the depths of hell might be like. Add in a fair amount of fear of drowning in a vat of boiling magma. And stick your head

inside a 1500° stone oven. Multiply that intensity by ten thousand and you might get close to what he was experiencing at this very moment.

“Quick, what’s next?” Stone shouted over the sound of the bubbling and crackling lava.

“Four stone glyphs found in hellfire must be joined with the final resting place of the Ninth Sapa Inca,” Hazelton answered without hesitation.

Squinting, his eyes burning from the sulfuric acid rising in soft ominous plumes impairing his vision slightly. Then, through the smoke, Stone spotted them. Twelve stones with carvings on them, fixated to the side of the left wall. He watched as the three pedestals rose just below them, and his task became clear.

“There are twelve stones here. How do I know which four I need?”

No response. This meant one of two things. Either Hazelton was thinking about their next move. Or she was dead.

After five long seconds, Hazelton answered. “I’m fairly certain two of the glyph-stones are the serpent and the jaguar, the symbols for life and death.” She paused, obviously thinking about the other two.

In the meantime, Stone took out a small pair of binoculars, which conveniently folded up nicely in his front pants pocket. He used them to get a closer look at the stones. Sure enough, he spotted the winding serpentine figure representing life and a proud jaguar, seated stoically with a wide fierce grin.

“I’m not sure about the other two,” Hazelton’s voice came over his headset. “It’s quite possible that the last two are of the Sun God, Inti, with Pachacuti holding his mace and the intertwining of life and death- similar to what we saw up here in the cave and what you saw in the burial chamber. Both are just guesses though.”

It was more than he could guess, so Stone looked around for those two glyphs. His eyes passed over many other stones. Birds. Vanquished enemies. The sun god alone. Pachacuti seated alone, holding his Stone Mace. For a second, he thought maybe Hazelton was wrong because through the now heavy smoke he could not find any the glyphs she mentioned. He all but conceded to procure the first two glyphs then improvise the last two, hoping for the best.

Then he saw them. Exactly as Hazelton described.

Inti seated on a throne with Pachacuti on bended knee, offering the Stone Mace to the Sun God like a servant to his master. The second: the intertwining serpent and jaguar symbolizing life and death. The latter was the farthest away so he would go after that one first.

Now, came the hard part.

Stone carefully leaped down onto the five-foot platform, just a few feet above the boiling lava. Sweat poured from his forehead as the heat intensified the closer to the lava he got. He watched as the three pedestals rose and fell rhythmically but he also wondered how long they would stay above the lava. One way to find out.

Stone jumped without thinking. Often, he felt that was the way to get things done. Do not think just react. But, then again, it was also a good way to get oneself killed. For a brief second, he thought he made the wrong choice as the first pedestal slowly sank beneath him. Then, just as suddenly, it rose. It was this motion that, Stone realized was supposed to keep the treasure seeker off-balance. Luckily, he was on his game tonight.

Deftly, he jumped from the first pedestal to the second then to the third. When he got to the third pedestal, he immediately grabbed the glyph stone of Intertwining Life and Death and shoved it into his backpack, which he had strapped around his chest before climbing down. But, before he could reach for the Inti and Pachacuti Glyph, the pedestal started to sink. He quickly jumped back onto the second, which held in place while the third pedestal began to rise again just as the second started to sink. Once more he jumped onto the third, to retrieve the second glyph stone. It slowly started to sink again but instead of abandoning it again, Stone jumped up grasping the stone, hanging by his fingertips over the pedestal and lava until it finally came loose. As he came down his right foot missed the pedestal completely and he fell off the pedestal.

Quick reflexes were the only thing that saved Stone from becoming boiling lava food. He grabbed onto the opposite side of the pedestal with one hand, wriggling his way back up, all the while holding onto the second glyph-stone of Inti and Pachacuti. Once he was standing back on the third pedestal he shoved the glyph into his backpack, but he had a bigger dilemma. The pedestal he was on continued to sink while the second continued to rise. Most likely, an after effect of removing the first two glyph-stones.

Without thinking, Stone leaped for all he was worth off the sinking pedestal. Arms outstretched, reaching desperately for the second pedestal. His fingers grasped the top edge of it.

Barely. Slowly he felt it start to sink but he was ready this time. He scrambled up to the pedestal's ledge, stood tall, and grabbed the third glyph stone- Life.

Suddenly, the second stone began to sink. He packed away the glyph and jumped onto the first pedestal just as the second sank deep into the boiling lava. The last stone was at eye level and easy to grasp, which he did. He packed that away then leaped back onto the five-foot landing.

Stone could definitely see the genius of this trap. Taken in the wrong order the pedestals would sink leaving the treasure seeker stranded on a pedestal in the middle of a lava field with no way across. Trapped until the heat and exhaustion got the better of them and death was welcome.

The first pedestal completed its descent into the lava just as Stone completed an arduous climb back to the first landing. Fortunately, the builder of this trap system had not been cruel enough to leave the traveler stranded. Foot and handholds had been carved into the side of the wall leading down into the lava pit. He looked over the side, where the pedestals had just been, and witnessed something that chilled his spine.

The lava level began to rise.

Soon it would climb high enough to pour over the top of the landing he was standing on then down the stairs and into the passageway.

“Aw, shit!” Stone shouted, remembering the last sentence of the Nostradamus riddle: *But, be forewarned, seeker of ancient treasures, once the Sealing Stone closes, forever are you bound in Hell.*

0240 hours

Burial Chamber of Pachacuti (Part Two)

Stone dashed across the landing and down the stone steps. Still rising, more than halfway up the corridor threatening to seal his fate was the stone slab, which had been triggered by the Sealing Stone Step. He mustered all the energy he could find, running toward the wall. A few feet from the rising wall he jumped high, diagonally sidestepping on the adjacent wall, springing himself from it then planting his foot on the Sealing Stone. He reached for the top of the stone, pulling himself up, scrambling over the wall. No more than thirty seconds later the wall sealed into place, into grooves in the ceiling.

Stone shook his head in disbelief. He had, within the past thirty minutes escaped death at least three times. Triumphant he walked up the stone steps but then recalled what awaited him at the top of them. Slowly he peered through to the next level.

No swooshing sound. The blades had stopped. Why? He could care less. The fact that they were not moving was enough. He hurried along the passageway, the blades looming overhead. Still silent. Still dormant. The false door leading back into Pachacuti's burial chamber remained open and Stone re-entered the tomb.

"Stone! Stone? Are you still there?" Hazelton sounded worried. With all that was happening, Stone forgot about his headset and communication. He wondered how long she had been screaming his name.

"I'm okay. Just retrieved the glyph stones. On my way back through the second level." He lied. He needed to give himself time to escape and ambush the Admiral and his soldier.

Stone was now standing at the side of the stone coffin that held the remains of the great Inca ruler. His glowstick from earlier still illuminated the chamber. He took out the glyph stones and looked at the empty squares where they were to be placed. Each square, he now noticed, had particular keyhole slots where he assumed the stones would fit.

Turning over the first one, the Life Glyph, Stone saw it had a wedge shape protruding slightly from the back. He looked at the empty square slots and found its match. It fit perfectly. Quickly he did the same with the other three glyphs.

Inti and Pachacuti had a circular wedge.

Death's was triangular.

And Life and Death Intertwined was hexagonal in shape.

With the four glyphs put in place, he could hear and feel the release of a locking mechanism. When Stone looked down, he saw the top of the coffin had opened slightly.

Carefully and respectfully, he lifted the lid. What he expected to see was a mummified corpse of the Ninth Sapa Inca. Contrary to what the media reported, mummies were found in other places besides Egypt. Many in the Peruvian highlands. Preserved to perfection, just as well as the more famous Egyptian ones.

But the coffin was not filled with a body. Instead, the stone burial coffer was filled from top to bottom with gold and jewels from all across South America and Mexico. Clearly the wealth of the Inca Empire died with the king. Or at least in this case it did.

Resting in the center of the treasure trove was what Stone was looking for. A solid piece of volcanic rhyolite embedded with golden spikes attached at its base with thick coarse hemp to a thick wooden shaft, ten inches long and five inches in diameter.

The Stone Mace of Inti.

Carefully, Stone lifted it from the coffin, placing it into his backpack, which he swung back around onto his back. He then replaced the lid, pushing the heavy stone coffin, using his legs, supporting himself by sitting on the ground, moving it toward the entrance to the tomb where he first entered so he could climb up onto the coffin. Once he hopped up onto the lid, Stone grabbed the bottom last step and pulled himself up.

Relief overcame him as he allowed a smile to form on his face. But that was soon overshadowed when he saw the entrance leading back up into the temple had been sealed shut. *Probably when one of those stones was triggered*, he thought. Instead of escaping the same way he entered, Stone saw another way out. A small crawlspace at the base of the top step revealed itself. He was not sure if it was there before. Frankly, he didn't care. He just, got on his hands and knees and began to crawl. Where it would let him out was anybody's guess. One thing was certain, anywhere was better than here.

0300 hours

"Stone!" Hazelton called out his name after twenty minutes of nothing but silence.

There was no response.

"It seems as though the Major left us without saying goodbye," Admiral Alberts smiled.

Hazelton looked at the smug Navy commander. He was gloating. Enjoying every moment of this agony she and Stone had been put through.

"Looks like you won't be getting that relic anymore than we will," she tried to appear confident but deep down she was truly concerned.

"I'm not the one who needs it to perform some cataclysmic ritual," Alberts slid back the chamber of his Steyr GB handgun, engaging the weapon, "I merely wanted it to rule the world."

"Not gonna happen asshole!"

Admiral Alberts spun around, pistol in hand, ready to fire at the familiar voice.

He never got a chance as his skull was smashed hard by a blunt object. A searing pain coursed through his left temple. He tasted blood inside his mouth, but before he could register anything, the Admiral fell to the ground with a dull thud.

Stone stood over him. Stone Mace in hand. Fresh blood dripping from several golden spikes. In his other hand, Stone held the Colt M16 of the SEAL operative that had accompanied them. The SEAL had been knocked-out cold and was lying just beyond the entrance to the cave.

Hazelton stood in shock, then lunged for Stone as he aimed the M16 at the head of the Admiral. Had it not been for Hazelton grabbing Stone's arm and swinging it upwards, the Admiral's head would have been in a thousand tiny pieces.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Stone looked at Hazelton in disgust.

"You're not a monster!"

What?"

"You're better than him, Major." She guided the M16 down to his side.

"He killed my father!"

"And you would dishonor your father's name, your name, by exacting revenge?"

"He's not going to walk off this mountain alive," Stone gritted his teeth, shaking with anger.

"I agree," Hazelton acknowledged.

"You have a better idea?" Stone tilted his head quizzically.

"I do."

Five minutes later, Stone watched as the slab sealed leading down into the burial chamber of the Ninth Sapa Inca Pachacuti sealed shut with a resounding thump, Admiral Alberts and his SEAL sidekick, both still unconscious and flex-cuffed, plunging them into absolute darkness. With no way out, the staircase leading into the actual tomb having sealed when Stone triggered one of the many stones during his harrowing journey, the only way the two men would escape would be if someone stepped on the stone on the opposite side of the wall they were now trapped behind. For the first time in a while, Major Donovan Stone genuinely smiled.

"Feel better?" Hazelton asked as they walked out into the moonlit sky.

"Much," he looked at his watch. It was a quarter till three. Forty-five minutes to drive back to Aguas Calientes. It would be close, but if his men were as smart as he thought they were, they would not need his help at all.

2 hours and 30 minutes ago

Aguas Calientes, Peru

“You have got to check out those toilets, man.” Marley chuckled, still zipping up his fly. “Nothing but a hole in the ground with a pipe leading somewhere. I feel for the guy that has to take a...”

The soft sounds of sweet Peruvian music was interrupted by a loud pop echoing through the air.

Remo knew immediately what it was, rushing to a small window, pulling back the red curtain gingerly so as not to attract unwanted attention, and peered outside. He held up his hand then brought it to his lips, cautioning silence, as Marley sidled up to him letting out a soft breath of air as he did so.

The two men watched as their fellow Marines were being held at gunpoint. Then, Nicky Rich flew through the air, as if he was on some stunt-wire, disappearing down an embankment.

They watched as Stone and Hazelton were forced by gunpoint into a waiting Jeep. Admiral Alberts went with them, but before he left Remo heard him say, “If I do not return by 0330 hours, shoot them all.” Then, the Jeep sped away their fellow Omega teammates stood dumbfounded at this sudden turn of events.

Remo let the curtain fall back into place gently, checked his watch- it was 12:33 a.m. He then turned to the maître d', “*Existe una salida a través espalda?*” Is there a way out through the back? Hoping the man spoke Spanish.

“*Sí. Sí, ven y te mostraré. Sígueme.*” The headwaiter motioned with his hand for them to follow him through the restaurant then through the kitchen until they came to a door leading to the back of the modest eatery.

Remo and Marley motioned for everyone to stand back, which they did, as they both took weapons out from under their shirts. Remo a smaller version of the experimental Heckler & Koch HK XM-8 sniper rifle, one of the advantages of being Omega was getting to use new weapons before they were issued in the field, and Marley his Heckler & Koch Mk23, standard MARSOC issue.

“I count twenty, but only seven SEALs,” Remo said, checking his ammo, six darts. “Take out the SEALs and those mercenaries will cower. Every one of our men is armed. They just need an opportunity.”

“Then let’s give them one,” Marley slid a round into the Mk23’s chamber.

Remo put his hand on the doorknob and opened it gently.

No one was there.

He pressed a finger to his lips, leading the way out of the tiny restaurant. It was not a big place so in a few steps they were at the building’s corner. Remo peered around and saw three SEALs holding their Colt M16’s to the heads of Lovey, Radcliffe and Kostakis. Three more aimed at Johnny Boy, Tricky and D-Boy. A lone mercenary aiming his assault rifle at Rebel. The last remaining SEAL was not aiming at anyone. He just leaned up against another Jeep, smoking a cigarette without a care in the world. The rest of the men stood around smiling and laughing. Unaware of the impending danger.

Remo knew their first task would be to take out the lazy SEAL dragging on his cigarette. He held up his hand, and motioned over his head. Marley understood. He also understood that once they started this they needed to finish it quickly or else it could turn into a bloodbath, and not necessarily one in their favor.

Marley peeked over Remo’s shoulder, around the corner of the building. He saw his target. He leaned back around. Took a deep breath. Looked at Remo. Both men nodded. Marley leaped from around the building and fired his Heckler.

Mayhem ensued.

The lazy SEAL heard the pop of the gun but never had a chance to move from his position as his head jolted back and he fell to the ground.

Next, the three SEALs guarding Lovey, Kostakis and Radcliffe went down, courtesy of Remo’s deadly aim and another of Marley’s 45 ACP rounds.

As Remo and Marley appeared from around the building, Lovey took the opening granted her and grabbed the two professors, running them back into the restaurant. She stayed there with them, crouched low beneath the window, an M417 SOC Caliber .45 in the ready position.

Rebel moved too quickly for the inexperienced mercenary holding him at gunpoint. Before the tall African Elite guard knew what was happening, Rebel had grabbed his Glock-40,

twisted it from his grip and turned the weapon on the man who immediately dropped to his knees, putting his hands on his head, pleading in French.

Johnny Boy, Tricky and D-Boy also took advantage of their opportunity. Each one shoulder tackling their captors to the ground, wrestling the weapons from their grasp, and then pointing them at the remaining mercenaries and SEALs.

As expected, the mercenaries dropped their weapons, following the lead of their comrade being held at gunpoint by Rebel. All of them fell to the ground, hands on their heads. The SEALs remained standing. Too proud to bend a knee in defeat.

Remo respected that. They, like his Omega team, were doing their job. Casualties were part of the territory and each one of them accepted that. He walked over to where Johnny Boy, Tricky and D-Boy were holding the entire entourage hostage and collected the weapons they had dropped. Marley joined him.

“Tie them to the trees,” Remo said to Lovey who, along with the two professors, had rejoined the team outside.

By this time, Remo and Marley had collected all the weapons and they watched as each man was tied to various trees surrounding the area while the remaining enemies waited their turn, not daring to move for fear of being shot. Contrary to what happens in movies and books, SEAL operatives and mercenaries are men and women just like anyone else; they would rather live to fight another day, perhaps one that is more advantageous to them, than to die.

It took ten minutes to tie each man with his own zip-strips. While that was being done, Remo and Marley disarmed each of their enemies' weapons, leaving empty cartridges and pocketing the ammunition. They also disassembled the guns, throwing its parts around the neighboring jungle, knowing that finding them would take time and effort. Two things neither of them had.

Satisfied with their accomplishments, Remo ran down the side of the hill to where Nicky Rich should be, but all he saw was a bloodstained rock. No body. No signs of the young Marine anywhere. *Where the fuck could he have gone?* Remo stood there for a second, looking around, noticing the embankment ended in an abrupt drop into the rapidly flow waters of the Urubamba. After rummaging through the dense foliage for over an hour without any results, Remo reluctantly called off the search. If, the kid was out there somewhere, he could miles down the

river by now. Hopefully he took the proper precautions. When he reached the top he looked at his watch, 0200 hours.

Now he just had to hope Stone and Hazelton were as lucky, or else this triumph will be short lived.

0330 hours

One and a half hours later, a Jeep could be seen barreling down the dirt road. Dust kicked up behind it, stopping beside the other Jeeps.

Stone and Hazelton jumped out of the Jeep, looking around at the almost comical scene. Seventeen men dressed in army and SEAL combat uniforms tied helplessly to several trees. Looks of utter hatred upon each face of the SEAL members. The African Elite Guards had more of a defeated look about them.

He walked up to Remo who had been leaning up against one of the Jeeps, its door wide open and a key in its ignition.

“Took you long enough,” Remo smiled. “We’ve been ready for the past two and a half hours.”

“Should I even ask?” Stone motioned at several of the tree huggers.

“About what?” Remo’s face was deadpan.

Stone let out a laugh.

“What about you? Seems you’re two SEALs short,” Remo looked around Stone, toward the empty Jeep.

“The Admiral and his man wanted a private burial.”

“They’re dead?” Remo asked, half delighted and half astonished.

“Let’s just say if they’re not rescued in the next few hours, they will be,” Stone looked over to where Nicky Rich had fallen.

“We looked. There’s no sign of him,” Remo was subdued. “If he survived he’ll find a way back. In the meantime, we need to move out, Major.”

Remo jumped into the driver’s seat of the Jeep he had been leaning on. Inside were Kostakis, Radcliffe, Lovey, Rebel and Marley.

Stone looked back at the second Jeep which had his remaining Omega team inside it- Tricky, Johnny Boy, and D-Boy all sat in the backseat laughing and jokingly punching each other. Hazelton stood beside the Jeep waiting for Stone.

“Why do I get the party bus?” Stone asked.

“You snooze you lose, my friend,” Remo smiled, starting the engine.

Stone smirked, walking over to the Jeep he and Hazelton had just used. He opened the passenger side door, examining the glove compartment. Inside was a small hunting knife, probably meant for him and Hazelton after the job at Machu Picchu was finished. He then walked around the Jeep, puncturing all four tires before throwing the knife far into the jungle.

After he flattened the tires, Stone walked up to the tiny restaurant owner, who had walked outside when he heard the bursting of the tires. From his rucksack, Stone pulled out two-thousand American dollars and gave it to the proprietor.

“Para sus problemas.”

The man took the money, thanking Stone several times, shaking his hand and bowing his head repeatedly.

Stone hopped into the driver’s seat of the last Jeep, starting it up and following Remo down the narrow street of Aguas Caliente back toward Cuzco. Turns out, where previous lack of clearance prevented them from landing in Cuzco, it had now been granted due to the proper being channels crossed. *The Meadowlark* could at last take-off from Alejandro Velasco Asete International Airport as soon as they arrived.

By three-thirty in the morning, they arrived in Cuzco. Thirty minutes later they were in the air.

Once in the air, Kostakis informed Eagle Eye of their next destination: Cambodia via Bangkok, Thailand. The wily professor had had plenty of time to cross-reference his information with the *Nostradamus Manuscript* regarding their next relic. He told as much to Stone but the Major held up his hand.

“We have a long flight, Professor. Let’s all get some rest.”

Kostakis understood and he, along with each member of the team retired to their cabins for some much needed relaxation.

Stone headed back to his cabin, leaving his door ajar slightly. He walked over to the footlocker beside his bed. Took a chain with a key from around his neck and opened the chest.

He then took from his rucksack the Stone Mace of Inti, placing it beside the two other relics before locking the chest and replacing the key around his neck.

Stone sighed as he sat on the edge of his bed.

They still needed to retrieve the Khaos Blade and Aegis of Zeus from Baghdad. He looked at the GPS locator once more. Still there as far as he can tell.

They had four days to find the last four relics, reclaim the first two relics and travel to Guatemala to perform a ritual that would give them an opportunity to find the additional relics and ten lost lands all before the final judgment on December 3rd.

The fate of the world was in their hands. But, as Stone allowed himself to drift into a well-deserved deep sleep, he could not help wondering, would the world even care if it were saved?

0340 hours

The secure signal came through Captain Bol's satellite radio about thirty minutes ago. Immediately, he jumped into action. Stubbing out his Cuban on the sole of his shoe, pocketing it for later. He slapped the pilot on the back of his head, jarring him from his slumber. In less than five minutes, the chopper took off from an undisclosed strip of land, used by rebels, leftover from the turbulent 1980's. From there it made the twenty-mile flight over the Peruvian rain forest until it came to the rise in the Andes where the Inca once believed was the most sacred and beautiful in the world.

With not much room to land the pilot chose a small patch of grass, just wide enough for him to set down the chopper. Captain Bol jumped and followed his GPS signal to the east then west and back around, until he came to a hollowed out structure. With no obvious entry point from where he stood, Bol jumped down one level and entered a small cave-like area. It was here the signal beeped the strongest.

"Mister Admiral, sir," Bol shouted at the stone wall. "If you are alive, I need to know how to get you out!"

A muffled voice could be heard from the other side.

"I did not get that, sir."

"... there's... stone... near... wall... push!"

Bol only heard some of what the man said, but it was enough for him to look around, find the displaced stone and push with all his might. Eventually, the stone became flush with the wall and, standing there, exasperated, was Admiral Alberts and the lone SEAL trapped with him.

“We got here as quickly as we could, sir.”

“Just get these fucking cuffs off me!” Alberts stuck out his bound hands.

When they arrived back in town Alberts was disgusted at the sight of his men bound and gagged like common animals. He ordered them untied, and once they were, his Captain bore the brunt of his rage.

“What do you mean they escaped?” Admiral Alberts was yelling at one of his subordinates. “How do seven prisoners escape twenty armed men, seven of which are highly trained Navy SEALs?”

“There were two more inside, Sir.”

“Oh, two more. *Two* whole more?” Alberts asked sarcastically. Then, “Cuff him back to the tree and gag him. We leave in ten.”

The shocked SEAL looked surprised as two of the mercenaries dragged him to a tree and did as they were instructed. Without a second glance, they walked away, climbing into the transport as it drove away, leaving the SEAL Captain behind.

0530 hours

Aguas Calientes

Nicholas Barrington wandered through the Peruvian rainforest aimlessly for hours. For how long he could not tell, but from the look of the sky, night was slowly turning to dawn. His clothes were still wet from the fall he took over the edge of the embankment into the Urubamba River. It took all his strength to stay afloat. He was still aching from the impact of the bullet he took in his abdomen. If it were not for his Kevlar bodysuit Stone insisted each member of the team wear under their civilian clothes, he would be dead by now.

He had struggled under and above the strong current of the mighty river for what seemed like another hour, but was actually only twenty-minutes. All the while, his eyes darted from coast to coast, searching for, and hoping he did not see, any crocodiles slither into the river, hungry for an early morning snack. Of course, if he were eaten by piranhas or an anaconda first, a crocodile

or two would be the least of his concern. Luckily, none of that happened as he floated to the nearest shoreline where an old woman was washing her clothes. She looked surprised, but when Barrington spoke to her in Spanish her countenance brightened and she was eager to help, pointing up over the rise toward the center of the town of Cuzco.

Realizing how he must look to the locals, Barrington ran his fingers through his hair, as he headed to the city's main police precinct. The rundown, stone and mortar building would have been demolished by American standards, but right now it was the most glorious sight he had ever seen. Before entering, he checked for the chain around his neck, plucked it off, unzipping a thick, leather wallet, which contained his passport and military identification, before walking through the doors.

It took several hours of explaining but the local police captain finally granted Barrington access to the town's lone aircraft. A battered twenty-five year old Beechcraft C-12 Huron, whose pilot was at least three times the plane's age.

"Great," Barrington said under his breath as he strode toward the airplane. With any luck they should arrive in Lima in an hour or so. *Providing this thing actually stayed in the air*, he thought. Once in Lima, Barrington could contact Omega headquarters where they could trace *The Meadowlark* so that he could rendezvous with his team, wherever they might be.

Nine

The Relics of Vishnu

November 9th, 2012

0500 hours

Bangkok, Thailand

“The Kingdom of Thailand, locally called Ratcha Anachak Thai, is located in the heart of Southeast Asia and has long been a Mecca for political, cultural, industrial and commercial endeavors since the 16th century when Portuguese traders arrived at the river kingdom of Ayutthaya when the country was still called Siam.” Kostakis stood at the head of the conference table, using a laser-pointer on a map of the Asian continent 300 years ago.

It was early in the morning, four days until the November 13th midnight deadline, which meant they only had three days to find the remaining relics and bring them to Tikal. Most of them had slept like rocks, the events of the past few days finally catching up with them- Stone had not. He had spent the night staring at his computer screen learning as much about the next site they would be assaulting, Angkor Wat.

For now, Kostakis continued his brief lecture on Thai history. “Soon after the Portuguese arrived, it did not take long for the Dutch, French and English to try exploiting Siam’s wealth and commerce. But, unlike its neighboring nations, Siam was never colonized by *any* of its foreign traders.

“Thus, between the late 1700s and the early 1900s, Siam remained an independent and viable commodity in the overseas trade industry. In fact, most European nations respected its borders and its leaders, several of whom were able to exploit the animosity between Great Britain and France during the 1800s, playing both sides and, in many instances, acting as mediators in some of their Southeast Asian conflicts.

“Even the somewhat peaceful and smooth takeover of the Siamese Coup d’état of 1932 was done without bloodshed. This transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy helped Siam form its first political party and ended 700 years of kingly rule. In 1939 the country of Siam, free from 150 years of absolutism, was renamed Thailand, derived from an ethnic group of people living in the central plains of the country, not *tai*- a Thai word meaning free.”

Kostakis clicked a remote and the overhead switched to an image of a man in military attire. “Then, in 1941, at the height of World War II, Japan invaded Thailand forcing its Prime Minister, Plaek Pibulsonggram, to sign a military alliance with them against the Allies while, in secret, forming the Seri Thai, an anti-Japanese resistance. When the war was over, the opposition

against Japan facilitated Thailand's allegiance to the United States, which still remains strong some sixty-five years later.

Another click and the screen went back to a more modern day map of Southeast Asia. "Over the next few decades, Thailand went through many coup d'état and military administrations until democracy and a stable government prevailed in the 1980s. Since then, Thailand has remained a strong force on the Asian political and commercial scene- despite the minor Asian financial crisis of 1997 in which the baht lost some value but has since gain much of it back."

The screen went blank as Kostakis finished his history lesson, then turned to the group at the table, most was still awake, much better than his lectures at the university. He took a seat, looked toward General Harris who was occupying the seat on his right. Kostakis sighed, "Of course, I'm not an authority on this part of the world for that you'll want to talk with..."

"Professor Ian McCoy will be waiting for us at the Millennium Hilton in Bangkok." Harris interrupted.

"This is your Captain speaking," Eagle Eye's voice crackled. "We will be landing at Suvarnabhumi International in thirty-minutes. Please put all overhead projectors away and stow any firearms that may frighten the other passengers."

"Wise-ass," Remo smiled as he and the others got up from the conference table and went to their seats in the front of the cabin.

When they landed at Suvarnabhumi airport, it was another hour by taxi to the Millennium Hilton overlooking the Chao Praya River. By the time they arrived at the hotel it was nearly eight in the morning, slightly busy considering the time of day but understandable because of the many business travelers staying there. *It* was the reason General Harris picked this location for their meeting; right in the midst of all the corporate hustle and bustle.

Dressed in business suits to blend in with the crowds, Stone and his team arrived in three taxis, ten minutes apart from the other so as not to draw any added attention. Without asking the front desk, every ten minutes three groups of four walked to the elevator queues and pressed the button for the top floor. Once at the top they walked to the end of the hall and used a "skeleton" key card, created by engineers at Omega's Lab facility in North Carolina, and capable of reading the barcode of any locking mechanism anywhere in the world. It had passed the test here as access to the most luxurious room the hotel had to offer was granted.

Stone and his team sat in the lounge area of the King Executive Suite, which offered an astounding panoramic view towered high above the skyline of Bangkok. With several high-back leather chairs and two sofas there was plenty of room for everyone as Professor Ian McCoy leaned comfortably against an oak mini-bar, a steaming cup of coffee held in his hand.

If Stone was to describe to someone what he thought a professor of Southeast Asian history McCoy would have been the farthest from his mind. The Welsh man was of medium build, wore a brown, tweed jacket, blue buttoned-down collared shirt and crisp navy blue jean. If Stone had to guess he would say the man was in his late forties, early fifties but did not look older than forty. He still had a full head of hair, which was a light reddish tint peppered throughout with white streaks. Introductions had been made and McCoy took a hearty swig of coffee.

“So, Anderson,” the Welshman smiled, “what sort of trouble is Omega in now?”

Stone tilted his head at the way the man addressed his superior, but the General did not seem to mind. In fact, he did not even acknowledge it.

“It’s exactly as I told you over the phone. We need to know everything you know about Angkor Wat.”

McCoy scoffed, “If you want a lecture on Angkor, you should sign up for my class at Bangkok University. Tell me what you really want.”

General Harris relayed the events of the past few days as the Welshman nodded and raised his eyebrows a few times. For mission details, he turned to Stone, who in turn motioned to Kostakis, Hazelton or Radcliffe for any historical facts they needed to stress. When they finished explaining, McCoy walked over to a chair beside the dining table and sat down.

“Interesting,” was all he could say.

“Is that all?” Harris asked.

“Oh, no. Not by a long shot.” McCoy sighed, “Let’s see, where should I start. It seems to me what is more important than what I know about Angkor Wat, is what I can tell you about the religious beliefs surrounding it.”

McCoy continued, “You see since its inception, Angkor has been dedicated to Vishnu as a religious temple complex in the 12th century. Suryavarman II used it as both a personal temple and his capital city. But, more relative to your dilemma, I think, is the fact that the chief religion around that time was Hindu, not Buddhist as some people would be led to believe, and that is

what we should be focusing on. You see many scholars, myself included, believe that the intricate architecture sculpted in and around the temple tell a story. Not just of Vishnu but of the coming of Kali Yuga.”

“Kali what?” Johnny Boy asked.

“Kali Yuga,” McCoy explained, “is the Age of the Demon Kali. The last cycle of four stages the world goes through according to Hindu scripture. The consensus in this part of the world is that the Kali cycle lasts for 432,000 years and that we are currently in that cycle. And since the cycle is said to have begun in 3102 BCE, we are in no immediate danger of the world ending anytime soon. However...”

“Why is there always a however?” Tricky shook his head in disbelief.

McCoy smiled at this quip, then went on to say: “Conventionally this number is accepted, but, now bare with me, if you factor in the sacred text of *The Vishnu Purana*, which states, and I quote from a translation by H.H. Wilson:

Twelve thousand divine years, each composed of (three hundred and sixty) such days, constitute the period of the four Yugas, or ages. They are thus distributed: the Krita age has four thousand divine years; the Tretá three thousand; the Dwápara two thousand; and the Kali age one thousand: so those acquainted with antiquity have declared. The period that precedes a Yuga is called a Sandhyá, and it is of as many hundred years as there are thousands in the Yuga: and the period that follows a Yuga, termed the Sandhyánsa, is of similar duration.

“A bunch of mumbo jumbo, I know but if you break it down into more simplistic terms, as Wilson did, you come up with specific numbers. Dates actually. First, he converts the years of mortals using the divine years- 360 years. Since we are in the Kali Yuga, the three previous ages can be ignored; they have come and gone. Our main concern is with the Kali Yuga, Sandhyá, and Sandhyánsa respectively. Now, when you add up the divine years of these three you come up with 1200. That then must be multiplied by the 360 days of the Yugas for a total number of 432,000. But for some odd reason, scholars always omit a very minute detail in which the divine years of the gods and the divine years of men conflict. That small fraction of a difference means everything when calculating for the coming of Kali Yuga.

“You see,” McCoy grabbed a pen and paper from his leather satchel, hanging on a chair, “if you convert the decimals of the total number by compensating for the age of the gods we’re left with 43,200. We then take into account the age of men by removing another decimal and we

are left with 4,320. So if you believe that the Kali Yuga started in 3102 BCE, add 4,320 years to that and we arrive at 1422 CE. Then take into account the hundred year intervals for each of the four periods of divinity leaving us with 1822 CE. That still leaves 190 years to fill. Ninety of those years are reserved for the three ages and three periods preceding the Kali Yuga, bringing us to 1912 CE. It's at this point that many scholars get lost, forgetting to tack on the last hundred years representing the sacred Hindu unit of measurement for time, one hundred trutis which is equal to one vedha and representative of the cyclical creation and destruction of the universe. That leaves us with the coming of Kali Yuga and an end date for this cycle in..."

"2012," Stone said unenthusiastically, as if he expected to hear that number before the professor even started throwing out numbers.

"Yes, although an exact date for that year has been debated, according to ancient Hindu scripts the date for the Kali Yuga coincides with the Winter Solstice date of the twenty-first of December. The only true question that remains is where the location of Suryavarman tomb is. That answer, I suspect, is hidden somewhere among the temple complex of Angkor Wat. Unfortunately, without that information we are at a standstill."

"Wait, why do we need to know where his tomb is?" Stone asked, already suspecting the answer.

Kostakis answered, "Because it is where we will find the two relics of Vishnu."

A bob of Professor McCoy's head confirmed this fact, as General Harris looked at Kostakis who had placed his laptop bag on the dining table and opened a side pocket, revealing the *Nostradamus Manuscript* to the Welshman who reached a hand out to touch the ancient tome.

Kostakis was about to explain what he had found in the manuscript regarding Angkor Wat, but the explosion of glass all around them caused everyone to duck for cover as the entire window of the living area shattered under a voracious barrage of gunfire from an AH-1G Huey Cobra attack helicopter hovering outside the panoramic floor to ceiling windows.

Luckily, the helicopter began its attack on the far side of the suite- shooting up the bedroom windows before moving onto the room they had occupied- giving Stone and the rest of the team time to run into rooms far from the attack and saving them from death, for the moment.

Kostakis, McCoy, Harris, Tricky and D-Boy jumped over the counter leading into the kitchen area, which was reinforced with modernized titanium-steel cabinets, and shielding them from the tracer gunfire.

Remo, Johnny Boy, Rebel, Marley, and Lovey crowded into a bathroom just beyond the entrance to the suite, seeking solace inside its cast iron tub and finding a temporary hideout by closing the thick oak door to.

Stone grabbed Hazelton and Radcliffe and dragged them into the wide hall closet, safe for the moment, out of reach of the attack bird's mini-gunfire. But Stone knew they had more to concern themselves about. The Huey Cobra was also equipped with either an M158 launcher, capable of firing seven rockets or an M200 with nineteen rockets. As sick as it sounded, Stone had hoped it was only equipped with the M158.

The Huey had stopped firing, the whirring of its multi-barrel mini-guns whining to a slow ominous halt. Stone took this brief stoppage to afford a peek by cracking open the closet door ever so slightly and relay an order to his team.

"Everyone out, now!"

General Harris seemed to have agreed. He popped up from behind the counter and dragged the two elder professors toward the door. This, unfortunately, exposed them to the three snipers hanging out the open doors of the Huey. They did not stand a chance as three shots rang out.

The snipers fell from their perch, dangling from rope harnesses and throwing off the balance of the helicopter for just a second. This split second lurch was all Stone and his team needed. Everyone made a mad dash for the door leading out into the hall.

"They'll be monitoring the elevators and probably storming the stairs from below, so everyone head up one floor!" Stone shouted as he guided them toward the emergency stairwell. As he opened the door, he could hear the stomping of boots on the lower floors, climbing. Fast. But, it was another noise that sent a chill up Stone's spine.

Two loud thumps echoed from inside the suite. Stone knew what it was that sound was immediately. A second later his fear was confirmed as one of the two 40-millimeter grenades, came bouncing into the hallway. He shoved Hazelton into the stairwell then ducked in himself, closing the door behind him and dashing up the stairs after the rest of the team.

The explosion from the grenades was so loud and thunderous that it blew the door to the stairs off its hinges and left it dangling precariously over the railing. Plumes of fire spewed from the hall and singed the walls, floors and anything else in its way. Relentlessly, the grenade fire melted away some of the railing, causing the door to tumble end over end from floor to floor until it stopped several floors below. Had Omega not reserved the entire floor to ensure privacy, dozens of lives would have been lost as the fire from the grenade blast wiped out more than a few rooms and suites on that floor.

Stone considered them lucky as well. He had been the last one to reach the floor above and slammed the door shut just as the grenade exploded. The heat from the blast burned the door and he had to pull his hand from the door to avoid being burned himself.

Heaving a sigh of relief, he turned to Remo and Harris, "Use the key card and wait for an all-clear signal from me." Stone handed Remo the keycard, felt the door to the stairwell. It was still hot, but tolerable. He opened it and turned to leave.

"Wait!" Remo called out. "Where are you going?"

"Bird hunting," Stone disappeared beyond the door as it closed behind him.

0900 hours

What Major Donovan Stone was about to do was either the dumbest or the bravest thing he had ever done in his military career. He ran up the stairs, taking two at a time, until he came to the last flight and a lone door with an emergency push-handle bolted with a steel pin. A sign on the door read in both Thai and English- Roof Access/No Admittance. The picture of a man on stairs opening a door encircled with a slash through it hung on the door as an extra precaution. Stone could not help but smile at the irony as he imagined himself the man in the picture opening the forbidden door. He shrugged, pulled the pin and pushed on the emergency bar gaining access to the roof.

By him pushing on the handle, it caused the emergency alarm to shriek throughout the hotel. Not exactly inconspicuous but with all the commotion it should give his team a chance to escape amidst the throng of hotel guests. He just hoped they took advantage of this rather fortuitous opportunity.

Once on the roof Stone closed the door behind him, trapping himself on the roof, as he crouched behind an air vent. He touched his earpiece and spoke in a normal and calm voice, “Eagle Eye, you there?”

“*Sure am, Boss,*” the reassuring voice of the Meadowlark’s pilot answered.

“I need immediate evac from this location.”

A few seconds passed then, “*Already on my way. News travels fast around here. Where exactly are you guys?*”

“I’m on the roof. Everyone else should be headed for the ground floor by now.”

“*A lot easier to get down if you use the stairs, Major.*”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” then as if he was considering whether or not he should, Stone asked, “By any chance do you have two parachutes?”

“*That I do.*”

“Good. When you’re overhead toss them onto the roof.”

“*Can do, Major. Eagle out.*”

Minutes passed uneventfully but that was quickly interrupted by the thump thumping of rotor blades rising fast. Stone pulled out his Mk 23, hidden under his jacket, from the small of his back, slid the chamber, took a deep breath, and risked a look around. He kept low hoping it would serve as some much needed camouflage. Crouch running from air vent to air vent Stone finally saw the threat. To his surprise it was not the Huey that attacked them, it was a second helicopter. This one a more modern version, the Huey AH-1F, loaded with an M197 3 barreled 20 millimeter Gatling cannon, 7 Hydra 70 rockets and 8 Tube-launched, Optically-tracked, Wire-guided (TOW) missiles.

Great, Stone thought. *At least it hasn’t seen me yet.*

That thought was extinguished when Stone saw the helicopter steady itself and take aim straight for him. He was like a fish in a barrel; an easy target. He felt stupid as he raised his small Heckler Koch at the gunner. In fact, Stone could swear that he saw the man smile before he pulled the trigger of the Gatling gun.

But, to Stone’s surprise, the spray of gunfire went erratic as the Huey pulled up and back suddenly, an enormous shadow looming across the dwarfed helicopter. Before it had a chance to react or adjust, *The Meadowlark*- especially equipped with a missile pod on its underbelly and

remote controlled from the cockpit- launched an AIM-9 Sidewinder short-range, air-to-air missile.

The explosion rocked the rooftop as Stone ducked behind an air vent. Then, as if in slow motion, the Huey was blasted from the sky. Debris was thrown about everywhere, rotor blades stuck into the asphalt on the roof, bits of metal and chunks of flesh fell only feet from where Stone was hiding as the lone helmet of the gunner rolled to a stop at Stone's feet. Before long, the only thing that remained of the attack helicopter was a shell of fire and smoke.

"Sorry for the delay, Major." The voice of The Meadowlark's pilot crackled in Stone's ear.

"Better late than never," Stone let out a prolonged sigh of relief. But it was soon replaced with the notion that there remained a second Huey, the one that actually attacked them in the suite, hovering around the floors of the Millennium Hotel. "You got those parachutes?"

Two thuds fell a few feet from where Stone now stood.

"Good luck, Major."

"Thanks, Eagle. You can head back to the rendezvous point. I'm sure we'll meet you there." Stone spoke as he ran towards the parachutes. He put one on then, from his jacket pocket, pulled out an M67 fragmentation hand grenade.

"Roger that, Major." Eagle Eye answered as *The Meadowlark* banked north and headed off toward the airport.

Stone unzipped the second parachute slightly and placed the grenade inside, leaving a small opening for him to reach his hand into. He ran to the edge of the hotel roof, looked around for the Huey, found it hovering about fifteen stories below. Backing up a few feet, he took a deep breath, placed one hand inside the parachute- gripping the pin of the grenade carefully- and ran toward the roof.

Stone angled his leap so that he would not fall directly above the Huey, and at the same time pulled the pin on the grenade, tossing it down toward the hovering helicopter that was unaware of the consequence that would soon follow. Stone fell fast but needed to wait until he was far enough away from what was sure to be a fantastic, fiery wreckage.

The next two events happened only seconds apart.

Stone pulled the cord on his parachute causing him to jerk upwards and away from the hotel; his feet dangling, swaying back and forth, the wind taking him on a smooth effortless ride across the early Bangkok skyline.

No sooner had Stone pulled the cord and was thrust from it, the Huey's rotor blades and the grenade-loaded parachute met. The result was a stupendous explosion that shredded the helicopter's blades causing it to spin out of control. Falling like a boulder in the ocean the Huey sunk toward the ground, eventually landing in an empty parking lot across the street from the hotel and exploding in a fireball of epic proportions.

Stone floated away from the hotel, landing a mile north of it to the amazement of a few onlookers in business suits. From down here, it must have looked like someone had jumped from the hotel just missing the unfortunate accident of the helicopter. No one seemed to suspect that he was the cause of the wreckage as he quickly discarded the parachute and walked briskly away from the evidence.

Once he felt he had put enough distance between himself and the wreckage, Stone entered a small park and sat comfortably on a bench. He touched his earpiece, "Anybody out there?"

"That's gonna be one hell of a hotel bill, Major." The voice of General Harris answered with slight amusement.

"Sorry, sir. I wasn't happy with the turndown service." Stone smiled at some people who walked by him, curious as to who he was talking to. "Are we all clear?"

"Crystal," Harris spoke. *"Everyone got out safe. We caught a taxi van and are on our way to the airport to meet up with Eagle Eye. I'll go with him, but your transportation has been arranged for the trek across the Cambodian border."*

"Sounds like fun," Stone commented sarcastically. "I'll meet you there."

Stone got up from the bench, walked to a taxi stand and hailed a cab.

Ten minutes later he was sweating in the backseat of a humid Bangkok taxi that idled in morning traffic. At this rate he should meet up with the others by next year. He sighed deeply, shook his head and closed his eyes, hoping to drown out the commotion surrounding him.

Without warning, the backdoor of his taxi opened and a figure stepped in sitting down beside him. He was a gangly old man; his face was bruised and showed signs of a recent beating.

Above both eyes were several band-aids covering fresh cuts. His lips were swollen, bruised a horrid yellowish-black. Whoever this man was he had been in some fight.

Stone took him for a street urchin and reached in his pocket for some change. When he offered the man money he crooked his head, grabbed Stone's wrist.

The man struggled to speak but did so in a short, strained voice. "My name is Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir, Major Stone, and I am here to help you."

4 days ago

1922 hours

Baghdad, Iraq

Abandoned Military Base

BLAM!

Captain Bol's Vektor Z-88 Double-Action handgun fired wildly inside the soundproof room. His arm knocked upwards by Professor Abdul-Qadir as he jumped up, still tied to his chair. The tall African mercenary more shocked than angry at the taste of blood that accumulated inside his mouth, the result of biting his tongue.

The shot that rang out also surprised the soldier sitting at Abdul-Qadir's laptop as the bullet entered the man's skull rocking him backwards. Blood pooled around the man's head as Captain Bol looked to his fallen comrade.

Professor Abdul-Qadir did not hesitate a second, if he had the next shot would not missed his. While Bol's back was turned, Abdul-Qadir sweep-kicked the tall mercenary who fell to the ground stunned by the littler man's resolve, his Z-88 skidding to the far side of the interrogation room.

But, the Professor was not done.

As soon as Bol landed, Abdul-Qadir struck again by stomping his foot hard to the man's groin, then kicked him in the head. With Bol down and incapacitated momentarily, Abdul-Qadir grabbed a set of keys from the table where his laptop rested and fumbled with them behind his back until he found the right key. By this time Bol had regained some semblance of normalcy and stood up.

Groggily, Bol staggered to where his gun had stopped. He wavered on his feet, bent down to pick up the Vektor and turned to fire at the tenacious Professor, but he was gone; an open door leading outside evidence of his escape.

Bol holstered his weapon. A smirk grew upon the tall African's face.

Run little man. And hope that we never meet again. Bol walked out the door leading into the hangar, closed the door and joined the others for their trip to Iran. No one would realize the Professor had escaped until Bol was far from here. By then they would have bigger problems to deal with than an impudent Egyptian Professor.

Professor Abdul-Qadir watched as the giant military transport took off. Limited troops remained here to guard an abandoned base, most of them lazed about, their guns hanging loosely at their sides. Still, Abdul-Qadir did not want to risk exposing himself, so he waited until well after midnight- when silence surrounded the base and the remaining troops slept with no threat of any attack eminent- before he hopped into a military jeep, using the set of keys he had stolen to unlock his cuffs, and drove off south into the heart of Baghdad.

He had not been driving long when he encountered an American blockade. Luckily, they had noticed the military jeep as one of theirs and stopped it peacefully, coming up to the driver's side of the vehicle to question its driver.

Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir must have looked a sight- bloody lips, cuts above his eyes, his clothes stained with blood and dirt, tears welling in his eyes- because, the military man immediately called over several men and helped him out, carrying him inside the checkpoint's infirmary.

The last thing Professor Abdul-Qadir remembered before blacking out was the smiling faces of the men helping him. Telling him he would be all right.

Professor Zamir Abdul-Qadir slept for two days. An IV drip attached to his arm feeding him vital minerals to replenish his emaciated body. Bandages were wrapped around his head and he could feel stitches in his lips.

His eyes slowly opened, revealing a tall man dressed in American military fatigues. But, for some reason, he was not worried. The man that stood before him instilled calmness as he spoke,

“Professor Abdul-Qadir, my name is Captain Launders of the United States military. You are safe here with us.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“My senior officer was curious to know how a distinguished Egyptian Professor wound up in the middle of Baghdad in a military jeep.” Captain Launders pulled a chair up to the hospital bed.

For the next thirty minutes, Professor Abdul-Qadir recounted the events of the past few days. From the time he received that phone call from his dear dead friend Ashraf to how he was kidnapped, beaten and tortured until he could not take it anymore, thus giving the American General whatever information he needed by turning over his laptop’s password. He then went on to tell the Captain how he escaped and came to be here.

Captain Launders nodded his head and stood up.

“Clothes have been provided for you,” the Captain motioned to a chair opposite the window with a small duffle bag resting on it. “Your ticket to Thailand is also in there.”

“Thailand?”

“Yes. Your assistance will be needed there.”

“My assistance to whom?” Professor Abdul-Qadir sat up in his chair.

“Everything you need to know is in that bag,” Captain Launders left the room, closing the door behind him.

Professor Abdul-Qadir gently pulled out the intravenous lines, tossed back the bed sheet and got out of his bed. His legs were wobbly, an obvious result of being bedridden for the past couple of days, but he managed the short walk to the chair. He picked up the bag, traded places with it, put it on his lap as he sat down in the chair and unzipped it.

Inside was a manila folder with four words stenciled upon it:

Ω Sector: Operation Doomsday Recovery

November 9th, 2012

Noon

Bangkok, Thailand

The Meadowlark Conference Room

Professor Abdul-Qadir finished telling his tale. The greeting was what he had expected. Incredulous stares from of fourteen strangers. Had he not lived those events he would hardly have believed them either.

D-Boy whistled then said, “Well ain’t that a dog tied to a post story.”

Some looks at the young Second Lieutenant but Stone ignored it, instead asking a question, directed at no one in particular, that had irked him for the last few days, “What I don’t understand is how the Admiral and his gang always seem to show up wherever we are?”

“I’m afraid, that may be my fault,” Abdul-Qadir said sheepishly.

“How so?” Stone queried.

“As I said, the Admiral has every bit of information I had on my laptop hard-drive regarding this,” he paused searching for the right word, “quest.”

“And why would you have this information?” Stone shook his head, confused.

“It is my job to keep these records. As it has been for centuries.” Abdul-Qadir answered mysteriously.

“Centuries? You don’t look that old,” D-Boy raised an eyebrow.

Abdul-Qadir just looked at the young Marine.

Kostakis was the first to derive a conclusion, “Good Lord! Are you telling us that you are a Servant of God?”

“Yes, the last of them.”

“You mean to tell me that once you are,” Kostakis left out the obvious, “the secrets of the Order dies with you?”

Abdul-Qadir gave one, solemn nod.

“We cannot let that happen.”

“I would prefer it did not,” Abdul-Qadir chuckled, quickly changing the subject before it got any more awkward. “Look, the important thing is that we find the remaining relics before the Admiral. Once we find them, the wheels of destiny will be set in motion. Everything I know was on my laptop, but before it was there, it was in here,” he pointed to his head.

“Great,” Stone said, taking in all this new information but still keeping to the task at hand, “so where do we head now?”

“If I may?” Professor Kostakis raised his hand.

Stone motioned for him to continue.

Kostakis spoke to Abdul-Qadir directly, "I have been going over the manuscript for the last three days and lost among all the information it provides is the actual incantation needed to perform the ritual at the Altar of Judgment ceremony."

"When were you going to let us know this?" Stone asked somewhat annoyed.

Kostakis turned to Stone, "I was hoping that upon finding the last relic we would be led to an answer." He then looked at Abdul-Qadir.

"That would correct," Abdul-Qadir agreed.

Kostakis smiled triumphantly.

The Egyptian Professor continued, "The incantation ritual lies with the Roman Emperor Constantine the First inside his tomb at the Church of St. Mary Pammakaristos, in Istanbul, Turkey."

"Constantine the First?" Lovey asked.

"Yes, Constantine the Great also known as..." Abdul-Qadir started.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Stone raised his hands. "One dead ruler at a time."

General Harris nodded his agreement.

Stone turned to Professor Ian McCoy sitting lazily by the window, a pipe clenched in his teeth. "I'm going to need *you* to come with me to Angkor. Rebel, Marley, and Remo, you're with me."

"What about us?" Lovey spoke up.

Stone shook his head, "This needs to be done quick, and with a small party. I've looked over the Manuscript and, from what I can tell, what we're looking for at Angkor will lead us to the next two relics." He looked at Kostakis who confirmed this.

"We'll fly you five down to Phnom Penh," Harris added. "From there you can drive up to Angkor in no time. In the meantime, we will wait for you at the International Airport there. We can leave from there, for the next leg."

"Agreed," Stone nodded.

The next few hours, were spent securing safe passage across the Cambodian skies, studying maps and trap systems and, of course, resting up for a long trek ahead. Once he was satisfied with their preparedness, Stone told his five-man team to pack light and rest up, because once they arrived in Phnom Penh, they would drive a rented Land Rover- thanks to General

Harris' connections- north to the ancient holy site. With nothing more to discuss, they all retired to their cabins until the early evening when they would begin the next phase of their mission.

1912 hours

The Meadowlark landed at Phnom Penh International Airport at just after seven in the evening, Stone and his team left wasted no time as they packed everything in the Land Rover waiting for them in the airport's parking lot, its keys tucked away on the underside of the front driver's side fender. The drive would take just over four hours, and with the GPS location locked in and a few strings pulled, they should arrive at the temple complex of Angkor just after eleven that night. They would have plenty of time to search for what they needed to find then drive back to Phnom Penh, where they would rendezvous with *The Meadowlark* at the international airport.

It was a relatively straight drive north with a few instances where he needed to bear right or left to stay on target with their destination. First Stone drove north following the local road until he came to Route 5, which he turned right onto and followed *it* for nearly twenty-one miles. He then turned right onto Route 6, first for twenty-nine miles then followed the same highway left for another sixty miles and eighty-seven miles, respectively. Once they reached Route 66, they would follow that north for about three miles until they encountered local roads that led toward the temple complex.

With time to kill between Phnom Penh and Angkor, Stone waited until they turned onto Route 6 before asking Professor McCoy what to expect once they arrived at their destination.

"Well, first, the construction of Angkor Wat began towards the end of the reign of Suryavarman the second, undoubtedly the greatest ruler of the mighty Southeast Asian empire of Khmer, which ruled parts of the Asian peninsula- the modern-day countries of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Myanmar- from the early ninth century through the mid-fifteenth century. The actual complex was to serve as both the king's temple and capital. Unfortunately, it was not finished until after his death, leaving some parts of the ancient structure incomplete. No one is sure what Angkor Wat was originally called but, speculation among scholars is that it was named for the Khmer's prime deity, Vrah Vishnulok, more commonly referred to as Vishnu."

“What about the actual size of this place,” Remo asked from the backseat, “from what I’ve seen on TV it looks pretty big.”

“That would be an understatement,” McCoy reached for his laptop, pulled out a USB cord and plugged it into the Land Rover’s central dash. Almost immediately, the vehicle’s three onboard monitors- two mounted on the rear headrests of both the driver and passenger seat, one on the front dashboard- flickered to life, revealing a schematic of the temple complex.

McCoy explained what they were looking at, “Angkor Wat is Khmer architecture at its finest. Not only was the harmonic aspect of the temple met but also the classical style rivaled the great temples of Rome and Greece. The temple itself is representative of Mount Meru, home to the Hindu gods, with the five central towers depicting the five peaks of the sacred mountain. As far as size goes, to gain access to the complex we are going to cross the 623 foot moat, using the stone causeway. Once across we simply need to search the 203 acres of land and temple for any sign of what we may be looking for.”

“Is that all,” Marley scoffed, looking at the map of the complex then slinking back into his seat.

The remainder of the ride Stone concentrated on driving while McCoy tap-tapped away on his laptop. Remo, Marley and Rebel chose to study the digital blueprint of Angkor, just to be prepared.

2320 hours

Angkor Wat Complex

Stone parked the Rover in an empty tourist parking lot as everyone got out heading for the complexes main entrance. Although he was not expecting trouble, Stone advised his men to carry their handguns, just in case they were needed.

The sheer grandeur and magnificence of Angkor Wat, struck Stone as surprising. He had seen plenty of documentaries on the History Channel and had studied about it at University, but to actually stand there, staring up at the two mile long, nearly fifteen foot, outer wall stretching around the entire complex was something otherworldly. Had he more time he would have stayed there for hours, take pictures, meditate, and enjoy it.

“I hope you know what to look for, Professor, because I sure the hell don’t,” Rebel commented while Marley and Remo shook their heads in amazement.

“I have an idea,” the wily Scottish Professor began reviewing the bas-reliefs and sculptures around them, pointing out, “You see, these all represent several portions from Hindu epics. This one here,” he pointed at a relief, “from *Ramayana*, shows Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, defeating the demon king of Lanka, Ravana. Now, if we follow the sculpture counter-clockwise, from north to west, we come to a scene from another epic in Indian literature, *Mahabharata*. This stone gallery shows the classic Battle of Kuruksetra, which is believed to have taken place somewhere around five millennia and eight centuries before the Common Era. It depicts the battle between the two dynastic clans of the Kaurava and the Pandava, as epic as the Iliad and the Odyssey, following individual battles of several heroes, their deaths, military strategies, diplomatic accords. It’s really quite as remarkable read.”

Stone and the others followed the Professor as he darted under archways, around walls, inside galleries and shrines. Seemingly, they were going nowhere fast. Then, McCoy found what he was looking for.

“Here we are,” he motioned at a bas-relief frieze along the southern gallery. “This here, among all the gods and goddesses, among all the heroes and demons, is the only depiction of any historical significance. This is a relief of Suryavarman II in, what appears to be a procession up a mountain while, underneath it a series of undulating lines. Oddly enough, just below this relief, were sculptures representing the seven hells of Hindu mythology, whereas, above it, the seven heavens were carved. You might think that, alone that would be enough, however, you’ll notice in Suryavarman’s hands he is holding two items.”

They followed Professor McCoy’s hand as he pointed to two small sculptures- one looked like an ancient mace, the other like a hollow disc, spinning around the king’s finger.

“Now, by itself these may seem like nothing out of the ordinary, but given the placement of the king and the two sacred items he’s holding, my only conclusion is that he returned those items- the Kaumodaki mace and Sudarshana Chakra disc of Vishnu- to the only place where they would be safe, never to be found or used again.”

“Which is?” Marley asked.

“Mount Meru,” Stone sighed.

McCoy corrected “Not quite. If I were to hypothesize, I venture that they can be found in the one place where they meant most to Vishnu.”

“Suryavarman’s tomb is?” Marley asked.

McCoy smiled, “I do not believe we are looking for his tomb any longer. What we are looking for is more along the divine.”

“English, Doc,” Remo shook his head in frustration.

“We are looking for the sacred palace of Ravana,” he answered.

“And that’s where?” Stone asked.

November 10th, 2012

0400 hours

Phnom Penh International Airport

Aboard *The Meadowlark*

“So, where can we find this sacred palace of Ravana?” General Harris asked the same question Stone had asked, once everyone was collected in the conference room of *The Meadowlark*. McCoy had briefed everyone on their findings at Angkor and what he thought they should do next.

“According to current historical and archaeological records, no such palace even exists.” McCoy answered reluctantly.

“That’s not entirely true,” Kostakis stroked his beard.

McCoy shook his head, “If you’re going to claim that this sacred Hindu palace is hidden somewhere among the Pamir mountain range, like some scholars, or that, because the ancient Hindu text of *Suryasiddhānta* refers to the middle of the earth, it pertains to the equatorial town in Kenya, which so happens to be called Meru, not to mention a mountain in Tanzania called Mount Meru, then...”

Kostakis held up his hand, stopping McCoy. “I think nothing of the sort, Ian,” he said while casually flipping open his laptop, typing in a few commands. On the flat screen monitor at the head of the conference table an image of Asia and the Indian subcontinent appeared.

“If we look at the Pamir mountain range,” Kostakis pointed out, “you can see that they run, roughly, south to northwest across central Asia. The majority of the range being in what is

presently Tajikistan, with some spill over in western China and Pakistan as well as eastern parts of Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan. All but one of which have religious roots in Hinduism.” Kostakis pressed a button on his laptop and the image zoomed into the country of Pakistan.

“Now, although many Indian epics revolve around the ancient kingdoms of Sindh, in the *Mahabharata*, and Gandhara, in both the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, neither is ancient enough to warrant any belief that we should be looking for the relics at Pakistan.”

“Then where,” Lovey asked.

Another button was pressed on his laptop, and the Asian continent zoomed out then southwest, stopping over the island paradise of Sri Lanka.

“Makes sense,” McCoy nodded his head.

“How’s that, Professor?” Stone turned to the Scotsman.

“Well, according to Hindu mythology, the island of Lanka was once ruled by King Ravana, a supposed demon king who could only be vanquished by a human form. Fortunately, after the abduction of Vishnu’s wife, Sita, Vishnu transformed into the human Rama and defeated him, using his two famous and powerful weapons of choice: the Sudarshana Chakra, a spinning disc sharpened with blade-like precision, and the Kaumodaki, a mace infused with mental, spiritual and physical powers.”

“Coincidentally, the next two ancient relics we’re looking for,” Kostakis interrupted.

“Naturally,” Stone shrugged.

McCoy continued, “And you think these relics are where?”

Kostakis tilted his head.

“Impossible,” McCoy shook his head. “That place is a UNESCO World Heritage site and has been excavated, thoroughly.”

“Yes, above ground. It is also the only logical place where the Seven can be performed.” Kostakis said matter-of-factly.

“Loyalty to Rama ... are you mad, Stavros?” McCoy asked incredulously.

“Wait, wait,” Stone held up a hand, “What the hell are you two talking about?”

“Well, according to one particular ancient Hindu text,” Kostakis answered, “a text most scholars would dismiss as shamanistic, blasphemous even, claims the *Ramayana*, is a sort of treasure map to these ancient relics of their supreme protector deity, Vishnu.”

McCoy shook his head, “Even if we listen to this nonsense, we have no way of knowing where to look.”

Kostakis held up a finger, “Ah, ah, we didn’t know where to look. Nostradamus clearly writes about them in here,” he held up the manuscript. “I only just realized that a few moments ago when you mentioned the *Ramayana*. Nostradamus states that *in order to obtain the relics of the Supreme God Vishnu, one must pass through the underworld to obtain nirvana.*”

“Of course, as clear as day,” Marley shook his head slowly.

“This trip just gets better and better,” D-Boy commented.

“Actually, finding the relics will be the least of our problems.” McCoy added.

“I’m afraid to ask, but what is?” Lovey tilted her head questioningly.

Kostakis looked at McCoy.

“Well,” McCoy looked around the room, “according to this text the first relic must be found before the second, because only that relic can unlock the other.” McCoy regarded Kostakis, “I presume that tome contains detailed instructions on what to find where and which to find first.”

“It does,” Kostakis simply answered.

“I know that look, Stavros,” General Harris said. “What else are you not telling us?”

Kostakis let out a long deep breath, then “It seems once the first relic is found you only have sixty vighatis, approximately twenty-four minutes, to unlock the second relic or else it will be sealed forever.”

“At least we won’t die,” Tricky commented. Everyone looked at him, “Well, you know, not until the end of the world and all a few days later.”

Johnny Boy and Rebel to smirked at the irony.

Stone could care less. He was only concerned with one thing: getting to Sri Lanka and retrieving those relics before anyone could stop them.

0840 hours

Colombo, Sri Lanka

“According to my calculations,” Stone address his team, once again gathered in the conference room of *The Meadowlark*, but now, instead of airborne over Cambodia, it was resting

comfortably on the tarmac of Bandaranaike International Airport, just north of Colombo, Sri Lanka, “we have little more than a three hour’s drive from here to Sigiriya. When we arrive, we need to work fast because we won’t have much time once we get that first relic.”

“Any idea which relic that might be?” Remo asked the question everyone wanted to ask.

Stone looked at Kostakis, “Yes,” the old Greek professor answered.

Stone addressed the queried looks he was receiving, “Everyone will be briefed when we get there. Now, move out.”

No one needed to ask where to go. Everyone headed for the cargo hold, and the Humvee. While everyone rested during the flight, Stone and Marley had loaded the vehicle with the necessary equipment needed for whatever they may need, including grappling hooks, nylon ropes, pitons, as well as a few provisions for any unwanted stragglers.

As usual, Lovey got behind the wheel and Stone rode shotgun, which until a few days ago had been filled by his very dearly departed friend and Lovey’s fiancé, First Lieutenant Maximillian Strove. Once the team was strapped in, Lovey unlocked the wheel-locking mechanism, tapped in the GPS coordinates, and eased the Humvee down the rear access ramp.

Ten minutes later, with dark, ominous, storm clouds looming ahead, misting over the city of Colombo, they were heading north, up the A4 Highway, which would eventually intersect with the A8, and leading them northeast, toward the Central Province and Sigiriya.

During the hour-long drive, Stone punched up something on the internal computer system. Ten seconds later, everyone was looking at a detailed readout of the site.

McCoy explained what everyone was looking at, “Sigiriya is actually what can be described as a harden rock of magma, the cork of a long-since dormant volcano. Over the course of its existence, archaeologists believe it has been used as everything from a prehistoric rock-shelter to a 5th Century BCE monastery to a garden and palace for King Kasyapa in the 4th Century CE. Along with these manmade structures, ancient cave paintings have been found there, presumably left by its prehistoric inhabitants.”

McCoy twisted in his seat, “I won’t bore you with nonsensical information. All you need to know is the rock-plug rises just over 370 meters, is precipitous on all sides and has a flat top that slopes down the axis of its elliptical shape. Don’t worry,” he answered the quizzical faces staring back at him, “there are minor footholds and even a terrace, mid-level where the Lion Gate leads to the section of the rock face with all the ancient frescos; locals refer to it as the Mirror

Wall. Just familiarize yourselves with the basics. I'm sure we will be able to talk you through most of it."

"Most?" D-Boy queried.

McCoy answered with a concerned shrug.

Then, with silent affirmation, each member of Omega checked their concealed weapons, made sure they were loaded, safeties were on. Kostakis, Hazelton and Radcliffe were engulphed in documents pertaining to the myths surrounding the ancient mystical religion of Hinduism that McCoy was kind enough to upload onto their laptops before they left *The Meadowlark*.

After a few moments of silence, Stone looked up from his notes on the subject of Hinduism and turned to McCoy, "Professor? You keep mentioning the *Ramayana* in your notes here." McCoy nodded. "What can you tell us about that piece of literature?"

"How much time do we have?"

Stone smiled, "Give us the abridged lecture."

"Well, the *Ramayana* was written in ancient Sanskrit, often attributed to the Hindu sage Valmiki, and dating to around the 4th century BCE. Much like the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* or Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Ramayana*, along with the *Mahabharata*, is considered two of the greatest works of ancient India. In a nutshell, it portrays the relationship between a servant and his king, a king and his brother, a king and his wife, as well as the duties and responsibilities of the king himself."

McCoy finally took a breath, "Unlike many ancient works, scholars unanimously agree that the *Ramayana* was written by only one poet, Valmiki, who himself not only lived around the time as the central character, Rama, but also interacted with him at one point. As far as timelines go, the *Ramayana* was comprised during the period in Hindu known as the Treta Yuga, one of four eons in the chronology of Hinduism.

"In fact, many revere this epic so much that, according to some of my contemporaries more familiar with the subject and devout Hindus themselves, just the mere reciting of specific passages can absolve them of sin, blessing everyone around them."

"Wait," Tricky held up his hand, "I'm a little confused. Not about the *Ramayana* thing but about the whole Vishnu thing, who you didn't mention at all."

McCoy smiled, raising a finger, “That’s because the two are considered one in the same. Rama being an incarnation of the god Vishnu, the Supreme God of Hinduism, whose main purpose is to obtain his own dharma, or righteous path, for all earthly creatures.”

Stone interrupted, “Thanks, Professor.”

“My pleasure,” the Scot sat back in his seat, continuing to absorb himself in the *Nostradamus Manuscript*.

1145 hours

Ancient Site of Sigiriya

Central Matale District, Sri Lanka

Nearly three hours later, they arrived at the outskirts of the ancient site. Lovey parked the vehicle in a designated area as everyone hopped out, gathered their things, and began the fifteen-minute walk to the actual site. Luckily, at this time of year it was either too hot or too rainy for tourists, so Stone and his team had the entire site to themselves. Hopefully, it would stay that way.

As they approached the first millennium site, Stone could not believe the complex detail and beautification, still visible by its three central, terraced garden structures. Not only was the sight an awe-inspiring marvel, but the way the architects proportioned every aspect of the man-made portion to seamlessly blend with the natural formations of the surrounding landscape, made Stone shake his head in wonder.

“Okay, Professor,” Stone turned to McCoy “where to first?”

McCoy consulted the manuscript, which Kostakis had afforded him. As instructed, the Greek professor stayed on board *The Meadowlark* researching their next mission, which, according to Kostakis, was not far from Sri Lanka.

“Nostradamus mentions the first four books of the *Ramayana*, the Bala, Ayodhya, Aranya, and Sundara Kanda will test the seeker of the Kaumodaki, Vishnu’s mace. He then states: *And lo’ the seeker shall cross into the underworld where the breath of the dragons sleep, through the sludge of the earth, suspended upon his belief until his Queen proves herself loyal to her King. Only then will the seeker enter his holy sanctum below the gardens of earthly beauty. But, beware trusted seeker, once the sleeping god’s treasure is in your possession time is unkind and his tears shall rain upon thee unless his cipher can be illuminated to show the seeker the*

way to salvation. So, from what I can gather, we need to head for the gardens and go from there.”

“Same shit, different day.” Tricky commented.

Stone ignored him, “Remo, Johnny Boy, I’m gonna need one on that rock,” pointing to the actual rock of Sigiriya. “The other I want back at the Hummer in case anything comes up. Nothing stupid. Just send us some kind of signal.”

“Gotcha, Major.” Remo and Johnny Boy did rock-paper-scissors, to which Remo lost. “Goddamn! You really gonna make me climb that thing,” Remo flicked his thumb over his shoulder.

“I’m a better driver anyway,” Johnny Boy shouted over his shoulder as he jogged back to the parked SVU.

1155 hours

The Gardens of Sigiriya

The Sigiriya gardens are centrally located in what is referred to as the western precinct. In all, there are three gardens, each unique in its own way. The first garden followed the *char bhag*, or quartered, layout of most ancient gardens: an island in the pools center, surrounded by water and connected by four causeways. The second garden consisted of two shallow, serpentine streams, which led to two long, deep pools on either side, decorated with circular limestone fountains. The third garden is built higher than the first two and consists of an enormous octagonal pool, a raised platform dominating the northeast corner and what remains of the citadel’s brick and stone wall on the eastern edge completes the third garden.

Stone and his team stood at the edge of the three beautifully cared-for garden terraces all of which led down into murky, rectangular pools about ten feet in length. Standing directly between the first two garden pools, Stone shook his head, “Which one?”

McCoy did not hesitate, “Any man who looked upon himself as a deity would choose the third garden because of its higher elevation over the two.”

“Door number three it is,” Rebel started walking toward the third terrace.

McCoy held out a hand, stopping the First Lieutenant. “Rama was not a god until he held the sacred relics, so the third garden is out. Besides, in the manuscript Nostradamus hints at

which path we must take. *Follow not the path of the divine or the path of the righteous but rather concede that you are but a man and must walk among the living.*

“And that means...” Stone raised an eyebrow.

McCoy pointed to the third garden, “The path of the divine,” then to the second, “The path of the righteous,” then to the first, “Walk among the living.”

“More like swim,” Tricky added.

“Precisely what we need to do, or rather one of you.” McCoy corrected himself then continued, “To gain what thou seek, beneath the calm murk, one must believe himself to be faithful and true to find the entrance to that which you wish to possess. But,”

“And there it is,” D-Boy smiled.

McCoy smiled sheepishly, “*But, be forewarned, once the sacred relic is disturbed time is unfavorable to those that seek the second relic. For, if it is not found before the second hand’s rotation completes the minutes equal to the hours in one day, all shall be lost and doom shall rain upon thee.*”

“Couldn’t just say we have twenty-four minutes to find the second relic?” Rebel commented.

Stone ignored the remark, instead he turned to McCoy, “Once I get down there you’ll be able to guide me, right?”

“More or less,” McCoy said with some confidence.

“Let’s hope more,” Stone said as he shed his shirt leaving on his pants. He then reached into his backpack pulling out a pair of goggles, a waterproof digital camera, and a small blue canister. He placed the camera into his front pocket, sat on the edge of the first garden pool, spit clean his goggles, put them on then grabbed the canister. “This pony bottle has enough air for about thirty minutes. You think you could talk me through in that time?”

“Gonna have to, aren’t I laddie?”

With that, Stone jumped into the pool, put the regulator in his mouth and dove under, into the murky green water. Below the surface the water was cloudy, visibility was no more than a foot in front of him. He sunk, in a controlled dive to the bottom of the western side of the garden pool but could not see anything that looked out of place, so he swam to the eastern underground wall, again looking for any abnormalities. Stone looked at his watch, six minutes gone and nothing on either side. He quickly moved onto the north side. Again nothing. The southern side

appeared to yield the same result, and he was about to rise to the surface to give the bad news until he saw what appeared to be a post and lintel architrave, about three feet in height stretching from the bottom of the pool's southern wall, with etching on both sides and its top. *Always the last place you look*, Stone thought as he took out the digital camera, snapped several pictures then rose back to the surface.

He handed the camera to McCoy as he surfaced and the Scottish professor immediately toggled through the most recent photos.

"What do you think?" Stone asked as he hoisted himself up.

"Well, the two posts appear to depict images of Rama's plight in the Ramayana. On the lintel, written in Sanskrit, is, hmm, this is most interesting," McCoy furrowed his brow. "From what I can see, it reads The Realm of Varuna."

"I assume there's a way in through that post and lintel," Stone pointed in the general direction of the southern architrave in the water.

"There must be. When you next go down there, see these relief carvings of Rama on the two post stones?" McCoy zoomed into the picture on the camera's display screen. Stone nodded, as did Lovey and Tricky, peering over his shoulder; it had been decided while they were on *The Meadowlark* that the three of them would retrieve the first relic, and Rebel and D-Boy the second. "This particular carving," the camera zoomed closer to a four-handed figure riding atop a beast that looked like a cross between a wolf and a crocodile, "is of Varuna, Hindu god of the sky, water, oceans law and the underworld. The beast he is riding is called Makara, a beast some scholars believe resemble the extinct Eocene mammal, ambulocetus. If you look closely, Makara appears to be a relief carving while Varuna is obviously a bas-relief. Make them whole, probably by pushing Varuna into the wall, and something could happen."

"Something?" Tricky asked.

"Yes, if I am correct in my assumption this doorway, once opened will only stay open for a matter of seconds, giving you three, well not a whole hell of a lot of time to get in. The doorway should then close, with no chance of reopening, and whatever water is swept into the doorway with you will more than likely drain out somewhere up ahead."

"Piece of cake," Tricky said pulling off his jacket and shirt, adjusting his goggles, and slipping into the garden pool, pony bottle in hand. Lovey stripped down to her sports bra, her slim figure and ample bosom not going unnoticed. She also donned goggles, gripped her pony

bottle and slid into the pool quickly to extinguish those stares. All three also clipped on a lightweight backpack filled with a few items that may come in handy.

“Once we get through I’ll put in my ear piece,” which Stone had secured earlier in his front pocket, inside a plastic case. He then jumped in softly and the three of the dove underwater, Tricky and Lovey following their leader.

This time, because Stone knew where he was going, it took them less than two minutes to reach the post and lintel. Stone quickly found the bas-relief of the Hindu god of the underworld and, did as McCoy suggested. Surprisingly, the stone carving moved easier than Stone had expected, the moss and algae combined with the cut stone made for instant lubrication.

As the door slid horizontally into the wall of the garden, a vacuum of pressure pulled Stone, Lovey, Tricky and at least one hundred pounds of water, shooting them into an underwater tube-like passageway, obviously manmade into smooth, unnaturally curved walls. They careened top to bottom down the southern wall’s inner shaft, sliding for what seemed an eternity but was in fact no more than ten seconds, before the flow of water subsided abruptly, launching them and the water through a second doorway before it sealed behind them, most likely part of the ancient timing mechanism Professor McCoy spoke about.

Stone stood, cracking a glowstick. His heart stopped as he saw the ground they had landed on ended with a cliff, only five feet in front of them. He raised his glowstick and, in the phosphorescent green glow, saw a similar ledge and doorway opposite them, separated by a one hundred foot gap. The cavern was damp, musty. Moss glowed eerily in the light of the three glowsticks being held by Stone, Lovey and Tricky. The humidity in the air hung thick, making breathing difficult at times. Dewdrops dripped from the wet ceiling onto their heads and into what sound like a water source of some kind just beyond the edge of the cliff.

Carefully, Stone moved to the edge, sure not to slip on the moss-covered ground which sloped perilously at a forty-five degree angle. Peering over the edge, he confirmed his assumption as an algae ridden, greenish-brown pool of murky water about thirty feet below them, stretched from their side to the opposite ledge- taunting them with a hope of escape. While examining the pool, Stone could also make out another ledge just above the waterline. Although he could not see what secrets it held, Stone would bet anything the first relic would be found there.

Stone smiled, looking up at the ceiling. He crinkled his brow, just now noticing a curious sight. Embedded in the stone above their heads were thousands of crystals, shining like stars in the night. It was only as he thought of this analogy that he realized he was looking at a mirror image of what the night sky would look like from where the above ground garden was built. But, more importantly, the crystals appeared to take the form of particular constellations.

Not only were they constellations, the image was almost identical to the ceiling they observed at Siwa, under the Oracle Temple of Amun, inside the cavern that held Alexander the Great's mausoleum. Stone was amazed at the sight as he let his eyes roam the gallery of shining stars made of jade, rubies, pearls, diamonds, amber, lapis, and a number of other gems he could not identify, together forming the Milky Way Galaxy. Except, unlike the one at Siwa, this displayed images of the sun, Earth and moon all perpendicular to a brighter star at the far end of the galaxy. Stone quickly pulled out his digital camera, snapping a few pictures. He was not exactly sure what he was looking at, but he knew it was probably important enough to preserve, and if all went according to plan, those images would not be their thirty-minutes from now.

"Uh, Major," Tricky appeared at Stone's side, disrupting his reverie, "Is it just me or did something in the water just move?"

Stone stared at the water, watching intently for any sign of movement, ripples on the surface, anything. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until Stone kicked loose a rock into the murky pool. As soon as the rock hit the water six massive jaws sprang to the surface, followed by six thrashing crocodiles, each jostling for position.

"I knew this was too easy," Stone muttered.

"I count six," Lovey said, joining them at the edge.

"That you can see," Tricky scoffed.

Crocodylus palustris, more commonly known as the Marsh crocodile is mainly a freshwater species of crocodile, usually found in lakes, rivers and marshes in and around the Indian subcontinent, it has also been known to haunt manmade canals and reservoirs. With nineteen upper teeth on each side, a broad snout, a rough ridge-less head, between seven and twelve feet in length (on average, although some have been known to grown to be as long as sixteen feet), and weighing in at one thousand pounds, these environmentally threatened amphibians have been known to swim as fast as 10 mph. all this did not bode well for Stone and his two friends.

“All right, let’s just get this thing and get the hell out of here. Somehow,” Stone spoke unpacking several pitons, a small metal hammer, and a fifty-foot nylon rope. He skillfully positioned four pitons along the top ledge and slope of the cliff, hammering them into place, then looped and knotted the rope through each hole. With the rope and piton secure, Stone volunteered to go first, attaching a cam from his belt loop to the rope, swinging over the edge, and shimmying down the rope until he reached the ledge below, with Lovey and Tricky close behind.

All three stood, frozen at the sight that greeted them. Chiseled flawlessly, deep into the niche was a ten-foot tall bas-relief of the Hindu deity Vishnu. Carved from the surrounding rock, the giant image of the creator god dwarfed the three Marines.

The stone was smooth, covered in moss that had accumulated over the centuries, but even that did not diminish the grandeur of the statue. There he stood, stoically, made of solid limestone, four arms, two on each side, with sacred symbols in each hand. The upper left hand held the sacred conch shell symbolizing his ability to create the universe; the upper right hand held a chakra to purify the mind and spirit; in the lower right hand, a lotus flower represented spiritual liberation, but, it was what Vishnu held in his lower left hand, that interested Stone.

The golden mace of Vishnu, the Kaumodaki, was shining brilliantly in the light of the three glowsticks, symbolizing his divinity in all things spiritual and mental, as well as the god’s physical strength. Vishnu’s Kaumodaki was used to vanquish materialism and demonic anarthas, hidden in a person subconscious, preventing them from reaching god. The Kaumodaki is symbolic in Hinduism because its divine power proves human beings ability to separate from the materialistic bonds of society in order to reach spiritual purification.

But Stone was not here for a lesson in enlightenment. He just knew he needed to retrieve the mace and, together with Vishnu’s chakra and the eight other relics, it will somehow prevent some great cataclysmic event from occurring. Stone walked up to the statue, examining the lower left hand holding the mace. From the look of it, the Kaumodaki and the statues hands were one continuous part of the entire sculpture, not exactly what he was hoping for.

Stone looked back at Tricky and Lovey, both shrugged as they too realized what needed to be done. With a silent, apologetic whisper to the deity, Stone forcefully brought his hammer down, onto the lower left wrist of Vishnu. It took several blows before the hand holding the mace broke free. As he bent to pick it up the entire cavern began shaking and, for a brief instant,

Stone thought it was going to collapse. When it did not, they breathed a sigh of relief, but that was short lived as he remembered they had only twenty-four minutes to get the second relic.

“Mace secure,” Stone held a hand to his earpiece. Those words would cue the second team to retrieve the second relic, Vishnu’s chakra.

However, Stone relief was soon extinguished when they turned around and saw four, eight-foot long crocodiles emerge from the murky waters, climbing onto the ledge he, Lovey and Tricky occupied.

1228 hours

Sigiriya Magma Plug

“Man this climb reminds me of boot camp in North Carolina,” D-Boy complained, “You remember that?”

“How could I forget?” Rebel answered, climbing the spiral staircase set into the side of the 1200 foot rock formation, “You complained about that too.”

It was just them two ascending the spiral staircase leading to the flat-top of the magma plug where King Kasyapa’s fifth-century palace once stood, overlooking the entire site, Marley had opted to stay with Professor McCoy just in case some protection was needed, which they usually found out was.

They had decided to start their arduous climb once Stone, Tricky and Lovey submerged into the garden pool. Now, they were more than halfway up the Sigiriya rock fortress when they heard Stone in their ear saying he had secured the mace. Rebel set his watch to countdown to the twenty-four minute deadline they had to get the chakra, and quickened their pace.

It took them five minutes to sprint the remaining two hundred stairs, reaching the summit of the rock. Now, they had nineteen minutes to find the disc-shaped chakra, a weapon Vishnu called Sudarshana, symbolizing a pure, spiritual mind. According to pictures, it was normally held in Vishnu’s upper right hand and was a combination of two Sanskrit words meaning Superior Sight, representing the conquest of the ego, the awakening of the true nature of a person’s soul, and the burning of their lack of knowledge by god so they may obtain a better understanding of Him. Unfortunately, Rebel and D-Boy were not sure exactly what they were

looking for, having seen it in pictures only briefly, but they knew it was hidden somewhere among these ruins.

Fifteen minutes had passed and still their search turned up nothing. Not that there was much to search. Most of the flat-top of the ancient rock had been excavated years ago, and it showed by the neat five-by-five meter archaeological squares littered around them along with rundown walls, hearths, and other evidence that this used to be a grand structure fifteen hundred years ago. Now, only the remnants of such a palace existed as they climbed several stone steps from one level to the next leading to the remains of kingly quarters as well as a dozen or so cisterns carved into what would have been the back façade of the palace.

Rebel was getting frustrated as his watch ticked away the time. Less than four-minutes and they had covered every inch of this sight as best they could.

“Looks like we’re all gonna die, Reb,” D-Boy commented, leaning up against one of the cisterns. The young second lieutenant was only half-joking as he turned, peering absentmindedly into the large well carved into the rock floor. They had checked them all, twice. Most were still filled with water from the periodic rainfall in this region. But this one was empty, and what he mistook as a meaningless stone carving at its bottom the first two times, this time the strange stone symbol at its bottom caught his attention.

D-Boy began unpacking his backpack frantically, taking out a long nylon rope, and a steel grappling prong, which he attached to one another immediately. Without waiting for Rebel, D-Boy secured the line on the lip of the stone well and rappelled down into the dry, humid, dampness. When he got down there he could see that it was not part of the original stone design, but actually what is referred to as Kashmir gold, a special type of granite found all over India. He quickly bent down, slid his tiger-striped, steel-bladed, Strider SMF knife into the grooves surrounding the granite and stone cistern, digging furiously until he felt there was enough depth around it and the cistern to pry it off. With his feet and legs to anchor him down, D-Boy used the steel tip of his blade as a lever to force the chakra from its dewy thousand-year plus slumber.

Suddenly the watch on his wrist began to beep, less than two minutes. D-Boy dug a little deeper and thought he felt it move an inch, maybe two. By the time it reached the one minute mark he could feel it beginning to loosen even more, and wrapped his fingers around it, twisting and pulling with all his might.

With forty-five seconds ticking away on his watch, a loud droning echoed in the shallow well followed by a strange but uncomfortably familiar thumping. He had no time to hesitate. He knew this would be his last effort. Pulling for all he was worth, his fingertips bleeding against the stone and surprising sharp granite.

Finally, at the twenty-two second mark the chakra came loose in his bloodied hand. He quickly tossed it up to Rebel, leaning over the side, and scrambled up the rope as fast as he could.

“Move it!” Rebel shouted as they jumped down from the second level, running for the spiral staircase just as an AH-64D Longbow Apache helicopter rose over the summit of the Sigiriya palace ruins with five Navy SEALs descending ropes, blazing a trail of gunfire just inches from where D-Boy and Rebel had just been standing.

1240 hours

Interior Sigiriya Water Gardens

The nylon rope dangled, ignored by the crocs, just a few feet in front of Stone, Lovey and Tricky. With no time to lose, for fear of becoming the main course at Chez Crocs, Stone shot two of the water monsters in the head while Tricky took care of the other two with precise shots from his Sig Sauer P239. Lovey immediately ran for the rope climbing to the top level with Vishnu's Kaumodaki packed securely away in her backpack. Tricky followed Lovey's lead, shimmying up the rope. Just as two more crocs emerged from the murk and muck, trapping Stone on the second level cliff. As if that weren't bad enough, he noticed the water level beginning to rise slowly. If they didn't get out of here quick, the three of them would die from drowning, if the leathery reptiles did not eat them first.

Stone reached into his backpack, which he now wore strapped around his chest for both easy access and some added protection, pulling out two M67 hand grenades, releasing the pins with his teeth while holding down the lever. He waited until both crocs hissed at him, opening their jaws baring sixty-eight razor-sharp teeth, then threw one grenade into each mouth, ran in between the two giant beasts as they snapped back at him, and lunged for the rope. With only a fuse of 5.5 seconds before detonation, Stone climbed the rope, hand over hand, his feet dangling, swaying back and forth for more momentum.

Keeping a mental countdown, Stone reached the top of the first cliff just as the two grenades detonated from the second cliff beneath them, giving off a loud resonating bass sound. In a way, the crocodiles managed to soften the impact as chunks of their flesh exploded outward into the rising water turning the already brown, muddy water a putrid, vomitlike, reddish-brown.

No time to catch his breath as Stone peered over the side, the water level rising, consuming the cliff below and the statue of Vishnu.

“Okay, Indy, what now?” Tricky asked.

“We LBAS over to the other side, activate the stone door and get the hell out of here!”

At the mention of their load-bearing, attach-release spears, Tricky and Lovey both took theirs from their backpack, loading them up. “Aim for the center of the ceiling,” Lovey suggested, taking aim, “this way we can release on to the opposite side with one swing.”

Stone knew what his First Lieutenant was saying. It was the only option as the water level continued its rise, almost halfway up to their cliff, with six more hungry crocs poking their eyes and snouts to the water’s surface. After their swing, the release would mean leaving their LBAS behind, having no time to reel them back in. But, in lieu of the alternative, they could always restock equipment. What they could not get back was their lives.

All three shot their load-bearing guns simultaneously into the hard limestone ceiling. The spear and hook mechanism then did its job, locking into place. Tricky went first, taking a running start, swinging over to the other side, and releasing the rope as his feet swung over solid ground. Lovey and Stone followed his lead and they were, within seconds on the opposite cliff.

Stone immediately ran for the doorway with the arching stone relief of Varuna and Rama in eternal combat. He located the image of Varuna, grasping the bas-relief, ready to activate it.

“Wait!” Lovey grabbed his hand, pulling it back. “Both are raised,” pointing to Varuna and Rama.

“Okay, so which one?” Tricky asked, stealing a glance over the side, the water was now no more than ten feet below their cliff.

Stone looked at Tricky’s grim expression, then to Lovey, “Well?”

Lovey shrugged, “God of the underworld got us down here It would make sense for the avatar of the god of the heavens to get us out.”

Stone did not have time to weigh his options, besides, the reasoning behind the suggestion was logical. “Rama it is,” he pushed on the damp, moss-covered stone. Like the one

in the garden pool, this too slid comfortably into the archway, revealing an open passageway with carved stone steps leading up. He shook his head at the ingenuity of ancient engineering.

By now, the water level was only five feet from the cliff's edge and several crocodiles attempted to climb onto it. Stone ushered Tricky and Lovey up the stairs, not sure where it led, or how far it rose. Frankly, he could care less as long as it was away from here. By the time the three of them had climbed ten steps, Stone heard two things. First, he heard the hissing of a very agitated male croc. Second, was the sound of the doorway beginning to close, obviously part of the timing design. As the stone door slid back into place, the staircase was engulfed in darkness and Stone could not tell if they were alone or if there was a hungry crocodile joining them.

He had his answer five seconds later as they cracked open glowsticks much to the agitation of the hissing male croc not far behind them.

1250 hours

Exterior Magma Plug

Spiral Staircase

Rebel and D-Boy ran like hell down the flight of spiral steps, a rainstorm of bullets kicking up stone and dirt just inches from where they had been only seconds before. Rebel held onto the chakra, afraid if he attempted to secure it in his backpack he would drop it or get shot.

From above, the sounds of men shouting orders followed by the scuffling of boots told Rebel and D-Boy the SEALs were hot on their heels just as they reached the portion of the rock formation called the Mirror Wall. Named because it was made of fine porcelain and was once said to be so well cared for, King Kasyapa could see his image in it, the Mirror Wall was now littered with verses written by previous visitors, except for one section. It was that section Rebel and D-Boy just ran past, passing Remo hiding in a fissure just opposite the polished wall.

The two Marines ran by him, continuing down the stairs, as three Navy SEALs appeared on the staircase just above them. They ran down, following their prey, stopping abruptly at the sight of Remo holding a close range M1911, single-action, semi-automatic handgun. The SEALs all fired at once, hoping to obliterate their target but instead only chipping the polished stone was, demolishing the image of Remo. The SEALs were perplexed long enough for Remo to step out of his hiding place and fire three successive shots into the foreheads of the stunned SEALs.

Predators becoming the victims to their prey. He then ran up to them, grabbed their fallen machine guns and followed Rebel and D-Boy down the staircase, the remaining two SEALs in hot pursuit.

1255 hours

Sigiriya Plains

The AH-64D Longbow Apache landed on the flat plains of Sigiriya, between the western garden pool and the magma plug, depositing ten Navy SEALs and one very pissed off Admiral Richard Alberts, chomping on the stub of a cigar.

“I want that cocksucker, Stone, brought back here to me on his hands and knees so I can look him in the eyes when the bullet enters his skull!” Alberts shouted at anyone within earshot.

To the SEALs’ surprise, the plain was empty, but the Admiral knew Stone and his team were around here somewhere, minus the two on that plug. His men should have no problem with them, Alberts thought just as three gunshots echoed from the huge magma rock. A smile parted his lower face, the thought of two more of Stone’s team being taken out bringing him a sadistic joy.

The sound of four shots rang out over the plain, felling four of his prized SEAL Team Six men to the ground, motionless. Erratic gunfire sprayed through the air as the remaining six SEALs fired all around them, looking for the source of the firing, while Admiral Alberts ducked back into the helicopter, more annoyed than when they had landed.

Other than a few random boulders, the only places for the SEALs to hide were either in the pools or inside one of the interior structures carved under the Sigiriya magma plug. The SEALs split up. Three dove into the murky pools while three took refuge under the rock, waiting for Stone and his team to make a mistake.

The next series of events happened so quick and so simultaneous that, if it were not for the panic-stricken helicopter pilot, Admiral Richard Alberts would have stood a chance during the assault on Stone and his Omega team.

The three Navy SEALs hiding under the magma plug heard the footfalls of the two men who had been at the summit of the rock formation. Silently, they crouched low, taking aim at the last of the spiral steps that led to the top, waiting for the two lame duck Marines.

Just then, from behind the SEALs, the grinding of rock on rock disrupted their concentration. All three took their eyes off the first prize coming down the stairs, opting instead, for door number two. Shock sprang across their faces as they watched the wall slide into itself and Stone, Lovey and Tricky hurl themselves from the doorway, glowsticks still in their hand and equally shocked.

Almost instinctively, two of the SEALs snapped out of their initial disbelief long enough to raise their M4As at Tricky and Lovey. The two did not live long enough, however, as two bullets entered the back of their skulls, exiting their nasal cavity, courtesy of Remo who had, along with Rebel and D-Boy, just reached the last step. The three did not have long to rejoice as Tricky and Lovey grabbed the fallen SEALs' carbine assault rifles, pointing them at Rebel, D-Boy and Remo. All three ducked as Tricky and Lovey let loose the powerful weapon at the two SEALs who had followed them down the stairs, succumbing to the carbine's barrage of bullets.

The last remaining SEAL lunged for Stone, but the experienced Major was ready as he grabbed the younger SEAL by his collar, slammed him against the stone wall, tossing him into the doorway as it began to close. The last thing they heard as darkness engulfed the SEAL was a venomous hiss and a blood-curdling scream.

Stone heaved a huge sigh and shook his head as the six of them cautiously emerged from under the Sigiriya rock. They all knew there were more SEALs around somewhere but could not see them. Just then, they watched the windshield of the Apache spider web, the inside splattered with blood, as the pilot slumped out the helicopter's cockpit.

From the eastern edge of the surrounding forest Marley and McCoy emerged while Johnny Boy did the same from the western edge. They all walked carefully toward the helicopter, converging on it like a pack of hungry wolves. Each held a gun, including McCoy who held Marley's Sig. With trepidation, they approached the pilot-less chopper.

"Anymore SEALs?" Stone asked as his hands steadied his Desert Eagle.

"There were three in the western pool," Marley answered as he, Tricky and D-Boy circled around to the other side of the helicopter.

"Were?" Stone stood firm a few feet from the open Apache door.

"Apparently those pools were filled with crocs," Johnny Boy joined Stone's side.

"No shit," he scoffed sarcastically. "So am I to presume there's only Papa SEAL left?"

Admiral Richard Alberts slowly showed himself, hands on his head a wicked smile on his face.

“You’re a smug prick, aren’t you?” Remo said as he grabbed the Admiral by his arm, pulling him out of the helicopter and slamming him to the ground.

“I must say, Major,” Alberts looked up from his knees, “you’re much harder to kill than your father.”

Stone pistol-whipped him across his face drawing blood.

Alberts spit blood onto the ground, laughing, “Still trying to impress your dead daddy.”

“You have a lot of balls for a man about to die,” Stone pressed his Desert Eagle to the Admiral’s temple.

“Irony is a cold-hearted bitch, isn’t it Major,” Alberts smiled. “If only your father had the balls you have.”

Stone pulled the trigger and watched as the smile on Admiral Richard Alberts’ face turned, for just a split second, from smugness to shock. He bent down, pulling the Admiral’s nameplate from his breast jacket, and spit in the dead face of the fallen Navy officer. “Now maybe we can finish this fucking mission without any interruptions.”

Stone was about to walk away when he noticed a bag bulging from under the back seat of the helicopter’s cargo hold. He smiled; maybe their luck was changing for the better.

“What should we do with his body?” Remo waved an arm at the dead officer.

“*They* still look hungry,” Stone nodded toward the western garden pool, which was now filled with five, eight-foot crocodiles swimming in a dark, reddish-brown, muddy water littered with the remains of the three Navy SEALs who foolishly sought refuge there. “And, after you do that, grab that bag under the back seat of the Apache,” he cocked his head toward the open door of the helicopter. “We’re gonna need those relics.”

Ten

Jade Tiger of Yu

November 10th, 2012

1520 hours

Airborne Over the Indian Ocean

Aboard *The Meadowlark*

Stone sat at his desk in his cabin. In his hand, he flipped the Admiral's nameplate over each finger, dexterously repeating the process repeatedly, absentmindedly. His desk was cluttered with paperwork for their next leg. Unlike the previous one, they were clear as to where they were heading and what it entailed. Professor Kostakis had been working on the next mission while they completed the retrieval of Vishnu's relics and he was confident Nostradamus referred to the legendary Jade Tiger of Yu, an ancient jeweled stone carved for the founder of the Xia Dynasty, Yu the Great, said to hold mystical powers helping him reign mostly peaceful times in the beginnings of early dynastic China.

Stone sighed putting down the last of Kostakis' handwritten notes on the Bamboo Annals, describing in detail the historical, political and societal structures during those first hundred years. Depending on which sources Stone believed, the first empirical dynasty of China lasted from 2070 BCE to 1600 BCE and was responsible for many of its innovative advances with King Yu leading the way.

Yet, all this was secondary to him right now. His mind was elsewhere as he stared at a picture of his father tossing him in the air, his brother sitting on the grass below them, laughing. Oddly enough, Stone could recall that precise moment, frozen in time forever. The images came in short quick bursts, as if his brain had taken snapshots with every sense heightened by the powerful memory of that day. They had just gotten back from church. It was a beautiful spring day. The air smelled like roses and lilacs; gardening was his mother's favorite hobby. His father's cologne was gentle on his senses, not too strong, just enough to imprint its smell in his olfactory system. They were in the backyard of their modest house in La Hacienda, California.

Stone smiled at the memory of that old house with its predictable white picket fence, beige-shingled roof and light-yellow siding. The grass was always perfectly green, he remembered each barefooted blade felt comforting as it tickled the soles of his feet. His mother had snapped the photo candidly as she stood in her cooking apron, splattered with grease stains of that night's tantalizing pot roast.

Stone allowed himself to smile wide, his eyes watering as he forced back tears. It was the last picture he had of his father. The next day he set out on a classified mission never to return. A week later their lives had been turned upside down. First the grim news of his father's death then the moving of his family to a small no-name town in Nebraska. His mother had started drinking not long after the move and he and his brother try, as they might, could not stop her spiral into the depths of depression. Three years later, Stone came home from school to find his mother lying on the bedroom floor, gun in one hand, the picture he now rested on his desk in the other. With no family around, Stone and his brother were separated. Stone went to live with his mother's sister in Denver while Timothy was awarded to his paternal grandparents in Maine.

Although the two brothers went on to live fulfilling lives, Timothy Stone was a well-respected science teacher at a local high school in Vermont and Donovan Stone was a successful government agent secretly looking for answers to his father's death and finally getting an answer to who killed him. Eventually, Stone quietly vowed, he would find out why his father was in the Arctic and the truth behind his death.

He finally stopped fidgeting with the Admiral's nameplate, opening up a desk draw, placing it inside and closing it. He shut off the desk lamp, walked over to his bed, lay down and closed his eyes in an attempt to get a couple hours of sleep before landing at Hangzhou Xiaoshan International Airport in the Zhejiang Province of the People's Republic of China.

2100 hours

People's Republic of China

Airborne over Zhejiang Province

Before they landed, Kostakis gathered everyone in the conference room of *The Meadowlark* to give them a broad overview of the history behind the impressive structure they were about to stealthily assault. "According to many ancient documents, Dà-Yǔ was a direct descendant of the

Yellow Emperor, who himself was one of the legendary Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors in Chinese mythology.” Kostakis began, “His legacy stretches back to when he was appointed to create a channel system controlling the waters of the central plains, which would have inundated them had he not intervened. For thirteen years, he fought back the floods using his knowledge and innovations, passing his home three times within that time, but never staying there. The people of the ancient tribes of China, called Xia, were so enthralled by his determination and success that they monikered him with the title of Yu the Great. He remained a revered figure until his death while hunting in along the mountains of Kuaiji, where he was buried.”

Kostakis took off his wireframe glasses, “Although his body has never been found, a mausoleum was built at the foot of the mountain in the 6th century BCE and, more recently on the site, the mausoleum complex of Dà-Yǔ Ling has been built.” He then tapped a few keys on his computer and the screen behind him showed a layout of the entire mausoleum complex.

The Dà-Yǔ Mausoleum covers just over twenty-nine thousand square feet and consists of three main areas: The Yu Mausoleum, The Yu Temple and The Yu Shrine. At the entrance is the stone memorial gateway, facing the great Yu pond, inscribed with the Chinese characters for Dà-Yǔ Ling, announcing to those who entered where they were. Just beyond the memorial gate is a three-hundred twenty-eight foot stone-covered pathway called the Divine Road, where several divine animals- cut and polished in stone- guarding the path leading to the Dà-Yǔ Mausoleum. Northeast of the mausoleum is the Yu Temple, built during the Liang Dynasty in the 6th Century, and elevated slightly higher than the mausoleum to draw it even with the base of Mount Kuaiji. The last bit of ancient Chinese architecture was the Yu Shrine to the left of the mausoleum and is nothing more than a palatial house with two entrances, three rooms and a pond.

Remo let out a whistle as he took in the enormity of the complex, “This layout is pretty impressive for a culture that I thought was behind developmentally when it came to ancient civilizations.”

Kostakis nodded his head, “It’s a mistake most people make, but the Chinese were just as advanced as the Romans and Greeks. In some aspects they even surpassed them.”

“Professor, when we get there is there anything specific we need to be looking for?” Stone, ever the professional, cut through the idle chitchat and got right down to business.

“Yes, well, Nostradamus mentions something quite interesting.” Kostakis moved some papers around on the table until he found what he was looking for, “Ah, here we go. He states

quite clearly, *the great eastern founder of dynastic rule, whose road is paved with silk, holds the great jade feline. Follow the bamboo of his life and you shall find entry to his world. Find the green-stoned staff he received from the River Essence. But choose wisely, lest you will be in the Great One's grasp for eternity. Follow the path he afforded his people and the relic he kept close to his heart shall be taken. But heed the channels of his ancient time; else your fate and the world's will be drowned in sorrows.*"

"I assume that comes with a translation?" Rebel asked.

Kostakis smiled, he had gotten used to this sort of banter among he and the rest of the team. "The ruler he speaks of is most certainly Yu the Great. The green stone feline, which he keeps close to his heart, is the Jade Tiger, a gift from his father. Where he got it no one knows. The bamboo of his life refers to the ancient Chinese text known as the Bamboo Annals, which chronicle early Chinese history. The green-stoned staff refers to the Black Jade Scepter he received from the River Spirit. The rest of text, I would presume, relates to the channels he used to control the flood waters that made him revered by his people."

"You could have just said all that to begin with," Tricky added, to which everyone laughed.

"All right guys," Stone's all business attitude quieted the room, "we have less than thirty-minutes before we land. Professor McCoy?" The Scotsman looked up. "You're good with transportation back to Japan?"

"Don't worry about me, lad. I have got contacts all around Asia. All I need to do is make a few phone calls," McCoy smiled reassuringly.

"The rest of you, I want loaded on that Hummer before we touch down," he then addressed Hazelton and Radcliffe, "unless you two object, I would like you to stay on board *The Meadowlark*." Both could see no reason why their fields of expertise would be helpful on this mission, so they agreed with Stone's decision. "Good," Stone nodded as he turned, walking toward the cockpit to arrange with Eagle Eye for where, when, and how an extraction would take place.

2130 hours

People's Republic of China

Hangzhou Xiaoshan International Airport

By the time they landed at Hangzhou Xiaoshan International Airport, it was already nine-thirty at night. They parted ways with Professor McCoy, who was able to arrange a flight back to Japan, while the rest of the Omega team waited inside the Hummer, ready for another nighttime excursion into the unknown.

As Lovey pulled out of the airport, she was surprised at the bustling streets, alive with the traffic of night owls searching for that after hours wind-down after a hard day at work. Maneuvering the oversized Hummer through the traffic of the downtown district was somewhat tedious, but when she turned onto highway 104 she coasted, and in twenty minutes they were in the city of Shaoxing. She then turned off the main highway and, following the polite voice of the GPS, took side streets until she saw signs for the Dà-Yǔ Mausoleum, resting at the foot of Kuaiji Mountain, where the mighty founder of the Xia Dynasty, died and was buried. The whole trip took less than ninety-minutes as Lovey slid the Hummer into one of the empty parking slots. As expected, the mausoleum complex was closed to the public, guarded by two bored looking military men, one of which was walking toward their SUV.

“Now what?” D-Boy asked from the rear passenger seat.

Kostakis rolled down his window, directly behind the driver’s seat. He stuck out his hand, which magically held a wad of rolled up American money, and spoke a few words in the Min Chinese dialect. The guard answered the Greek professor, smiled and gladly took the bribe as his fellow guard opened the gates leading inside the complex.

“Let me guess,” Stone turned to Kostakis as they got out of the Hummer, “Harris.”

“Your General seems to know a lot of people who owe him favors,” Kostakis grabbed his laptop, and a leather satchel that contained all his notes for this mission.

“It would seem that way,” Stone shrugged on his backpack of essentials then led his team through the gates.

2252 hours

Dà-Yǔ Memorial

Shaoxing, People’s Republic of China

Their first impression of the memorial was astonishment. The first thing that struck them was the massive stone structure supported by two stone pillars with, what was referred to as the Dragon Bar- a stone lintel topped with writhing dragons meeting at its center, upon the stone facing, etched in red Chinese characters was Dà-Yǔ Ling. Beneath the stone and lintel Dragon Bar was the aforementioned Divine Road, a stone-covered path, stretching all the way to the mausoleum structure with the symbolically placed pond in front of it.

“Where to first, Professor?” Stone looked around.

“Well I’ve been thinking about that, and if I am reading into this correctly, the Bamboo Annals highlight Yu’s achievements surrounding the flooding of the Yellow River after the River Essence Spirit gave him the Black Jade Scepter. So in all likelihood, we should find what we’re looking for inside that pond.”

“Which is what exactly?” Lovey asked as they stared walking the Divine Road toward the Yu Mausoleum.

“The Black Jade Scepter symbolically returned to the River Spirit. It should be in the water somewhere, which, according to Nostradamus, will allow us access under the shrine and into the base of Mount Kuaiji.”

“Great more water,” Stone shook his head as they all walked toward the Yu Shrine and, for the first time in several days they did not feel the need to look over their shoulders. The Admiral was dead and the mercenaries he hired for General Combs, more than likely, would be less enthusiastic about following them.

With no distractions or guards to slow them down, it took less than ten minutes to reach the shrine and its long rectangular pool. The shrine, like the temple and the mausoleum, rested at the base of the mountain so, at least, Stone had some idea where he would need to look for this Black Jade Scepter once he was underwater. He shrugged off his shirt, secured the digital camera in his left pocket, put on his mask, and jumped in.

“Any idea how this thing looks?”

“Should look like a long, black shaft, maybe in the form of a serpent with a jade jewel at one end,” Kostakis answered.

Stone nodded, applying the pony bottle to his mouth and went under. The water was remarkably crystal-blue. Obviously kept clean through some filtration system. He swam toward the side nearest the shrine and, to his surprise, he was almost immediately greeted by an

enormous stone circle, about ten feet in diameter, with a giant carving of a dragon entwined in a never-ending struggle. Arching around the top of the circle were three Chinese characters, to Stone they looked similar to those engraved on the stone gate at the entrance. But, what he saw in the center of the stone dragon drew his attention.

It looked at least six feet long, and was smooth to the touch. At one end was the head of an open-mouthed dragon, typical in Chinese literature, while the other end, resting in what looked to be the claw of the dragon, was a circular gem. Even in the water Stone could see the glow of the jade jewel. He was about to grab the scepter when a glint in the corner of his right eye made him look in that direction.

Stone emerged from the pool, frustration wrought upon his face, “There are two scepters.”

“Oh, dear,” Kostakis sighed.

“Not quite the response I was looking for, Professor.”

“Are they identical?”

Stone handed Kostakis the digital camera, “You tell me.”

Kostakis toggled through the images until he came to the stone dragon carving. He studied them intently. They certainly seemed to be similar, but to the trained eye, Kostakis saw something very much different. Above one stone dragon and scepter was the familiar Chinese character for Dà-Yǔ’s name: 大禹, while above the second circle were the same two characters along with a third: 灵.

Kostakis smiled. Obviously someone was aware of this secret because architects of the 6th century BCE would not have included the Chinese character for mausoleum on such a sacred portion of the complex. The second stone dragon was obviously a decoy, which he now remembered from Nostradamus’ warning of: *choose wisely, lest you will be in the Great One’s grasp for eternity.*

“Try to open the one with the two symbols.”

“You sure,” Stone acknowledged Kostakis.

“Yes,” Kostakis then added, “ninety-percent sure at the very least.”

Stone sighed, jumping back into the pond. He again found the first stone dragon symbol, grasping the scepter in the center of the circle like a door handle and with all his might, twisted. The stone did not budge. All this time underwater definitely tightened whatever ancient locking

mechanism the architects put in place. To his knowledge the Chinese did not develop any kind of metallurgy until, at the earliest 500 BCE, and even that was cutting it close, so this mechanism was most likely made from pure stone.

Unless, Stone thought, glancing at the second stone dragon. He swam over to it, grasped the scepter and turned. The grinding of the stone underwater was deep, so resonating, that Stone nearly let go before the full rotation of the Black Jade Scepter was complete. And a good thing he did not, because, almost simultaneously, the water level in the pond began to drop, emptying down into a drainage system. Once it drained completely, there Stone was, hanging precariously, one hundred feet above the flat stone bottom of the pond, his only solace was a stone ladder in between the two dragon circles, set into the side of the former pond. He let go of the scepter, getting a foothold first then grabbing onto the next stone rung for support. When he let go, the scepter swung inward revealing a long smooth tube plunging into the darkness.

With the pond emptied, the rest of the team looked down and saw Stone hanging on. Once he gave the all clear, they secured a nylon rope around a thick stone set into the ground above, lowering themselves down the rope, one by one, until they reached the stone ladder beside the dragon hole Stone was waiting in. from there, he led his team, using the rope and slowly rappelled down into the tube. As a safety precaution, Stone threw down a few glowsticks, which toppled end over end until landing silently on a stone floor below.

Although, he felt confident, Stone was a lot more comfortable with eyes in the back of his head, which is why he posted Johnny Boy and Remo on the perimeters, just in case. He had been through too many missions to underestimate the enemy. No matter how dead they seemed. In less than fifteen-minutes everyone had taken advantage of the ladder afforded to them and climbed down the tube, but that was where they all stopped, staring at an impossible task before them.

2330 hours

The Rotating Spikes Trap

Interior Kuaiji Mountain

“I’m no history major but you can’t tell me this dates back to the 6th century BCE,” Marley commented about the four, steel-spiked, floor-to-ceiling, ten-foot thick logs rotating vertically in front of them.

“It’s not,” Stone answered, “That’s why I turned the second stone instead.”

Marley was not following.

“In 1995 the Chinese government made this mausoleum more accessible to tourists. They even added a giant sign on the memorial gate announcing the entrance to Dà-Yǔ Mausoleum. I figured they would probably know about this place, why wouldn’t they? They obviously added the Ling symbol to the original entrance, which we just came through, to throw off treasure seekers. To anyone it would be the obvious choice to choose the stone without the mausoleum advertisement, which of course would be wrong. Apparently, the government modified it with some modern deterrents.”

“If they know about this place,” Tricky interjected, “how come the rest of the world doesn’t?”

“The Chinese like their sacred secrets to remain just that,” Kostakis answered, studying a bronze plaque on the wall.

“That still doesn’t explain how we get passed those,” Rebel motioned toward the three revolving spiked-logs.

“It appears we must follow this diagram,” Kostakis pointed at the plaque.

“Which is what exactly?” D-Boy asked.

“The title is River Essence Diagram. Presumably, it refers to the diagram Yu used to regulate the flood waters,” Kostakis explained.

“Does it say how to get passed these logs?” Stone raised an eyebrow.

“Unfortunately, it looks as though these were placed here quite recently. Probably to deter any tomb robbers,” Kostakis sounded defeated.

“Any way to stop them?” Stone threw the question out to anyone.

“Aside from blowing it to hell?” Marley answered.

“What if you close the stone doorway, allowing the pond to refill. It might have been activated when it was breached.” Remo had been listening to their dilemma over his earpiece.

“Worth a shot,” Lovey shrugged.

Stone volunteered, proceeding to climb back up the rope. When he reached the top of the stone tube he braced his feet on either side of the wall, it was slick with moisture but manageable. He then cut the rope, allowing one end to drop down the tube while the other fell limply into the empty pond. Next he swung the heavy stone door closed using all his strength, his legs burning from the amount of weight and pressure being put on them. His left leg started to spasm. He could feel his skin prickle as his aching muscles struggled to support him while he finished his task.

Finally, the door sealed shut. Stone slid down the tube fast, uncontrollably. When he came to its end, Marley and Tricky were there waiting for him to break his fall. Stone took a deep breath. His legs felt as if they had been subjected to a decathlon.

"Pond's filling back up. That work on your end?" Remo's voice sounded hopeful over the earpiece.

Looking up, Stone answered, "Affirmative," as he stared at the three stationary death traps. "What made you think of that?"

"Figured the Chinese probably still present offerings every so often to this Yu guy. They would not want to go through that every time. It's just a trap for would-be tomb raiders," Remo smiled knowingly, "Which also means...?"

"There's another way out," Stone finished his sentence.

"You got it, Major."

"Okay we're gonna go on. If we lose your signal stand firm, and maintain radio silence, unless your position is threatened. In that case, get the hell out of there and meet us at *The Meadowlark*."

"No problem, Major. Remo and Johnny Boy out."

The rest of the team made their way around the three thick tree trunks with two-foot steel spikes. More than once, someone got a piece of clothing caught on them and, for a split-second, thought they would be turned into chop meat. Other than that, they maneuvered quickly around the trap, squeezing and ducking every so often to avoid any injuries.

At the end of the spiked-logs was a set of stone steps leading down into the depths of the mountain. The staircase was so long that Stone did not even reach the last step before Marley cleared the uppermost ones. When Stone at last reached the bottom step, the entrance above them sealed shut with an ominous thud!

“Hope Remo’s right about that exit,” D-Boy said, his face illuminated by the green glowstick.

Stone secretly hoped the same as they walked the long corridor. It seemed to go on forever before finally coming to an abrupt stop. In the green glow Kostakis made his way to the front of the pack to where Stone stood.

“Is that what I think it is?” Stone asked Kostakis.

“The Bamboo Annals, carved in solid stone,” Kostakis brushed his fingertips along the intricately carved Chinese characters, each one raised slightly in a bas-relief.

“I hope your Chinese is good enough to translate this, Professor,” Stone turned to the wizened Greek, “Or else we’re going to rot down here.”

“Oh, I highly doubt that,” Kostakis studied the writing on the wall.

“That confident, are you?” Tricky smiled.

“Not nearly,” the Greek answered. “Because, if I don’t translate this properly, I fear we will all drowned.”

It was only now that they all realized the moisture on the floor and walls. It had to be coming from somewhere. Some underground water source. An analogy for Yu’s flood regulation obviously. Stone could only hope Kostakis could replicate what the Chinese emperor did so many centuries ago.

November 11th, 2012

2425 hours

Yu’s River Channel Trap

Interior Kuaiji Mountain

“Any day now, Professor,” D-Boy said, leaning casually against the wall.

Kostakis had been examining the text carefully for nearly thirty-minutes. It was not that he could not translate it, that was not the problem. The problem was that every other character was followed by a dummy character. There was some pattern here. He just needed to figure it out. Then it suddenly hit him. He remembered when reading one of the many versions of the Bamboo Annals that, not only did Yu regulate the waters by redirecting the water with freshly

dug channels but he also helped the farmers by adding irrigation conduits at various points along the river.

Now, as he examined the wall, lit up by several glowsticks, Kostakis found what he was looking for. Several references to irrigation and the control of the river. As in many cultures, the superstition revolving around numbers is embedded in the minds of every member of society. Rich or poor, nothing can escape the fear surrounding these auspicious traditions. For the Chinese, the number 4 was unlucky because the word for four is similar to the word for death. At first Kostakis thought about that but decided there were too many characters on the wall to fit the pattern. Seven, like many western cultures, is considered lucky because that number is so abundant in our lives. But that did not seem to fit either. Nor did the lucky number six. Both were not enough. And ten seemed like it was too much. Then he tried nine, the largest of the single digits and which, in Chinese culture, promotes longevity. It was so obvious to him now. Nine was the perfect fit.

He read aloud the phrase: *Control the flow of the waters. Bring them as one. Channel them so lands may prosper with plentiful harvest, leading us from despair.* Finding the coordinating characters, which followed a top to bottom left to right pattern, he tried to push them into the wall but they did not budge.

“Hmm,” Kostakis puffed under his breath, scratching his beard. He ran his fingers along the edges of the first character: 𠂔. He examined it more closely, an idea forming in his head. He then searched and found each corresponding character, and could not help but smile. “Captain,” Kostakis turned to Marley, “may I borrow your knife?” he motioned at the specialized USMC-issue Ka-Bar military knife.

Marley cocked his head, obliging the professor by flipping the blade and handing him the knife, handle first.

Kostakis moved close to the wall and dug the tip of the blade around the edge of the first Chinese character, scraping away excess stone and dirt surrounding it. Once he was satisfied, he gently slid the knife deeper in between the wall and character and, with relative ease, he shimmied it out of the wall, handing it to Stone. He proceeded to do the same for the remaining ten characters, all of which he removed, giving them to Stone and Marley.

When the last character was removed, two very different sounds assaulted their ears. First the Bamboo Annals wall slid down, into the floor, stone grinding on stone. Secondly, the sounds

of rushing waters trembled from above and started flowing down the staircase where they entered. From where they stood, an exit was visible only ten feet ahead, in the form of an opening in the floor against the far wall, which had been hidden when the Bamboo Annals wall was still in position.

“Everyone into the hole!” Stone shoved everybody ahead of him as they climbed down a set of stone rungs dug into the wall. Stone was the last to climb down but he was met by the backs of Marley and Lovey, “What the hell?”

“There’s another wall,” Lovey told him as Stone pushed toward the front of the pack while water started pouring down through the opening from above.

“Professor,” Stone shouldered through until he stood next to Kostakis, “is this the same wall?” But, by the light of the glowstick, Stone could now see that it was; except this, was a mirror image of the previous one.

“Yes, but from the opposite side it is very much different,” Kostakis studied the wall with intensity, which, rather than containing raised Chinese characters; this wall contained the characters hollowed out. Like a giant, wall-sized jigsaw puzzle into which pieces could be fitted.

It was only then that Stone realized the wonderment of this engineering feat. Once you entered through the mausoleum pond, you had no choice but to close that entrance to stop the rotating spikes. But in doing so, you essentially sealed your fate. They now had no choice but to follow the passage down until they came to the Bamboo Annals wall, but, when that was solved, the entire chamber would be flooded, you would be trapped by the Bamboo Annals wall, which was now on the next level as flood waters poured in through the opening to the level above. It was ingenious. Sadistically ironic, but nonetheless genius.

“Tell me you have this, Professor,” Stone asked as the water level began to rise to their knees.

“I’m trying my best,” Kostakis knew what he had to do. He needed to find the spaces where the characters he removed from the opposite side fit into this side. But with the wall reversed he had some difficulty distinguishing them from this side. “The characters are so similar to one another that it’s making this slightly tougher than the first.”

“Well,” Rebel shouted from the back of the crowded space, “I’d try to move a little faster.”

The water was now up to everyone’s midsection and rising rapidly.

“Ah! Now I see it,” Kostakis moved to the other end of the wall, wading in the water around his stomach. “I was...”

“Later,” Stone grasped Kostakis’ shoulder, handing him the characters he was given, Marley did the same. “Everyone else back up through the opening.”

His team did not need to be told twice as Lovey and Rebel went back up the rung ladder, followed by D-Boy and Tricky. From up here the water cascaded down the stone steps at the opposite end of the passageway like Niagara Falls.

“No rush up here,” Lovey called down sarcastically.

The old Greek professor stayed below with Stone and Marley, moving quickly now that he understood he needed to fit the characters into their proper slots in the same order he did when the wall was above.

Control: 叉

The flow of: 交

The water: 彙

The floodwaters were now at chest level. Rising faster, threatening to entomb them all.

Bring them: 促

As one: 促

Channel them: 導

So lands may prosper: 入 豐

When it reached their necks, Stone sent Marley up through the opening, protesting at first, but, being the good soldier he was, when Stone gave an order, he obeyed, handing Stone the last two characters.

The water seemed to flow faster, rising ever closer to the ceiling, which posed a problem since the last three characters were now underwater completely. “You need help, Professor?” Stone asked, their heads practically touched the ceiling.

“Yes,” he answered, spitting water from his mouth, trying to keep afloat, “may I borrow that pony bottle?”

“I’ll go. There’s only enough air for about two minutes.”

“I’m afraid that would only slow the process. I know exactly where they fit.”

Stone did not ask any questions, there was no time. He just handed the breathing apparatus to Kostakis who, with one quick breath, applied it then ducked underwater. Stone had no choice but to swim back up through the opening to join the others. They all looked at him, wondering where the Professor was.

“He insisted on placing the last three, himself,” he answered their stares while sitting on the opening’s edge.

Time refused to move. The only evidence of it was the flow of the water, which seemed to intensify as it completely covered the opening they swam through. Ten seconds turned into twenty. Twenty into forty. Forty into one-minute. Still no sign of Kostakis.

“Dammit,” Stone splashed his hand into the water. “I’m going back down there.”

Just then, the familiar sound of stone on stone grinding told the team that Kostakis had succeeded. Their thoughts were confirmed when the Bamboo Annals wall began to rise back up from the lower level behind them, eventually blocking the flood waters from posing any further threat. At the same time, they watched as the water below receded, obviously into a passageway opened up by the rising wall, and, a few seconds later, Kostakis emerged from opening, which was now almost entirely clear of water.

“I gotta stop under estimating you,” Stone smiled. “Okay team, let’s move on.”

They climbed down the stone ladder and, with no wall blocking their way, proceeded to walk down the empty corridor toward a set of stone steps descending to a third level. When they reached the bottom of the steps they were greeted by a ten-foot ledge, ending precariously at a steep drop, another set of stone stairs led up the opposite side.

Marley took out the 410 Laser meter, pointing it straight across to the opposite ledge. “Three-hundred feet, Major.”

“Shit,” Stone realized their LBAS G-guns had a maximum range of two-fifty. He looked at the ceiling. Limestone. Tough. Durable. Should be able to hold, but there was a slight problem. He, Lovey and Tricky had to leave their load-bearing spear guns at Sigiriya after their harrowing escape from the underwater trap, resulting in them obtaining the Kaumodaki of Vishnu, which meant they only had three LBAS to support the weight of seven people. Not exactly the recommended weight distribution as suggested in the operations manual, but they had no choice.

With no other option, Stone loaded three per swing hoping to lessen the stress on the load-bearing gun and nylon rope. Lovey, Rebel and Kostakis were the first to go, lining up the spearhead with the farthest point possible in the ceiling to assure maximum grip. Rebel shot the tip into the ceiling about twenty feet from the opposite edge. It locked into place as Kostakis wrapped his arms around Rebel and Lovey around Kostakis.

“Here goes nothing,” Rebel yelled as they took a running start and swung with all the force they could muster. Once they were in the air, over a sea of nothingness, the three of them kicked their feet forward adding to the momentum.

The tricky part would be landing all together.

With luck as their only ally, Rebel released the spear just as they were about to reach the opposite ledge. Their forward progress cleared them of the gap by only a few feet as Lovey had to practically lean into the back of Kostakis to keep from falling backwards off the cliff.

D-Boy and Tricky went next, other than a minor miscalculation causing Tricky to teeter over the edge before D-Boy could pull him back, their swing was successful.

Lastly were Stone and Marley, who had performed this drill in boot camp nearly ten years ago. Although, the twenty-foot drop into ice-cold water at Camp Lejeune did not compare to the two-hundred foot gap facing them tonight, the basic concept was the same. But as they did in North Carolina, Stone and Marley perfectly executed their landing before reeling in the LBAS.

“Show offs,” Lovey smirked.

0133 hours

Tomb of Dà-Yǔ the Great

Interior Kuaiji Mountain

At the top of the staircase, were two smooth stone pillars, carved with the Chinese name of Dà-Yǔ on each. Resting on each pillar were two ceramic celadon glazed bowls filled with water and several unlit candles floating on its surface. When everyone arrived at the top landing of the staircase, Stone and a few others lit the candles with some matches. Although their glowsticks lit the way sufficiently, once the candles were lit, the scene played out like a dramatic, , ancient offering sequence practiced hundreds of years ago, and from the looks of the candles, more recently.

Along with the pillars and celadon glazed bowls- a tradition, Stone would later find out, dated back to the early part of the twentieth century of the Zhejiang Province- they were greeted by a long stone path set with rough-cut stones, laid and fitted perfectly together. Above them the ceiling glittered like millions of fireflies dancing around, lighting the way.

“Amber and Jadeite minerals,” Kostakis spoke, his voice echoing in the vast chamber, “looks as if they were placed there individually by hand. Remarkable!” He added with a shake of his head.

“Does that look at all familiar to you?” Stone tapped D-Boy on the shoulder.

“Yeah,” the young Second Lieutenant nodded, “it looks exactly like the celestial chamber in Siwa where we found Alexander the Great.”

“That’s what I thought,” Stone then added, “Same dark matter halo?”

D-Boy just nodded.

Stone sighed, shaking his head.

Lost, was the fact that before them, at the end of the stone path, a second set of perfectly carved stone steps led to a brightly colored, magnificent wood structure, designed in the traditional bilateral symmetry and articulation commonly found in early Chinese architecture.

The concept was a simple one, bringing balance to the surroundings whether the building is a temple, palace or common house. Using corbel wooden bracket supports to hold up the multi-inclined roof, the entire mausoleum structure, Stone estimated, was at least fifty-feet long, twenty-feet wide and twenty-feet high. Painted in bright reds and splashes of yellow gold leaf, each wooden pillar depicted images of serpents entwining alternately up and down.

At the foot of the mausoleum was a five-foot high stele. On it were several Chinese characters, which Kostakis translated for everyone, “Dà-Yǔ, son of Gun and Nuzhi, descendant of Huang Di, founder of the Xia Dynasty.”

“At least we’re in the right place,” Rebel added.

“Does anyone else find it strange that this place seems so well maintained?” Lovey asked, observing the polished stone and the mausoleum itself.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Kostakis walked under the inclined structure, reverently. “There must be an alternate entrance and exit somewhere so the monks could come in and venerate their legendary founder.”

Inside the mausoleum, they could see four statues in each corner, made from terracotta, all of which were finely sculpted with great care and intricate detail, stoically representing the Chinese ruler whose tomb this was. Stone also noticed that each statue had its arms crossed over their chest and, just above their arms were four different types of gemstones. The one closest to them, on their right side was a heart made from a solid piece of ruby. On their left, the statue contained a single white pearl set in its center.

For them to see the two statues in the far corners, they had to pass across the smooth, polished, stone floor. As they neared the center of the mausoleum, they saw the tomb's occupant. Dà-Yǔ was entombed inside a glass coffin, which had been lowered into the floor, gold framing its rim. Inside the actual coffin, the mummy of Dà-Yǔ rested peacefully, his hands crossed over his chest, much like the terracotta statues that guarded him. Also inside the coffin was a wooden carving of what looked to be a scroll. On the wood scroll were four gemstones: a heart of ruby, a white pearl, a teardrop lapis lazuli and a jade tiger.

They stood around the coffin, peering in at the two-thousand year old mummy, wrapped in linens, now brown with age. Strands of black hair escaped a few of the bandages around his head. If they had not known the age of the Dà-Yǔ mummy, they would have guessed it to be maybe a couple of decades old at the most.

Obviously, the practice of mummification was not new, nor was it confined to Ancient Egypt. In fact, mummies have been found on five of the seven continents, Australia and Antarctica excluded, the oldest ones being the Chinchorro mummies of South America in what are now the modern day countries of Chile and Peru, and dating to around 5000 BCE- nearly two thousand years earlier than the earliest mummies found in Egypt.

"Okay, now what?" D-Boy asked, obviously referring to the problem of having the relic they needed locked inside a glass coffin.

"Anyone got a glass cutter?" Rebel half-joked.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Captain," Kostakis answered, walking toward the statue of Dà-Yǔ holding the jade gemstone. "*Look for the gemstone held close to his heart,*" repeating a section of the *Nostradamus Manuscript*.

Standing before the terracotta Dà-Yǔ was eerily surreal. The details that went into sculpting this masterpiece easily rivaled any marble sculpture done by Michelangelo or Bernini. His stone face showed every line, every crease, every wrinkle; even the thin wispy Manchu

moustache was finely crafted. The stone cut crinkle of his guzhang silk robe and his official headgear, with two flaps extending like wings on either side of his head, so exquisitely detailed, Kostakis could even make out the carvings of several Chinese symbols and decorations. All of this was spectacular, but Kostakis was more interested in the gemstone the terracotta figure had embedded in the center of his chest.

At first he thought he may have to pull it out, much like the first part of the Bamboo Annals riddle, but it would not budge and there were no grooves to suggest otherwise. So, the old Greek professor did the next best thing, he pressed the jade tiger into the statue and, with relative ease, the gem allowed him to do so, then released from its secure recess, falling into the waiting hands of Professor Kostakis.

He wiped it clean and stared at the stone. It was one of the most beautiful examples of ancient craftsmanship he had ever seen. Two eyes were set deep in a thick square head while four short, squat legs supported a long rectangular body, on which were carved leaves, and ending with a long tail, curved at its tip. The entire gemstone was no bigger than the palm of his hand, and yet he felt as if it held the weight of the world within it.

The next thing that occurred surprised everyone, as the tall stone statue shifted forward then to Kostakis' right revealing a spiral set of stone steps leading down under the mausoleum. He turned, looking at the curious faces around him.

"Seriously," Tricky scoffed, "was anyone expecting anything less?"

Without saying another word, everyone descended the staircase, Stone taking point with Marley guarding the rear. When they reached the bottom step, they were greeted by a long stone passageway with wrought-iron dragon sconces and freshly lit candles. Everyone thought the same thing, but no one said the obvious. These sconces did not light themselves. Someone had access to this passage, the burning candles, as well as the upkeep of the mausoleum, told them as much.

About fifteen minutes passed before they arrived at a second set of spiral stone steps, this time leading up. Stone led the group up the narrow flight which ended abruptly at a wood ceiling. Except this ceiling had an iron wrung hanging precariously, waiting to be utilized. Stone obliged, grasping the wrung and, with a shove of his shoulder, pushed the wood ceiling upwards. The wood did not give.

“Must be locked from above,” Stone said, lifting it slightly, looking for a lock of some sort. His thoughts were confirmed when he glimpsed a padlock on the opposite upper side.

“Now what?” Lovey asked from below.

“You still have that C4 in your backpack, D-Boy?”

“You know I do,” the young First Lieutenant slung off his pack, grabbed a small block of the plastic explosive, handing it up the line until it reached Stone. The clay explosive was followed by a long thin pin detonator with a ten-second timer. It was still in the experimental stages but, like most advances in military technology, they had to be tested in the field sometime.

“Everyone back down the steps and into the passageway,” Stone said while he formed the clay around the edge where the lock was. Twenty seconds later, Stone joined the group. Five seconds after that there was a low, muffled explosion, up and inwards.

They ran up the stairs, guns at the ready but nothing greeted them except for the dark empty space of a wood framed building. Several rice paper windows let in the rays of bright moonlight. The floor was wood, the same as the trapdoor they had just come through. In the center of the room, hanging on the wall was a thin silk textile with the now familiar Dà-Yǔ name, written in Chinese characters.

“Three guesses as to where we are,” Stone led them to the only door, leading out of the Yu Mausoleum, the pond they entered, nearly two hours ago, was filled once more with the clean clear water.

“At least we now know how someone could get down there without going through the Bamboo Annals,” Lovey commented while they walked down the Divine Road leading to the memorial’s exit.

Waiting for them, beside the Hummer, was Remo and Johnny Boy, “About time. We were about to leave you guys down there.”

They piled into the large transport, Lovey behind the wheel, driving off passed the guardhouse where both guards had their feet kicked up, heads lolling, lost in a dream world.

“Could have just waited until now to sneak in,” Tricky commented as they passed the sleeping guards. “Probably would have saved us a couple thousand dollars.”

Everyone could not help but laugh at the irony as Lovey drove back to the airport to meet up with the others waiting with *The Meadowlark*.

When they arrived at *The Meadowlark*, they were pleased to see a familiar face: Second Lieutenant Nicholas Barrington, Nicky Rich. Last they heard, the young Second Lieutenant had been shot, left for dead. He went on to explain his harrowing trek through the rivers and jungles of Peru until he reached Cuzco, was interrogated for hours by the local police, and finally allowed to leave on the less-than safe C-12 Huron military aircraft. It took him a couple of days and a lot of money exchanging hands, but Barrington eventually arrived in Bangkok before flying out here to Sri Lanka to meet up with the rest of his Omega teammates.

As he recounted his journey, questions were answered, answers were embellished and everyone was in a jovial, lighthearted mood, for once. Stone even managed to smile and laugh, something he had not done since they started this mission. The only thing missing was the presence of a very dear friend they lost early on. The absence of Money changed Stone's disposition, remembering they still had a mission to complete.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen," Stone stood, breaking-up the reunion, "we still have a job to do. Everyone get some rest while you can." He left the conference room they all gathered in and went back to his room more determined than ever to finish this operation without losing anyone else.

0250 hours

Captain Matata Bol watched through his AN/PVS-4 night vision goggles from the rooftop of a nearby office building. He had been watching them the whole time. From the moment, they arrived, climbing into that pond. To them emerging from the flat-house building beside the pond only seconds ago. Bol focused his goggles and zoomed in on the face of Major Donovan Stone, awash in a grainy, iridescent green.

Two days ago Admiral Alberts contacted him. He told him to fly to China while he and his team flew on to Guatemala. His orders were simple: follow and observe Stone and his team. After China, they should be heading for Turkey. Stay on their tail but do not engage.

"Let them do the hard work," the Admiral told Bol over the phone, "when they arrive at Tikal, that's when we'll attack."

Until then, Captain Matata Bol was merely an observer, watching Stone and his team pile into the Hummer and drive off in the direction of the airport. The tall African smiled, picking up

his Global Intec sat-phone. He found the correct frequency then said in Swahili, “Tell Captain Wanenu to be sure the plane is fueled and ready for take-off. I will be there shortly.”

Bol packed up his goggles and the tarp he was laying on, then proceeded down the fire stairs until he re-entered the lobby. As he passed the dead body of the security guard he shot in the head upon arriving at the scene, Bol grabbed the guard’s keys and walked out the building. He got into the only car in the parking lot, a beat-up 1997 compact Citroën Fukang, started it up using the guard’s key and drove down highway 104 toward Hangzhou Xiaoshan International Airport, where a private jet Admiral Alberts provided him and his men, was waiting inside a secure hangar, along with twenty of his best mercenaries.

Eleven

The Scepter of Constantine

November 11th, 2012

0500 hours

Airborne over China

***The Meadowlark* Conference Room**

Two hours after securing the Jade Tiger of Yu, Kostakis and Stone were sitting in the conference room of *The Meadowlark*, discussing the next leg of their mission. Stone had told everyone to get some sleep, they had a ten-hour flight ahead of them, before arriving in Istanbul, and so they had plenty of time. But, before Stone’s head hit the pillow, he wanted to know as much as he could about this last relic, especially what to expect once they arrive in Turkey.

Kostakis had collected all the information he thought they would need while everyone else was on the mission in Sri Lanka, so he was well prepared when Stone came to him asking about where they were heading next. In front of them was Kostakis' Mac Book Pro, filled with hundreds of files- from the history of Istanbul to the legacy of Emperor Constantine to the mystery behind the ruler's scepter.

"As I'm sure you already know, Istanbul has been known by many names," Kostakis began by tapping a key on his laptop. On the flat screen monitor behind him, mounted on the wall, a map of Turkey appeared, dating from the late 7th century BCE. "The city of Byzantium, more commonly known by its Latin name, Byzantium, was founded by ancient Greek settlers from Megara in 667 BCE, and named for their king, at the time, Byzas. Over the next thousand years or so, Istanbul was referred to by many names, not including names given by the Arabic and Greeks living in and around The City, which, by the way, was what the Byzantines called it. But, all that is irrelevant, what we're concerned with is that, around 330 CE, it was changed to Constantinople in honor Constantine the Great."

Kostakis changed the image on the screen to that of the emperor himself. "As for Constantine, he was named Roman Emperor in 306 and ruled until 337, but he was best known for being the first Christian Roman Emperor. Born in modern-day Serbia, Constantine's father, Constantius, was a Roman officer and served as imperial bodyguard for Emperor Aurelian where he rose through the ranks and was eventually granted the governorship of Dalmatia by Emperor Diocletian, who divided the Empire in 293 into an eastern and western Roman Empire. In fact, Diocletian formed the system of Roman government where the appointing two junior emperors and one senior emperor later came to be known as the Tetrarchy. One of these Caesars, in this case, the junior emperor, was Constantine's father who was appointed the subdivision of the Roman Empire of Gaul, modern day France, Belgium, western Germany and Luxembourg.

"Constantine was accepted in Diocletian's court where he was formally educated in Latin literature, Greek and philosophy. Now, although he was taught by many of the great thinkers of the time, Constantine was actually somewhat of a hostage by Diocletian because, as with most politicians of the Roman Empire, his father was not trusted, so keeping his son close to the Emperor ensured his loyalty. This did not dissuade the young Constantine who, fought for Diocletian in Asia; served numerous tribunates; and by 305 was named *Tribunus Ordinatus Primi*. In the same year, Diocletian became ill and appointed Constantine's father along with Galerius

Augusti and two prominent Roman army officers Caesars. For fear of his son's life, Constantius requested Galerius allow Constantine to leave court, which was eventually granted. Both father and son fled to Britannia where Constantius grew increasingly sick but, before dying in the summer of 306, the Emperor of the Western Roman Empire proclaimed his son, Constantine, Augustus."

The image on the screen changed from a colorful map of two Roman Empires to an image of Constantine wearing purple and gold silk robes, "Ever the showman, Constantine sent Galerius an official notice of his father's death and his appointment to the rank of Augustus, complete with a portrait of him donning the customary the robes of that office. Naturally, Galerius was enraged, but he compromised by appointing Constantine the title of Caesar allowing him to keep the purple robes thus removing doubts of his legitimacy. Over the next three years, the Roman Empire was wrought with strife, rebellion and conspiracy, eventually leading to the Civil Wars of the Tetrarchy which lasted from the time of Constantius' death in 306 until 324, ending with the surrendering of the western throne by Licinius at Nicomedia."

The next photo was a map of the Roman Empire circa 325, colored brightly in red and stretching from France to Asia-Minor, with a portrait of Constantine in ceremonial robes holding a golden scepter with a blue jewel at its top. "With no one to oppose him, Constantine became the sole Emperor of the entire Roman Emperor at the age of fifty-two."

"As always very informative," Stone leaned back in his chair, "what can you tell me about the scepter?"

"Unfortunately," Kostakis turned to Stone, "not much. The only time anyone has ever written about it was by the Roman orator Flavius Clavius Demios. In one of his open letters to the Roman people he wrote that, when the Emperor Constantine rode into Rome for the first time as emperor in 325, he held in his right hand a magnificent rod of gold with an ocean-blue stone, which shined like all the stars in the heavens and would make the goddess Juno jealous with rage."

Kostakis brought up an image of a close-up of the scepter from the previous picture, "To my knowledge this is the only image of the scepter. But, as with all myths and legends of ancient times, the scepter holds some special mystical powers that aided Constantine, as well as his father and his predecessors, to ascend to the throne of the Roman Empire for almost sixty-years."

Stone leaned forward in his chair, staring at the strange gem atop the golden scepter, “Is that lapis lazuli?” He asked in shock, admiring the bright blue stone the size of his fist.

“The biggest rock of its kind I have ever seen,” Kostakis answered Stone’s question with the same incredulity.

“That would explain why some thought it was mystical,” Stone said, easing back in his chair, “anyone gazing upon a stone that size would make them wonder what other wealth they kept hidden if they flaunted a rock the size of a baby’s head.”

Kostakis nodded in agreement.

0930 hours

Atatürk International Airport

Istanbul, Turkey

Before they departed for the Yeşilköy district and the Fatih Mosque, Stone held a brief meeting in *The Meadowlark’s* conference room where he and Professor Kostakis went over what they talked about four hours earlier. When he was done, Stone asked if there were any questions. No reply. He then turned the floor over to Kostakis who rose from his seat; the *Nostradamus Manuscript* lay open in front of him on the table.

“From what I can gather, this should not be a difficult task,” some murmurs of sarcasm echoed from the assemblage, “at least not to what we’ve become accustomed to. Now, the scepter itself is buried with Constantine, who is buried in the catacombs under the Fatih Mosque about thirty-minutes from here. Fortunately, we will not have to step foot inside the mosque, which, given currently relations with the Muslim world, would be ill-advised for what we need to accomplish. Nostradamus hints at a secret passage, away from the mosque and virtually unknown.”

He picked up the manuscript and read from it aloud, “*Beneath where the underprivileged rest their heads, upon the grounds of Constantine’s church, seek thee the cross of Christ to enter the crypt of the Holy Roman Emperor under the faithful Camii of the Ottoman Empire. Deep below the surface, follow the flight of Christianity to the wall of the worthy few. Gaze upon the sign of the sacred and bless thee in the name of our Holy Lord to gain entry to the resting place of the first Holy Roman Emperor.*”

No one said a word, by now everyone was used to the cryptic nature of this mission. Instead, they waited for Kostakis to translate, which he did the second he finished reciting the words of the French prognosticator. “Not far from the Fatih Mosque there is a youth hostel, technically not on the grounds of the mosque where the Church of the Holy Apostles used to stand before Fatih Sultan Mehmed commissioned it to be demolished, the mosque built in its place. To my knowledge, the crypt is still there, as this manuscript clearly details; many Romans of that time were buried in familial crypts, Constantine was no different. The flight of Christianity, hmmm,” Kostakis thought silently.

“Is it possible flight could refer to a series of steps or an actual staircase?” Lovey asked as Kostakis looked at her curiously. “It does say under the faithful Camii, deep below the surface, it could mean literally a flight of stairs.”

The idea was simple, yet, “That does make sense once you break it down like that,” Kostakis agreed, accepting Lovey’s theory.

“Okay, now what about the wall of the worthy few and gaze upon the sign of the sacred?” Rebel added.

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see, but, if I were a betting man, I would say it has something to do with a cross of some sort,” Kostakis answered confidently. “Best wait until we get to that point before we speculate.”

Two hours later, Stone, Lovey, Kostakis, Tricky, Remo and Rebel were on their way to the Fatih Mosque. Stone had discussed the idea of some of the team staying aboard *The Meadowlark*, given that it would probably look suspicious if they all entered the hostel at once. Everyone agreed so Marley, Johnny Boy, D-Boy and Nicky Rich were chosen to hang back with Hazelton and Radcliffe while Eagle Eye prepped the plane for a hasty departure and General Harris left to grease the palm of the man who allowed them to enter their air space and use the airport for a few hours.

1500 hours

Istanbul, Turkey

Hostel outside Fatih Mosque

Stone decided the best course of action would be to wait until mid-afternoon. By that time, everyone staying at the hostel should still be out sightseeing, so they should have the run of the place, sans the hostel's employees. The only dilemma would be trying to find the entrance into the catacombs, which, as of yet, they had no idea where it could be.

Luckily, he had guessed right. As the six of them entered the modest building, the desk clerk looked up from his small color television, annoyed that six tourists were checking in during his favorite Turkish TV show. Stone smiled apologetically, paying the man in American dollars, explaining they had just arrived in his beautiful city and wanted to change and shower before exploring the nightlife. The excuse seemed to appease the man as he quickly checked them in, wanting to get back to his television sooner than later. He accepted their dollars, offering them two rooms on the second floor; one for the men and one for Lovey, who would be sharing the room with three other women- not all of whom were there the clerk indicated. The men's room was empty too he told them, as was the rest of the hostel. As a formality, they took their keys, walked to the elevator, taking it to the second floor but immediately headed for the emergency exit stairs at the hallway's end.

Stone estimated they had approximately four hours before the boarders returned So he decided to split into three teams; Remo and Rebel; Tricky and Kostakis; and Stone and Lovey. Knowing the entrance was somewhere on the ground floor, they carefully took the emergency stairs, searching every unlocked room- maintenance closets, storage rooms, even the kitchen was not beyond their search, although Tricky and Kostakis received rude comments and glances, which eventually them chased out. After an hour of searching every possible room, and enduring several strange stares from hostel employees- desk clerk notwithstanding, whose feet were up, his snoring practically drowning out the television which was now airing *Çarkıfelek*, the Turkish version of *Wheel of Fortune*- the team of six meet back inside the emergency exit's stairwell.

"We haven't tried the basement, yet," Lovey pointed out, acknowledging the descending flight of stairs to their right.

For a moment, Stone felt so stupid. Of course, what they were looking for would be on the lowest possible level. He shook his head, exasperated at his neglect as he led them down the two flights of stairs. Not surprisingly, the basement was just like any other normal, small, hotel basement. Boilers. A water tank. Sacks of sugar and flour. Boxes of non-perishables. Cans of fruits and vegetables. Four refrigerators filled with dairy products like cheese, eggs and milk as

well as cold soft drinks and juices. Three freezers stacked with all kinds of meat and frozen foods.

While looking around the average sized basement, Kostakis noticed an out-of-place stone arch along the eastern wall. Stone and Remo moved some boxes from against said wall and, sure enough, on the center stone, a Christian cross was engraved into it.

“Seems odd for a Christian symbol to be found so close to one of the world’s largest mosques, don’t you think?” Stone said, touching the cross.

“Now what?” Rebel asked.

Stone looked at Tricky who immediately swung off his backpack and, without saying a word, took out a four-by-four square inch block of clay, two wires and two detonators. He carefully placed the C-4 just below the stone with the cross on it, inserting the wires and detonators into the clay explosive. Everyone stood back, hiding behind the freezers and refrigerators. The blast would not be big or loud, so no one on the above floors should hear what they were about to do. Still, trepidation welled inside everyone as Tricky crossed himself, shrugging his shoulders to his ears then pressed the handheld remote device.

A muffled explosion, no louder than the sound of a heavy cardboard box dropping onto the stone floor, imploded the wall, under the arch, partially revealing an opening behind it. Stone rushed to the basement steps, listening for any indication that anyone may have heard the blast. Nothing. No one was coming. He then ran to the hole created by the blast where Remo and Rebel were already halfway through, removing rock and debris until the hole was wide enough for them to fit through.

A few minutes later, Remo held a glowstick in one hand, bracing himself on the broken wall with the other, peering through the hole. Nothing sinister greeted him, only darkness and the landing of a set of narrow steps, carved into the foundation stone. He stepped through the hole, leading the way down. Stone went last, looking around before ducking inside, hoping they would be back before anyone would notice the gaping hole they left behind.

1637 hours

Front Desk of *Sadık İzleyiciler*

Hostel outside Fatih Mosque

“The Americans have entered the stairway leading to the catacombs,” Salih Demir said into the receiver. He had to lower the television behind him to be sure no one else was listening.

“Very good my friend,” the voice on the other end answered, a heavy accent apparent. *Some sort of African accent*, Salih thought to himself. “Your cooperation will not go unrewarded.”

The line went dead, Salih Demir smiling as he hung up the phone. He went back to watching his television, one-hundred and fifty-thousand American dollars richer than he was when he woke up this morning.

1640 hours

The flight of stone steps was nothing special. Just one set of ten steps followed by another ten, zigzagging down under the hostel, lit by the four glowsticks held Stone, Lovey, Remo and Rebel. The entire trek to reach the bottom took less than fifteen minutes, which was fine by Stone because the sooner they got in, got the relic, and got out, the less chance they had of being caught. At the bottom of the last flight was a long plain, stonewalled passage. Nothing special struck the six of them as they walked its length. Fifteen minutes, and about one hundred feet later, they got to the end of the corridor.

Carved on the wall in front of them was an enormous cross at least eight feet high and four feet across. It was cut from the wall itself, raised entirely, giving it a three-dimensional look. Kostakis took out a sheet of paper. On it, he had written the excerpt from the *Nostradamus Manuscript* pertaining to Constantine’s scepter. He read it to himself then aloud, “*Gaze upon the sign of the sacred and bless thee in the name of our Holy Lord to gain entry to the resting place of the first Holy Roman Emperor.*”

He then walked up to the giant cross, examining it carefully. From a distance it looked normal, nothing out of the ordinary, but upon further examining, Kostakis saw small linear grooves running along the top and bottom thirds of the cross as well as left and right quadrants. He ran his fingers along the creases, digging out excess dust and dirt. Kostakis looked back at Stone, “I believe we may have found a way into the crypt.”

Remembering Nostradamus’ words, Kostakis pushed on the top portion but the stone was set in too tightly. He turned back and Tricky, the strongest and tallest of the six, who proceeded

to reach above his head and, with all his might, pushed the stone into the wall until a grinding noise followed by a secondary noise, somewhere inside the wall, signaled that a stone dropped into place, “Now what?”

“The bottom stone,” Kostakis replied.

Tricky got on his backside, bracing his arms behind him, and pushed the stone into the wall. A similar result followed a grinding noise, then the sound of a stone dropping.

“Now the upper right stone,” Kostakis said.

“You sure,” Stone interrupted. “Shouldn’t he push the left one? You know,” he said, crossing himself as he did so many times when he and his parents attended weekly mass.

“Normally, you would cross yourself like that,” Kostakis smiled, “but remember, we are facing in the opposite direction. If we were to stand with our backs to the wall, the way would be our left but the wall’s right.”

As confusing as it sounded, the more Stone thought about it, picturing the scenario, he realized the Greek professor was right. So, Tricky pushed the upper right stone until he heard the grind and drop of an inner stone. Next, without asking the obvious, he did the same to the upper left. When the final stone was set in place, the grinding and dropping of the last stone allowed the entire cross to swing inwards, revealing another long, dark passageway.

1710 hours

Constantinian Crypts

Under Fatih Mosque

The passage was dark. Lit every few feet by the glowsticks. A rough-cut stone wall, with twelve recesses, six on each side, carved into it was visible through the green glow. Stone did not need to guess what was inside those holes. The recesses along the walls, obviously, belonging to some of the lesser of the nobles were impressive enough. Large stone sarcophagi adorned with carvings of happier times. Family heirlooms scattered throughout each niche, specific to that particular family member. The sight was impressive; however, if it were not for the importance of the mission they would have vomited from the stench of decay, which was old and intense. It was the familial sepulcher of the Constantinian dynasty; responsible for spreading Christianity

throughout the known world. But, it was what lay beyond the niches that made them forget the offensive odor.

As they approached the three sarcophagi, Stone was equally amazed at the fine mosaic decorating the walls and the frescos on the ceiling. The mosaic of small, colored stone squares, individually nothing fancy but, when observed from a distance, each square became part of a grander, more beautiful scene of verdant fields and pristine landscapes. In the foreground, the figures of three magnificently dressed people sprung to life. The two flanking the middle figure were slightly older in appearance than the one in the middle. Stone did not need to be told it was Constantine the Great and his parents.

The ceiling was also ornately decorated. An inky black sky was filled with thousands of tiny stars, obviously the night sky, with faded dots of blue around its inner rim that struck Stone as more than coincidental. As with the celestial mural in Alexander the Great's chamber and in Da Yu, inside the rim of blackness, the image changed slowly to a lighter blue, the dots now a brighter bluish-white and the innermost portion merging into a lighter blue, but with fewer bluish-white dots and the ominous brighter white dot directly in its center. Everyone noticed it but did not say a word. They all knew what it was. What it meant. Presently, they had a task to finish.

As the group of five Omega operatives and one scholar approached the sarcophagi, although two were significant, with gold trimming around the ornate stone coffin, it was the largest of the three that stood out. Kostakis, upon gazing at the final resting place of the Constantinian Emperors, a surge of sadness welled up inside him. "No one will ever look upon the beauty that we see here," he spoke softly but loud enough for everyone to agree with him.

The four-sided, purple and gold-hued sarcophagus of Constantine the Great was rectangular but not necessarily equal on all sides. It was sealed tightly, as Stone and Tricky found out soon enough.

"Well, that ain't budging," Tricky shook his head after he and Stone tried lifting it.

"What about the C4?" Rebel suggested.

"Fresh out," Tricky answered despondently.

"We can pry it open," Lovey said, gesturing toward a collection of swords in one corner.

Stone rubbed his chin, nodding as he stepped toward the swords. He hastily grabbed several by the decorative hilts, handing them out to Rebel, Lovey, Tricky and Remo. "If we can

somehow shimmy these swords between the lid and the actual sarcophagus we may be able to get this thing open.”

Kostakis smiled, secretly happy they would not be destroying another significant find. The Greek stood back, watching as the five military minds blended as one. Each person sliding his or her sword blade into the thin groove just under the lid. Carefully, they wagged the swords back and forth, back and forth. After several, painstaking minutes, the five swords were up to their hilts, kissing the purple-gold trimming on stone lid. Stone counted down from five and, on his mark, they lifted their swords up until...

FOOOSH!

Stale, acrid air escaped from inside the nearly seventeen-hundred year old coffin. But the smell did not stop them. They continued to lift the lid until they could turn it diagonal with the sarcophagus. Everyone stepped back, somehow knowing Kostakis should be the first to look inside. So, without wavering, the scholarly Greek Professor stepped up onto the base upon which the sarcophagus rested and peered, eagerly, inside.

The body of Constantine the Great was not there. The sarcophagus was empty except for the plush purple lining.

“I don’t... under... understand?” Kostakis stared into the empty stone coffin. By now everyone had joined him, equally stunned.

“Are you sure you translated the manuscript right?” Stone asked, just as perplexed.

Kostakis stepped down, the light of the glowsticks illuminating the corner of the crypt chamber. He shook his head in disbelief. *How is it possible?* He asked himself. *I know I translated it properly. Each word, carefully crosschecked.* Scratching his head, he walked around the three sarcophagi, questioning himself. Questioning his abilities. The fate of humankind rested on his knowledge and now, because of his lack of that knowledge, the whole world was doomed. All of this. Everything they had been through over the past several days now meant nothing. For all their troubles, they were still going to die.

He found himself standing in front of the mosaic of Constantine and his parents, wondering what they would do now. How would they spend their last few days on Earth? Hell, he was not even sure how the world was to end. If it was going to end. Or, if simply, some great calamity would doom humanity, wiping them from history, leaving nature to bury any signs they even existed. Would future beings, or aliens, find their remains? What would they think? What

would survive? How long before the great monuments decayed into ruin? How long before the art withered and faded away? How long before...

Kostakis was staring at the mosaic when something caught his eye. Something he had not noticed before, or rather paid no mind to. But now, with the light of the glowsticks glinting on the polished stones, Kostakis stared at the object the figure of Constantine the Great was holding. It was a scepter. Not just a scepter. *The* scepter!

He rushed to the wall of mosaic and felt around the edges of the four-foot, golden staff with the bright blue jewel. At first, he thought it was part of the same mosaic, but upon further inspection, he now saw that the staff and jewel were indeed one, solid piece. "Ingenious," he whispered, trying to pry it loose.

Stone and the others joined him, each one holding a glowstick closer to the wall, everyone, just now, seeing what had drawn the professor's attention. Without saying a word, Stone pulled out his trusty Strider SMF knife and poked around until he found purchase. Remo followed his lead and together the two men were able to scrape around the scepter enough for it to drop from the wall, and into Kostakis' hands. He quickly and delicately placed it inside Stone's backpack and waited.

Knowing their luck, everyone stood around, waiting for some disaster to strike. When nothing happened, they began their trek back down the recess corridor, back through the giant cross-door, still open, leaving it that way. Kostakis figured if it was left open, someone might stumble down here and discover what they had already discovered: an amazing display of wealth but, more importantly the forefathers of the Christian faith.

By the time they reached the hole in the storage room, it was almost six in the evening. That meant they had one day to regroup, analyze what they had and make their way to Central America, where who knows what awaited them.

At Stone's suggestion, they climbed back up to the second floor using the emergency stairs, taking the elevator back down to the first floor and lobby. To no one's surprise, the desk clerk was still watching television, although this time he was wide-awake, paying close attention as Turkey's national football team was in a scoreless tie with the Spanish team. Every so often, he would let out a shout in Turkish, an obvious complaint at the poor officiating. He was so engrossed that he never even noticed the six Americans leaving his hostel.

1814 hours

Front Desk of *Sadık İzleyiciler*

Hostel outside Fatih Mosque

Salih Demir waited until the Americans were definitely gone. The last thing he wanted was for them to discover his deception. He had heard about the terrible things they did to spies and traitors, of which, technically, he was none. But, he highly doubted they would care. Carefully, peering across his desk and out the door, he watched as the backs of the Americans disappeared from view before he picked up the receiver.

“Yes,” the African voice answered.

“They just left,” Salih said.

“Did they leave with anything?”

Salih looked at one of his employees, whom he had asked to check the basement. “Yes.”

Just then, two large African men entered the hostel. They did not say a word as they withdrew Vektor SP1’s, equipped with silencers. In less than one minute, the entire staff was killed, including the cooperative desk clerk, Salih Demir.

Once the last employee was shot dead, one of the Africans picked up the desk clerk’s phone, dialed a number. When the person on the other end picked up, the tall African uttered three words, “It is done.”

1815 hours

Atatürk International Airport

Istanbul, Turkey

Captain Matata Bol smiled as he hung up the phone. His men had done their job. The stupid Turk would never see his money, nor had Bol ever even planned to give it to him. The power of greed never ceased to amaze the African captain. He should know. It was his motivation as well.

He woke up his pilot with a slap to the back of the head, the lazy *tibura*! They were about five miles away from Stone’s plane, way on the other side of the Atatürk International Airport. Bol gathered his men, fifteen mercenaries in all, preparing them for takeoff. He then walked to the window of the Gulfstream IV G450, placing the high-powered binoculars to his eyes. The

overly large Lockheed C-130 was still idle outside its private hangar. Stone and his team should be there in less than thirty minutes, by then they would be airborne and on their way to Guatemala. Once there Bol and his men would meet with the Admiral's SEALs and the General's Rangers. Together they would travel to Tikal where this entire operation would come to a head.

Bol smiled, removing the binoculars, hearing the roar of the Rolls-Royce Tay 611-8C turbine engines and the voice of his pilot communicating with tower control. He walked back into the cockpit, taking the co-pilot's seat, adjusting his headset and buckling his safety belt. Ten-minutes later, they were on runway 14A. Five-minutes after that they were in the air.

Yes, greed is a most powerful motivator, Bol smiled to himself.

Twelve

Altar of Judgment

November 12th, 2012

1932 hours

Airborne over Europe

Conference Room of *The Meadowlark*

They were airborne over Germany. Just about an hour had passed since they collected the last relic. Everyone was gathered in the conference room of the Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules. Kostakis was pouring over the entire *Nostradamus Manuscript*, taking notes and rereading passages repeatedly, comparing them to one another. Stone was seated at the right hand head of

the table, General Harris on the left. Everyone else sat around the table, including Eagle Eye who had put *The Meadowlark* on autopilot for the time being.

At the head of the table was Professor Amanda Hazelton. Behind her was the image of an enormous, triangular stone structure. The only variation was that, instead of it coming to a point at its top, the summit was flat with an enclosed shrine and three chambers. In the archaeological community it was designated Temple I. But, to the ancient Maya it was the Temple of Ah Cacao, the Temple of the Great Jaguar.

Amanda arranged her notes in front of her and began, “What you see behind me is the most common image everyone thinks of when they hear the name of the great Mayan structure of Tikal. Although, they would be correct in assuming so, the Temple of the Great Jaguar is part of a massive collection of Mayan structures. Almost the entire core complex of Tikal has been mapped out, excluding the residential area, which has yet to be cleared and covers about twenty-three square miles. Tikal National Park stretches an enormous two-hundred and twenty-two square miles. The actual core site of Tikal, which includes the plazas, temples and complexes, stretches six-point-two square miles and includes around three-thousand buildings, royal, noble, commoners and even slaves. The city was built using limestone from a local quarry, which was then waterproofed by plastering them and used as reservoirs. In fact, the plazas were rendered on its surface and sloped in such a way that any excess rainwater would flow into the reservoirs. Now, seeing as that we’re not sure what we’re looking for exactly, just yet,” Hazelton looked at Professor Kostakis, “I will give a brief, but hopefully concise, description of some of the structures making up the complex.”

Amanda stepped back from the projection screen behind her, clicked her laptop mouse, “This is a map of the core site of Tikal.” On the screen appeared a map of the entire city’s plan, an equilateral triangle, squeezed on both its upper right and left sides slightly and tilted faintly to the right with a exterior line stretching diagonally from the lower right corner. Each structure was labeled, as was each causeway leading around the site.

“As you can see the city is linked by four major causeways- or *sacbeob* in Mayan, meaning white ways, raised paved roads- each one named after archaeologists who first worked on the site.” The screen then switched to a close up of the right side of the city plan. “The lone structure at the southeast end of Mendez Causeway is Temple 6, also known as the Temple of Inscriptions. If we follow that road northwest, we can see two structures on either side, Group G

and Group F, before we come to the Temple I complex, the Great Jaguar Temple, the Great Plaza, and, behind it, Temple II. A central causeway, Maler Causeway, leads us north, passing the North Acropolis to our west and, a little further along Complexes O, R and Q. If we continue north, Maler Causeway leads to the Group H and Complex P. We have now reached the farthest north the site of Tikal has ever been mapped and excavated.”

Amanda tapped the laptop’s mouse and the image dissolved from the eastern side to the western, “Following Maudslay Causeway southwest we pass Complex M, then for about half-mile we see nothing in the way of temples, complexes or groups until we hit Temple IV at the southwest corner. Then, as you can see, if we turn back, to the east, along Tozzer Causeway, things get crowded.”

Another tap of the mouse and the lower portion of the triangular city plan was magnified. “South of the causeway you have, in the foreground, Complex N, Bat Palace and Temple III. While, behind these structures, is the twenty-two-thousand square foot South Acropolis which consists of Temple V, Plaza of the Seven Temples and the Lost World Complex.” Amanda looked up at the faces of the people she had met only eight days ago.

Eight days of running from continent to continent, country to country. Trying desperately to stay alive while racing against an invisible clock and being chased by maniacal mercenaries hell-bent on stopping them. An insane, disgruntled General and former Director of Homeland Security coupled with an entire unit of Navy SEALs led by a vengeful Admiral providing know how, weapons and unlimited resources. In actuality, Professor Amanda Hazelton was amazed they were all still alive; well, not all. Her gaze fell upon First Lieutenant Vivian Dario, who was engaged in a discussion with Major Stone, but whose thoughts were more than likely with the man she had lost on the mission’s first day. Amanda did not know how she was coping. If it were she, she would have probably quit by now. But this woman had nerves of steel, and was very quickly becoming Amanda’s personal hero.

She was about to ask if anyone had any questions, which she guessed they would, but at that moment, Kostakis slammed down his pencil so hard it broke in two, a smile growing upon his face.

“Would you like to share with the rest of the class, Stavros?” General Harris asked his friend.

“Hmm, yes, uh, well,” Kostakis cleared his throat, “the thing is, Nostradamus does not say exactly what needs to be done, once we reach Tikal, nor does he mention where this mysterious Altar of Judgment could be located.” He was still smiling.

“And, yet, you’re still smiling,” Stone raised his brows.

“You see,” Kostakis paused, thinking how he could explain his findings, “Wait, first, let me read to you what Nostradamus wrote.” The shuffling and arranging of papers followed, then, “Here we go: *The Judgment of the Lord begins in the beginning of the house of worship where an offering of confusion will open communication with the Heavens. Follow the path numerically where the faithful worship until thee gaze upon the inscribed. The first six treasures sought will be the first six sacrificed. Where and when shall become apparent. Once the last of the first six is tendered, the light of the sun and the strength of the rod will find purchase among the Devil’s provider and the seven holy houses. Together, these eight holy relics will allow the seeker of the Altar of Judgment to place the sacred feline among its Brothers of the Lost World to open the gates of Cum Hau. Here, within his domain, you will find the convergence of east and west. Sacrifice the last relic of the Holy Emperor at the altar to gain access to a most secret document that will serve, sufficiently, to prevent an apocalyptic wasteland.*”

Kostakis looked up from his notes, at Amanda. “At first I was lost. I did not understand the meanings behind much of the beginning of this passage. But, after you showed us the plan of the site, everything fell into place.” He rustled a few more pages and stood up, walking toward the head of the conference table, “May I?” Amanda relinquished the floor to Kostakis.

Toggling back on the slideshow until he came to the map showing the entire site core, Kostakis cleared his throat. “It’s quite simple really, if you take each temple- numbered one through six- they correspond to each of the first six relics. The fact that Nostradamus mentions the offering of confusion in a numerical pattern clearly suggests, in my opinion, that we must use the first six relics we found in the order in which we found them- the Khaos Blade, the Aegis of Zeus, the Orb of Zoroaster, the Lion Headed Scimitar, the Royal Crown of Ramesses, and the Stone Mace of Pachacuti- and offer them at each subsequent temple, the last of which Nostradamus mentions when he wrote *gaze upon the inscribed*. Or, as Professor Hazelton called it, Temple VI, the Temple of Inscriptions.”

Kostakis tapped the mouse button until the image showed the southern acropolis. “Once the six relics have been sufficiently offered the next two relics- those belonging to Vishnu- must

be brought and placed, first here,” Kostakis pointed at the Bat Palace. “Nostradamus describes it as *finding purchase among the Devil’s provider*. Now as I am sure Professor Hazelton will confirm, the Maya refer to the bat as the Devil’s provider.”

Amanda nodded, “The bat was thought to leave the underworld, collecting blood from animals, and bringing it back for the Devil to feast upon.”

“Precisely,” Kostakis bobbed his head curtly, “and the seven holy houses is an obvious reference to the Plaza of the Seven Temples. After we relinquish these relics, the eight holy relics Nostradamus wrote about, we must use the Jade Tiger of Yu, placing somewhere within the Lost World Complex, alongside other felines, presumably among the Mayan jaguars. At this point we would access some kind of path to the underworld, ruled by the god Cum Hau, where we will find the Altar of Judgment and offer the last remaining relic, the Scepter of Constantine.”

“What about the part about a secret document and preventing an apocalyptic wasteland?” Stone asked.

“It must refer to the next series of relics and the lost lands which Nostradamus hinted at earlier,” Kostakis answered, then added, “what he could be alluding to is yet to be seen.”

The entire table was silent. Oddly enough, by now they were used to fantastical quests and mysterious phrases. Listening to Professor Kostakis explain, although foreign and utterly unbelievable a week ago, was now just business as usual. The silence was broken by, of all people, Eagle Eye, who rose from his seat.

“Bedtime, boys and girls,” he strode toward the cockpit, “Daddy’s got a plane to fly.”

November 13th, 2012

1230 hours

Mundo Maya International Airport

Santa Elena, Guatemala

Mundo Maya International Airport is the main hub for those wishing to visit the Mayan site of Tikal. Located in the suburb of Santa Elena in the city of Flores, Mundo International does not usually accommodate to military requests, but once more, a few well-placed phone calls by General Anderson Harris, and *The Meadowlark* was sitting quietly behind one of the newly renovated airport hangars. Unlike the previous missions, everyone would be needed to reach

their goal. They had ten relics and ten structures. Before landing, Stone discussed how they would go about accomplishing this task. There were twelve of them total, but Remo and Johnny Boy would be needed sentries. Unlike the last two missions, Stone was almost certain they would encounter some resistance and their expertise as snipers around the perimeters would be necessary.

That left ten team members to cover the ten relics and structures. D-Boy would have to place the Khaos Blade somewhere on the Temple of the Great Jaguar. Nicky Rich was designated Temple II, called Temple of the Masks, and the Aegis of Zeus. Marley got assigned the third temple, Temple of the Jaguar Priest, and the Orb of Zoroaster while Rebel offered to take the Lion Headed Scimitar to the tallest of the Tikal temples, Temple IV. That left Tricky to bring the Royal Crown of Ramesses to Temple V and Lovey to bring the Stone Mace of Pachacuti to the Temple of Inscriptions, the sixth and last of the temple offerings.

The three professors and Major Stone would handle the rest, while the six temple volunteers would then take up arms and cover the remaining team members. Kostakis suggested he take the Chakra of Vishnu to the Plaza of the Seven Temples; the climb was not as steep, less strenuous, and offered him plenty of coverage in case all hell broke loose. But, not before Radcliffe took Vishnu's Kaumodaki to the Bat Palace. Stone and Hazelton would run the last leg with Stone finding the niche for the Jade Tiger of Yu at the Lost World Complex and Hazelton placing the Scepter of Constantine within the Altar of Judgment. To no one's surprise, Stone would accompany Professor Hazelton into the "underworld" of Cum Hau, just in case, any unforeseen problem should occur.

Everyone had their assignments and were studying close-up of each location so they would have some idea what they were looking for. The least amount of time spent searching, the quicker they could get out of there without any significant damage to either their persons, or the monuments themselves. With everyone piled into the Hummer, and their destination located on the GPS, Lovey pulled out of the airport and drove north toward El Cruce, twenty miles from here, before continuing north onto Tikal for another forty miles.

It was now almost one in the afternoon. The tourists would still be sightseeing around the ancient Mayan site, which worked out perfectly since the drive from the airport to the actual site of Tikal would take around eight hours, getting them at the site by nine in the evening. By then,

the site should be free of tourists, but, from what Stone heard, there were always some stragglers. Hopefully, they would take the hint once the gunfire erupted.

1310 hours

Ancient site of Tikal

Petén Basin, Northern Guatemala

“We are in position, Faithful One,” Captain Matata Bol spoke into the sat phone he was provided.

“Excellent,” the voice of General Zachariah Combs answered. “Has Admiral Alberts arrived with his SEALs yet?” The general had not heard from the Admiral since the day before last when he told him he was on his way to Sri Lanka. He assumed the worst, but the Admiral surprised him in the past.

“None, Faithful One,” Bol’s answer came back. “It is just me, ten of my men, and the twenty-five men you sent. We are all secure around the site, just waiting on Major Stone and his team.”

“Good. Remember, wait until the document is secure before you strike,” then he added, “According to my sources, Stone and his men left Mundo Airport about twenty-minutes ago so they should not be there until late this evening.” Combs paused, “I trust you are well-prepared for night combat?”

“We are warriors,” Bol answered, “Night or day.”

Combs ended the call. If Captain Matata Bol could see him, he would see a wide grin of satisfaction growing across the overconfident general’s face.

2057 hours

Petén Basin, Northern Guatemala

Tikal National Park

Lovey parked the Hummer in a designated parking lot. Surprisingly, the surrounding area was crowded with three on-site hotels, two museums and a few restaurants. Just beyond the parking lot, was the trail leading to the ancient site, a ten to fifteen minute walk through the dense forest.

If an ambush were waiting for them, this would be an ideal time for it. Coming out of the forest, they would be sitting ducks.

Fortunately, for them, there was no conflict as they emerged onto the largest excavated site in on the North American continent. In the span of thirteen years, the University of Pennsylvania uncovered hundreds of thousands of artifacts and ruins in and around the core site. And still, the surface of the outlying residential area has yet to be scratched.

The glow of the moon, high in the starry sky, shined eerily through some dense fog, misting just around the summits of the higher temples and structures. Hazelton had warned them about the potential problem of fog, so it was not unexpected, just a minor inconvenience considering they did not know where, among the ruins, the relics need be placed.

Knowing their roles each team member made their way around the ancient Mayan ruins to accomplish their tasks. They entered from the eastern side, beside the Group F complex. Lovey had the longest walk, first, down the Maler Causeway then taking the long hike down the Mendez Causeway, to the Temple of Inscriptions with Pachacuti's Stone Mace, while Rebel carried the Lion Headed Scimitar of Darius the Great straight across the site to Temple IV, with the second longest trek. The rest of the team spread out among the ruins.

D-Boy and Nicky Rich jogged to the area between the Central and North Acropolis where Temples I and II were situated. Marley followed Professor Radcliffe just past the North Acropolis to Bat Palace and Temple III, adjacent to Tozzer Causeway. The remaining team- Kostakis, Tricky, Stone and Hazelton- followed the road, past Marley and Radcliffe, which led them to the remaining locations behind them. Hazelton, still unsure of where this mysterious Altar of Judgment would be, stayed close behind Stone who headed for the Lost World Complex, while Tricky branched off to the east, toward Temple V, and Kostakis to the Plaza of the Seven Temples, positioned between the two.

"Everyone set," Stone spoke into the wireless headset each of them wore. Yeses all around answered him. "Okay, D-Boy, you're on the clock."

2117 hours

Temple of the Great Jaguar

The Great Plaza

Tikal, Guatemala

Temple of the Great Jaguar gets its name from a lintel, which depicts a jaguar sitting upon a throne and rises one-hundred and fifty-four feet high above the jungle canopy, watching over the Great Plaza of the North Acropolis. Commissioned by the great Mayan ruler Jasaw Chan K'awiil the First in 730CE, it is made from limestone and looks like a stepped pyramid, a style typical at Petén at that time. At the great temple's top is a funerary shrine with ornately carved wooden lintels, topped with a high roof comb sculpture of the king who commissioned it. Under the roof comb is a vaulted opening, which helps to distribute the weight easily.

Currently, D-Boy was climbing one of the steep staircases, which rising one of the nine levels, decorated with grooved moldings on each side. To be honest, he had no clue as to where he was going. There was obviously no place to insert, which is what he had assumed he would need to do, the sword- sort of a reverse of the old sword in the stone Excalibur myth- so he kept climbing. Once he reached the summit, he ducked into the space under the roof comb. To his surprise, the shrine contained a single doorway. With nowhere else to go, he entered the doorway.

The space there was narrow and dark. The first room he entered had a soaring corbel-vaulted ceiling braced with wooden beams of sapodilla, an indigenous, hard, red-brown wood. It was empty. As was the second room and the third. Not even wall paintings or sculptures remained. Then, D-Boy noticed something, obscured at first because of the darkness. A glowstick later revealed, hiding in the corner of the third room, roped off to the public, was a stone staircase. Taking a deep breath, Johnny Boy scuttled his way down the winding staircase, getting in his cardio for the week. Some ten-minutes later, he entered the enormous vaulted chamber of King K'awiil; or so he would assume.

If he had to guess, he would say he was well below the surface of the Great Plaza. He took a moment to catch his breath while admiring the sight before him. One time the chamber must have been filled with the richest cache in all of Tikal. Woven mats, jaguar skins, jade, decorated ceramics from around the Yucatan peninsula, spondylus shells, pearls, mirrors, all were once crowded into the now empty chamber of the king. Now, the only thing that remained was the masonry bench the king's body laid upon and a jade mosaic vessel with a sculpture of the king upon it.

D-Boy was at a loss, afraid that this mission was over before it began. He stood there, glowstick held high over his head, looking for anything that might lead him to what he was...

Suddenly, there it was. Sculpted into the wall behind the masonry bench. A carving of the great Mayan ruler himself, Jasaw Chan K'awiil. His proud, square-jawed face staring out from some otherworldly dimension. A stone representation of the royal plumed crown and ornate earrings adorned his regal head. His strong torso was covered with a typical royal cloak coming to below his knees, and his feet were bare. But, D-Boy's eyes focused on the area around his waist.

There, wrapped around the king's waistline was a thick line, exactly where a belt would be. And, on that belt-like stone carving, was a narrow slit- the kind that would easily fit the blade of a sword.

Quickly, he slung the backpack off his shoulder, flung it open, pulling out the Khaos Blade, sticking halfway out the top of his backpack and was bundled in a thick piece of cloth. Without thinking, he slid the blade into the narrow slit until, to his amazement, it locked into place, somehow.

"One and done," D-Boy spoke into his headset, looking at his watch, 2137 hours, as he climbed back up the stairs, looking for an easier way out.

2120 hours

Temple of the Masks

The Great Plaza

Tikal Guatemala

Standing at one-hundred and twenty-five feet high, the Temple of the Masks was nearly thirty-feet smaller than the massive structure of Temple I, directly east of it. More than likely built by Jasaw Chan K'awiil for his wife, Lady Kalajuun Une' Mo' somewhere around the same time he built his Great Jaguar Temple, although the completion of it was overseen by their son, Yik'in Chan K'awiil. The temple is so-called because of several bizarre masks adorning the façade of the temple. Other than that oddity, it followed the same basic plan of Temple I, except that the upper platform leads to a second smaller structure, the summit shrine, rather than leading all the way up to the shrine itself.

Nicky Rich watched as D-Boy ran up the side of the pyramidal structure on the far side of the Great Plaza as he still ran toward his perch. Once there, it took him three and half minutes to ascend the 8th century temple. Now all he could do was wait for the signal while he scouted around for some clue as to what to look for.

Fourteen-minutes later Nicky Rich heard over his headset, “One and done.” That was all he needed as he scoured the summit, looking desperately for something to catch his eye. *Damn! Thought I had more time!* He thought, scrutinizing the ancient graffiti on the interior walls of the shrine. Graffiti showing a prisoner laying on a platform, tied between two poles and being stabbed with what looked to be a spear. It was obviously an image of some sacrifice being performed. Nothing to suggest an ancient Greek shield belonging to Zeus could be used anywhere. At a loss, Nicky Rich turned his attention to the roof comb above the shrine.

Climbing quickly up into the roof comb of Temple II, Nicky Rich was shocked to find several sealed chambers. The roof comb itself was abundantly ornamented with various sculptures, important in Mayan lore, as well as the sculpture of a face with the traditional ear spools many Maya are depicted wearing. Nicky Rich shook his head discouragingly. He jumped back down to the shrine platform, landing directly in front of one of the many frightening stone masks.

However, something was different about this one. Unlike the others, this mask with the angry, bulbous eyes and an open mouth bearing sharp teeth, seemed to be resting on a squat figure carved into the outer wall of the shrine. Like so many images of Mayan culture, this figure wore a traditional breechcloth and nothing else. In the monster’s right hand he held a long spear. His left hand was empty, save for two thick slots where he could hold something.

Nicky Rich scoffed, unslinging the Aegis of Zeus from around his back. He removed the leather belt he threaded through the two grips on the shield’s underside and, fitted the grips into the slotted wall. Not surprisingly, it lodged securely into where the stone monster would have held his shield.

“Two down,” Nicky Rich affirmed, taking up a defensive position inside the summit shrine. His *Komandirskie* Vostok watch read 2150 hours.

2150 hours

Temple of the Jaguar Priest

West of the Great Plaza

Tikal, Guatemala

Marley was more than halfway up the stairs of this one-hundred and seventy-nine foot behemoth of a monument when Nicky Rich's signal came through his headset. "Shit," he huffed, "I'm getting too old for this!"

"You know we can hear you, right Mar?" Stone commented.

"Let's see your old ass climb these stairs, then we can talk, Major," Marley said, finally reaching the summit of the limestone structure.

After briefly catching his breath, Marley went inside the vaulted shrine beneath the roof comb. Right away, he could see this was going to be a problem. It was obvious that this temple was not excavated. Dust and dirt covered the floors. Cobwebs hung comfortably from the ceiling. It was dark, musty and did not look promising.

From what he read about the temple, it belonged to the last great ruler of the Tikal dynasty, Chi'taam. He also remembered that his tomb has not yet been found and, from the looks of his surroundings, Marley was not going to be the one to do so. Still, he cracked a glowstick and searched the shrine, which consisted of several rooms.

The first three rooms consisted of walls decorated with sculptures of Chi'taam and his royal court. The other walls were painted with ritualistic sacrifices, victims laying helpless on a stone slab, their hands and feet bound while a priest, draped in a jaguar skins held a knife high above his head. In the last room, Marley examined another set of sculptures, this one of the well-known Mayan ball-court game in which participants were known to be sacrificed- and those were the winners! He shook his head at the barbaric display. Bouncing a ball over and through hoops fixated onto the ball-court's walls.

That was when he saw it, or rather did not see it. The sculpted figures were participating in the ballgame; however, there was no ball; only a deep, curved, indentation in the wall where a ball ought to be.

Marley smiled at the cheekiness of whoever devised this version of the hidden-ball-trick. He calmly took out the Orb of Zoroaster from a side pocket on his backpack, carefully unwrapping the glass sphere, and placing it flawlessly into the curved impression. The orb

seemed to be instantly attracted to the wall, forming a bond that, even if he wanted to, Marley would not be able to retrieve it from its niche.

“Three secure,” Marley said, exiting the shrine, sitting calmly on the top step of the temple. Just then, he saw movement along the outlying jungle. “Uh, Remo?”

“*We saw it too,*” Remo’s voice came over the headset.

“Saw what?” Stone asked.

“*Several armed men. All along the jungle and tree lines,*” Remo answered calmly.

“How many is several?” Lovey asked as she climbed the steps of Temple VI.

“*I count twelve on my side. Johnny Boy?*” Remo queried his protégé.

“*Fifteen, sir,*” came the response.

“*I got five more from where I am,*” Nicky Rich added from his hiding spot high atop Temple II.

“Great. Stand down until our mission is complete. Do not fire unless fired upon,” Stone ordered as he tapped a button on the side of his military watch. A homing beacon, General Harris had told him before he left for Tikal. In case they run into any trouble, at his signal, the highest priority would become their safety. An Executive Order, the General had said with a smile. Stone knew what that meant, so he did not let this setback deter him.

Resounding affirmatives countered Stone’s command while they continued with the plan as if nothing was out of the ordinary. *Hopefully*, Stone thought, casually scanning the jungle with his night-vision goggles, *the General could keep his promise before we are killed*. He glanced down at his watch, 2210 hours, “You’re a go, Rebel.”

2210 hours

Temple IV

West of the Great Plaza

Tikal, Guatemala

At two-hundred and twelve feet high, Temple IV towers over the site of Tikal like a limestone sentry protecting its brethren. Commissioned by Yik'in Chan K'awiil when he came to the throne in 734CE, after the death of his father, this amazing structure is unsurpassed in the Mayan world. Like the other temples at Tikal, Temple IV has a set of steep stone steps ascending its center with

a summit shrine and the ever-present wooden lintels over the doorway leading into the shrine and familiar Petén-styled roof comb. The most amazing aspect of this structure is that, until proved otherwise, it is the tallest Pre-Columbian structure ever built.

When Rebel reached the summit shrine of Temple IV, he felt as though he had jogged a marathon. It was not necessarily the height of over two-hundred feet; it was the actual height itself and the vertiginous reaction one felt after climbing that many stairs, let alone sprinting up them. So, it was understandable that Rebel needed a breather once he reached the shrine resting on the summit platform of the stepped pyramid.

Luckily, by the time Marley had finished his task, Rebel had been resting for five-minutes when the calls came in. First about Marley being done, then about them not being alone. After the brief exchange, Stone's order came over and Rebel went to work.

He searched around the two wooden lintels of the doorway leading into the shrine at the pyramid's top. Markings on it were written in the traditional Mayan glyphs but nothing stood out to Rebel as he entered the small, narrow chamber, which consisted of a main chamber and a smaller one off to the left. He could make out faint outlines of what used to be wall paintings, but were now nothing more than ghosts of the artist's renderings.

Feeling a bit lost, and out of his league, Rebel used a lifeline. "Any idea what I'm looking for folks?"

"Temple IV belonged to Yik'in Chan K'awiil, son of King Jasaw Chan K'awiil, creator of the first temple," Hazelton answered.

"Not really much help, Professor," Rebel said, still searching, his glowstick laminating the tiny chamber shrine. "Is there anything I should be looking for that may stand out?"

"Yik'in was loyal to his father," Hazelton spoke in his earpiece, "some of the same aspects of his father's temple are more than likely to be found there. Look for an image of him, a sculpture. Anything depicting the younger K'awiil."

"All I see is faded paintings of what seems to be a royal figure. Headdress, fancy clothes, that sort of thing. No sculptures." Rebel turned inside the small room to peer at a discolored painting of who he could only assume was Yik'in.

"Rebel, D-Boy here," the Kentuckian drawl interrupted. "Look at the image carefully. If I'm right, there should be a belt of some kind around his waist." D-Boy figured like father like son.

“Yeah, except it’s not around his waist, it’s slung diagonally across his chest.”

“Okay, now there should be an opening or a slot or something,” D-Boy suggested. “Long and narrow enough to slide the scimitar into.”

“Son of a bitch!” Rebel exclaimed, obviously finding it. “Got it!”

Rebel took out the scimitar from his rucksack, wrapped in piece of thick cloth so as not to slice off any fingers, and fit it carefully into the slot along the belt of the Mayan ruler. As he edged it in, Rebel could actually feel the curve of the blade slide effortlessly into the perfectly carved slot. The time was exactly 2219 hours.

“Four done,” Rebel said. “Trick you’re turn.”

2219 hours

Temple V

South Acropolis

Tikal, Guatemala

“About damn time,” Tricky responded.

He was waiting outside, at the top of one-hundred and eighty-seven foot high ancient structure. Overlooking the South Acropolis to the west and the Central Acropolis to the north, Temple V is the second tallest structure at Tikal and dates to around 700 CE. Although the actual king who commissioned its building project has not been verified, Carbon-14 analysis of ceramics found at the site suggests it correlates with the reign of Nun Bak Chak in the mid-7th Century.

Tricky found himself inside the weirdest room he had ever seen. At thirty-five inches deep, thirteen feet wide and fourteen feet high, he had no idea where to look first. The depth of the shrine was not even worth searching, so he first walked to his left- nothing but bare stone walls- then to his right- the same. So he went back outside, and looked up at roof comb and shrine.

The roof comb was nothing special, having long since eroded. But the wooden lintels of the shrine still existed, as did its cornice, which was decorated with three masks on its north side- the side Tricky was looking at now. The rain god Chaac stared down at him in some evil promise

of a threatening storm yet to be unleashed. However, it was the frames of the cornice, where human figures filled the voids that grabbed his attention.

Tricky took the Royal Crown of Ramesses from inside his leather jacket, and quickly rock climbed the north side of the shrine, finding purchase where he could. Once he was level with the cornice, barely wide enough for him to stand on and coming face-to-face with the first figure, Tricky tried fitting the crown on its head. If he had not held onto it, it would have fallen fifty-seven meters to the ground below, shattering into pieces, and then they were royally screwed. But, as luck would have it, he did not let go and shimmed his feet across the narrow limestone molding, which was slippery in the humid jungle air. Again, no dice.

The third figure was much like the first two- regal, noble- definitely some important royal figure. *Probably old Nun Bak Chak himself*, he thought to himself. He got comfortable, practically straddling it, and, in doing so, saw a thin groove running around the sculptures head. Easy to miss at first but, in this intimate position, how could he not notice. “Always the last one,” Tricky shook his head while fitting the royal crown of the Egyptian pharaoh on the statue of this Maya king. The crown locked into place, like a magnet to a refrigerator.

“Clear,” he said as he jumped back down onto the summit shrine’s platform, took up a combat position, lying on his stomach, his rifle at the ready. He checked his watch, 2232 hours.

2232 hours

Temple of the Inscriptions

Southeast of the Great Plaza

Tikal, Guatemala

Lovey had been waiting at the top of the Temple of Inscriptions, glowstick at her side, for nearly an hour for Tricky’s clear sign. Plenty of time to explore the fascination with this unique structure. Known mainly for its enormous forty-foot roof comb, Temple VI gets its name from the abundance of inscribed Mayan hieroglyphs recording major events surrounding Tikal’s rich history. Not to mention acting as one of the last pieces of propaganda its ruler, Yik’in Chan K’awiil, left his adoring public. However, had it not been for these hundreds of inscriptions, archaeologists would not have learned about the beginnings of Tikal and the subsequent history that allowed it to become the most recognizable of all Mayan cities.

At first, Lovey was not sure she was going to find where to place the Stone Mace of Pachacuti. She looked at the pyramid's base, around the stele and sacrificial altar. Then she carefully climbed the steps, searching each and every one for some clue as to where she could look. Even when she reached the summit shrine and its three wood lintel doorways leading into it, she was optimistic about her chances. Now they were dwindling by the second.

The only place left to look was on the back and side of the roof comb, not an easy task for a five-foot, eight-incher when facing a forty-foot wall. The only thing she had on her side was that the faint leftover images of one-hundred and eighty, or so, glyphs measured two-feet high by three-feet wide making it slightly easier to figure out where the mace belonged. Each glyph was carved directly into the roof comb's stone, its detailed, plastered stucco and red paint long gone. But, enough of the glyphs remained for her to see the one thing she needed to see.

Not too far up on the wall, in fact on her tip-toes she could reach it, was the remains of the glyph of a ruler, hand raised, holding the hair of his enemy in one hand, ready to strike vengeance for some wrongdoing. Except, the weapon that would have done the striking, the weapon which should have been in his raised hand, was not. Instead, there was the chipped broken carving of his hand and a hole. And, by the look of it, it went deep into the stone. Deep enough for...

Lovey inserted the bottom shaft of the Mace of Pachacuti into the hole where one should have been carved. The mace seemed to fit perfectly except it did not seem to lock into place. Until Lovey twisted the shaft counterclockwise, relinquishing the ancient Inca ruler's weapon to a neighboring state.

"Mace secure," Lovey said as she ducked into one of the three doorways, ready to take aim at anyone standing in their way. She pressed the button on the side of her watch, it glowed the time back at her, 2245 hours.

2245 hours

Plaza of the Seven Temples

South Acropolis

Tikal, Guatemala

While everyone went about their business, Professor Stavros Kostakis had been admiring the five-door palace of Pre-Classic Maya for the last hour. He knew from his decades of studies that the palace was actually a cover-up from a previous Mayan structure, a common practice of not only the Maya but of nearly every civilization before and after it. Covered almost entirely by the surrounding jungle, the Plaza of the Seven Temples is the latest of the Tikal structures to be unearthed. Its squat appearance and moss-covered, inclined roof did not look like much from the outside. But on the inside, each temple was arranged in a straight line with a room onto itself.

Kostakis could only imagine the offerings of gold and jewels that once adorned these magnificent shrines. Where once stood intricately carved sculptures and brightly colored wall paintings of their nobles, was now nothing more than black chipped walls with the remnants of what might have been.

In one particular shrine, on one particular wall, a sculpture caught Kostakis' eye of what appeared to be a ceremonial offering to the sun god, Kinich Ahau. The broken arms of the person making the offer, held his arms high, outstretched, as if attempting to reach the god himself.

Kostakis smiled. *The genius of ancient civilizations will never cease to amaze me*, he thought, kneeling down, carefully removing the Solar Disc of Vishnu from his backpack. Not surprisingly, the solar disc was an exact match and fit tightly in place. Embarrassed by the short amount of time it took him to accomplish his task, Kostakis contemplated waiting a few minutes but thought better of it since they had less than- he looked at his watch, 2255 hours- seventy-minutes to open the Altar of Judgment.

He felt guilty, not telling the rest of them about its contents, but, in all actuality, Kostakis was not sure he believed what they would find hidden within the altar. And if it was true, than this adventure had only just begun.

"Professor Radcliffe, you may proceed," Kostakis said into his headset, crouching low inside one of the shrines. The last thing he wanted was to get caught in the crossfire of some military shootout.

2256 hours

Bat Palace

South Acropolis

Tikal, Guatemala

Professor Miles Radcliffe hated bats. Once when he was excavating underground in Thailand, an entire flock of bats flew from out of know where, shrieking and shitting all over he and his crew. Sure, they laughed about it at the time but for some reason, ever since then he cringed when he felt the presence of the vile flying rats. So, he was not surprised in the least when he drew the proverbial straw that would lead him to the Bat Palace.

Originally, a two tiered structure, Bat Palace's second story had since collapsed under environmental pressure, but was recently restored somewhat- scaffolding and ropes hanging in the dry, thick air. Still, Radcliffe could admire the architecture surrounding him. The first floor, a double row of rooms and openings, resembling what we would call windows, gave the palace a less eerie feeling and a more welcoming one.

On the many walls of the inner chambers, he could make out ancient and modern graffiti, remnants of vandals trying to leave their mark. Radcliffe had to admit the high vaulted ceilings gave him a sense of calm as he looked around for a place to put Vishnu's Kaumodaki. With most of the wall paintings gone now, and the inner chambers bare, his pickings were slim. So he turned his attention to the outer walls of the ruin.

Several grotesque bat figures were sculpted along the entire structure, his only thought was that maybe, perhaps, he would find an answer here. Fifteen minutes later, he was still coming up empty.

"Any suggestions would be helpful," Radcliffe said to anybody willing to help.

"Professor," Stone came to his aide, "look for a sculpture that appears to be one with the wall. We found the Kaumodaki in Vishnu's hands, gripping it as he would a real mace, and the statue was carved directly from the bedrock."

Radcliffe, once again, walked around the outer wall looking for anything like Stone described. *Sculpture. Gripping hands*. Had it not been for Stone's help, he would have walked right past the flighty beast a third time. But, there it was. Snarling, open jawed, baring vicious fangs, frozen in mid-shriek, and its claws, its little limestone bat feet, were one on top of the other, as if it were gripping something that would sink into the wall.

He took the golden mace from his pack, and slid it down into the clawed feet, into limestone wall. For a second, Radcliffe thought the whole mace was going to be engulfed by the ancient ruin but it stopped just before the elaborate, bulbous top. The Kaumodaki locked into

place, at precisely fifteen-minutes past eleven at night. Exactly forty-five minutes to place the last relic *and* find the Altar of Judgment.

Nothing like cutting it close, Radcliffe thought, but said, “Okay done here, your turn, Major.”

2316 hours

Lost World Complex

South Acropolis

Tikal, Guatemala

The entire Lost World Complex stretched across an area of nearly fifteen acres, and was made up of no less than thirty-eight structures. It is also the oldest of all the ruins at Tikal and is considered a harmonious link between the Earth and the stars, most notably Venus, the Sun, the equinoxes and solstices. Dominating the complex is the Pyramid of the Lost World, measuring ninety-eight feet high and adorned with various sculptures of masks and a central stairway on all four sides and, unlike the other temple structures at Tikal, the Pyramid of the Lost World did not contain a summit shrine. One unique architectural feature on display at the complex is the use of the talud-tablero style in which a vertical platform intersects the inward-slope of a structure, a common practice among the Pre-Columbian cultures but rarely seen in Mayan architecture.

The eastern complex bares a long terrace with three temples, presumably used as observatories and timekeeping. Inside the temples on the eastern terrace of the complex are six tombs belonging to the lineage of the great Mayan ruler Jaguar Paw, who was forced from power around 378CE due to civil unrest.

As time went by, the function of the astronomical complex became unimportant but its cultural significance helped it remain an integral part of Tikal society. Over time, the complex was most likely used as an administrative compound but, the preservation of this sacred site never let the people of Tikal forget their ancestry.

With so much going on around them and the enormity of this complex, a head start was greatly appreciated by Stone who had already found- with the help of Professor Hazelton- where he needed to place the Jade Tiger of Yu. And, it was a good thing because he would have never

found the wall sculptures of several jaguar figures, obscurely mounted on one of the walls of the last chamber of the eastern terrace.

So, when Professor Radcliffe announced he had completed his task, all Stone had to do was place the green gemstone shaped like a tiger- or in this case a jaguar- into the empty shape on the wall. Which he happily obliged. Once he did this, the ground beneath him shook and from where he stood, he watched an amazing sight unfold.

The bottom portion of the central staircase, on the southern side of the four-sided pyramid, slid inwards revealing nothing but darkness. But, it was obvious what was happening. Each relic brought and offered up as a sacrifice had somehow unlocked this hidden passageway leading into the Lost World Pyramid. Whether or not it would lead up or down, Amanda was about to find out as she walked into the dark void.

2320 hours

The Altar of Judgment

Lost World Pyramid

Tikal, Guatemala

A figure suddenly appeared at Amanda's side- it was Major Stone. He had run all the way from the eastern terrace, hoping the doorway would not close before he could get there, which it did not. In fact, it had stayed opened as they entered. Stone reached in his backpack, pulling out a glowstick and cracking it open. The interior of the Lost World Pyramid came alive with so many fantastical images they could not believe their eyes.

The chemical compound inside the plastic tubing of the glowstick mixed into its familiar iridescent green glow, shining an eerie light onto the many sculptures lining the passageway. If they had just been Mayan rulers, which Hazelton recognized some were, they would have thought nothing of it. Except for the fact that the faces the green light shone on were a virtual who's who of ancient rulers.

Stone and Hazelton walked carefully through the passage, eyeing cautiously the six-foot sculptures of the seven rulers they had become familiar with over the last few days. Both sides of the path were filled with these impressive sculptures. No matter which side they looked on, they were bound to see someone.

On one side stood a stoic statue of Alexander the Great, his cloak flowing regally in stone, holding his Khaos Blade high in the air, shielding his enemies by gripping onto the Aegis of Zeus. Opposite him was a sculpted figure of the Egyptian Pharaoh, Ramesses, as regal and imposing as he had been on the many wall scenes in Egypt. On the Pharaoh's head, the symbol of Lower Egypt, his tall white conical Royal Crown, was united with the symbol of Upper Egypt, the red crown.

Next in line was the great Persian king, Darius the Great. In typical Persian form, he held his head high, wearing the traditional curled beard of that great empire. He too held the relics of his past: the Orb of Zoroaster cupped in his right hand while at his side he wore his Lion Headed Scimitar. Across from the Persian was the Hindu god, Vishnu, his four arms outstretched holding symbols of his power, most notably, his Sudarshana Chakra in his right upper hand and his Kaumodaki mace in his lower left hand.

As they continued the long walk down the red painted corridor with Mayan hieroglyphs and sculpted jaguars all around them, Stone shook his head in disbelief. *Whoever went through all this trouble*, he thought as they passed the great Inca ruler, Pachacuti and his Stone Mace, *was trying to make it known that this journey they were on needed to be taken seriously*. And, what better way than to shock those partaking in the quest, than to stare in disbelief at the curiosities before them.

They had just passed Da Yu and his Jade Tiger, cradled in one sculpted arm, then Constantine, standing tall as ever, gripping his magnificent scepter, holding it regally across his chest. But then, as the endlessness of the passage continued, several other figures stood froze in time by an artist's chisel and hammer.

A tall figure with his hands held above his head, holding a long staff.

A stone chest, decorated with fire and brimstone, opened but empty.

A tall Roman legionnaire leaning on the staff of a long spear, his expression was sullen and somber.

Another figure of a man, except he was wearing what could be described as an explorer's hat and a long cape, leaning on a sword.

A noble Englishman, in full armor, holding a chalice in both hands above his head.

Then a schematic of an ancient Aztec site, models of each temple and structure exactly the way they would have looked during that period. Etched on one temple was mysterious hieroglyphs used by the ancient inhabitants.

A single stone tablet with writing on it, resting on a rock slab, with figures of what looked to be of ancient Mesopotamian origins surrounding it.

The next statue was a hulking figure, a long flowing beard, massive arms brandishing a menacing spear.

The last sculpture rested on a pedestal. It was a stone carving of a thick book, open to its center.

Finally, they reached the end of the long passageway, an arch allowing them access into the next area, which, unlike the previous one, was much smaller and vacant- except for a long wide stone table in its center. The walls were still of the same rough-cut limestone, unadorned with paint or sculptures of any kind. But that was probably not to detract attention for the main attraction of the room: the Altar of Judgment.

Stone lit three more glowsticks, placing them around the altar while Hazelton examined it. The altar appeared to be made of a single piece of limestone with a long thick slab resting on top of two thick legs. In the center of the altar was a sculpted panel with astounding images. She was prepared for just about anything but nothing could have prepared her for what she saw in front of them.

Mayan hieroglyphs ran alongside Egyptian ones. Cuneiform ran alongside ancient Greek. Sanskrit ran alongside ancient Chinese characters. Scandinavian rune stones, Aztec symbols, ancient Celtic markings, nearly every form of ancient writing were represented here. She even pointed out symbols of Christianity, Islam and Judaism carved side by side.

“This is incredible,” she exclaimed, “I don’t understand how, but somehow every major civilization is represented on this altar.”

“Don’t forget, Spanish missionaries made their way here for nearly four-hundred years spreading the word and teachings of Christianity. It would not be surprising if other cultures and civilizations did the same, whether before, during or after.” Stone tried explaining, but even he was finding it hard to believe.

“Whatever the case, we have less than,” Hazelton looked at her watch, eleven-forty-five on the dot, “fifteen-minutes to get this scepter,” she held up Constantine’s relic, “into place.”

They quickly went about looking for some opening on the altar. At first they thought it might belong with the sculpted cross on the panel between the altar's legs. But no matter where they looked, it did not seem to fit. Their only other choice was to try the flat top of the altar itself.

Stone and Hazelton began by sweeping away excess dust and dirt. At first they saw nothing but then, there in the center of the altar, Hazelton saw a small hole, obscured by the grime of hundreds of years of neglect. "Remind me to hire a maid the next time we come here," she said, clearing the remaining dirt from the hidden orifice.

She then took the Scepter of Constantine, inserting it into the hole. It fastened onto something inside the altar as she felt some locking mechanism release whatever was holding it into place. Just then, unexpectedly, the front panel opened, splitting down its center like a double-door swinging open. Stone and Hazelton looked at each other then reluctantly stared into the opening of the altar.

There, resting on a small, stone lectern was a leather bound book, sealed tightly with thick twine. On its cover was the book's title, emblazoned in Latin. Hazelton's knowledge of the dead language was not crisp, but she knew enough to be able to translate the name on its cover: *Nicolaus Copernicus*.

"What the hell?" Hazelton exclaimed. She was about to add something else but was interrupted by gunfire, several explosions and the unmistakable thumping of helicopter blades. The look on her face was of despair and fear as she grabbed the book from its alcove.

Stone grabbed her arm, "Don't worry. This time we came prepared."

Hazelton had no idea what he was talking about as they rushed out the pyramid and into the night, which was suddenly illuminated by the spotlights of four Apache helicopters, in the center of the Tikal complex. She looked at Stone, who wore a smile on his face. Her questioning gaze was answered when the stoic figure of General Anderson Harris climbed from one of the choppers, striding toward them.

"Perfect timing as usual, General," Stone said, looking around the complex.

All around them their enemies were laying either dead or face down with their hands tied. Although, Stone noticed that one man, the tall African captain, Matata Bol, was nowhere to be seen.

His team was gathering around him, Hazelton and the General. They seemed equally stumped, but welcomed the rescue. Once everyone was accounted for Stone spoke, “I hope someone can explain why we risked our lives for a book written by Copernicus.”

General Harris did not answer; instead he offered the floor to Kostakis, “Stavros?”

“I fear our journey has only just begun,” the old Greek Professor said with equal amounts of seriousness and concern.

0342 hours

The Meadowlark

Airborne over Central America

Back on *The Meadowlark*, in its conference room, Professor Kostakis stood at the head of the table, the flat screen behind him showed the 3D image of the Earth rotating on its axis. Three hours had passed since they returned to the military plane, which was now airborne over the Central American jungles on its way home to Omega Headquarters in North Carolina. From the time they boarded the plane until now, Kostakis had locked himself in his cabin only to emerge a few minutes ago requesting everyone’s attendance in the conference room they all now gathered in.

Scribbled notes on scattered papers with diagrams and drawings were on the table in front of the seasoned Greek professor as were the *Nostradamus Manuscript* and the newly acquired journal of Copernicus. With everyone baited in anticipation, Kostakis began: “Without mincing words, according to the writings found in this journal, we have until December 3rd of this year before an event described as the Thermal Threshold will occur. Copernicus’ careful observations, hundreds of years ago, rightly predicts the alignment of the Earth, sun and the galactic equator taking place on December 21st, an event that will throw off the balance of the Earth’s magnetic field. This Thermal Threshold, on the Third of December, will cycle a series of geological and environmental events, resulting in catastrophic weather patterns and unpredictable landmass shifts, culminating in a dramatic polar shift in only eighteen days.”

Collective sighs of consternation echoed from the assembled team. Oddly enough, no one panicked, probably because of the calmness with which Kostakis delivered his news, allowing him to continue.

“The good news is this can all be prevented if we follow the illustrations in this journal. Technically, I would not even call it a journal. Copernicus wrote *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* in the fifteen-hundreds- a six-book volume of his observations of the planets, moons, stars, sun and other astronomical objects, causing quite a stir in the scientific community. For centuries, following this publication, rumors have circulated of a lost seventh book. One that was, more than likely, inspired by Copernicus’ correspondence with a French apothecary,” Kostakis paused dramatically, “Michel Nostradamus. During their lives, it was believed that the two wrote several letters to one another describing their views on society, religion and everything in between. In one of these letters, Nostradamus writes about ten ancient relics belonging to great rulers of the past and how they must be found by a specific date.”

“Sounds familiar,” tricky interjected.

“Funny you should say that,” Kostakis smiled. “Copernicus basically wrote the same thing, telling Nostradamus that the dates he suggested correlate with this Thermal Threshold event Copernicus calculated by observing the skies. Not only that but some side research was done by the Italian astronomer- at the recommendation of Nostradamus- revealed some startling findings surrounding lost relics, mysterious iron-nickel crystals, and ancient lands, thought to be long lost or, in some cases, non-existent.”

Kostakis held up the journal, “All of which can be found in this; in detailed, chronological order. Unlike the *Nostradamus Manuscript*, Copernicus’ journal is very specific about where to find these relics, as well as how long we have to find them. Once we have the relics they must be brought to a specific lost land where we will find the crystals that need to be placed at specific locations, regulating the Earth’s core temperature.”

“How long do we have before we need to find the first relic?” General Harris asked, exasperated at the notion they would need to continue this tedious task any longer.

“The first relic, Magellan’s Sword, can be found in the Philippines but must then be brought to the City of the Caesars, thought to be located somewhere in Patagonia, South America, where the first crystal must be found by twelve-minutes past ten on November 16th of this year.”

“That gives us a little more than three days to gather as much information about this quest that we can,” Stone chimed in. “Plenty of time to resupply, refuel and get to the South Pacific.”

“Always wanted to go to the South Pacific,” Remo commented.

“At least we don’t have to worry about some psychotic Navy SEAL and hired mercenaries trying to kill us every other day,” Johnny Boy smiled.

“Nah, just thousand year old, rusty, unpredictable booby-traps,” D-Boy added.

Light laughter filled the conference room as Stone and his team retired to their cabins for some much needed rest before they began the next leg of their journey.

Epilogue

Iraq

November 15th, 2012

1002 hours

Abandoned Military Base

Somewhere in Iraq

It was only ten o’clock in the morning in Iraq and already the sun beat down on the sandy, rocky terrain relentlessly as a patrol of well-trained soldiers walked the perimeter of the obscure, abandoned military base, watching for any suspicious movements along the mountains surrounding them. The base followed the standard layout for US military bases, barracks and mess hall in the western quadrant; the officer’s quarters and command center dominating the eastern border. At the far south end of the base were two military hangers where two B-52 bombers and two Apache attack helicopters could fit comfortably.

This base, however, had not been used by allied forces for well over ten years. It was the reason he chose it as headquarters for AMMO. He knew no one in the government would bother them way out here in the middle of this hellhole.

General Zachariah Combs stood in his office, located inside the eastern hanger. He was staring at a large map of the world, attached to a corkboard on the wall behind his desk. All over the map were pushpins and notes taped to various locations on nearly every continent. His hands were clasped behind his back as he studied the map intently. A hard rap on the door broke the silence looming inside the modest room.

“Come,” Combs answered without turning.

A Private First-Class entered the office holding a small rectangular, bubble-cushioned envelope, “Message for you, Sir.”

Combs turned, holding out his hand. The private placed the envelope in the general’s hand, clacked his heels, then left.

The envelope was light with something loose inside it and was addressed to him personally. How it found him irritated him to no end. As far as he knew, no one in the government knew he was here; even with all the advancements in satellite technology, he was confident the jamming systems did their jobs, hiding them from the outside world. Apparently not.

General Zachariah Combs tore open the top of the envelope, dumping its contents into his hand. Staring back at him was a small piece of metal, a pin on one side, a name on the other. Combs read the name on the nametag, his blood boiling. He would need a second in command now that Admiral Alberts was dead.

Combs let the nametag fall from his hand, dropping it onto the desk, and reaching for a sat-phone with an internal jamming chip securing the line. In one swift motion, he dialed a number from memory.

“*Da*,” the baritone voice answered in Russian.

“We have a situation,” Combs sat down in his chair, moving some files and papers around his desk, looking for one particular file.

“Your phone call told me as much,” the smugness oozed through the phone. Any other man would have been shot in the head for such insubordination, but General Zachariah Combs needed the man for the time being.

He found the file he was looking for, the photo of Major Donovan Stone staring back at him. Combs was done playing games. This impudent Sector brat has lived long enough. Closing the file, Combs spoke into the phone, “Do you remember what we agreed upon?”

“Vividly,” the Russian answered.

“Make it happen,” Combs paused briefly, “It’s time we put a bounty on Major Stone’s head.”

This is the end of *The Nostradamus Revelation*. The remainder of the adventure will be concluded in its sequel: *The Copernicus Connection*

Author’s Note

(*spoiler alert!)

As with most novels of fiction, the author uses liberties regarding how to mesh fact with fiction. This work is no different. Some of the sites where Major Donovan Stone and his Omega operatives find the first ten relics are, in fact, actual locations that can be admired perhaps by all, in person someday. The same is true about the relics they are after, some are mentioned in ancient documents and texts, while others are strictly the figment of this author’s imagination. I must also add that any similarities to any of the technological advantages or military innovations is purely coincidental and must not be taken literally. After all, this is a work of fiction and it should be viewed as such. That being said, I will try to separate the aforementioned facts from fiction.

Michel de Nostradamus lived in 14th Century France. He was an apothecary who made bold and mysterious predictions becoming world famous for his prognostication. Whether you believe what he wrote in his Almanacs is open to discussion but, I can say with all confidence, that the *lost* Manuscript referred to in this book is fictitious as is (to my knowledge) the relationship between he and Copernicus. Also, the brethren referred to in the prologue, The Order of the Servants of Secrets, is not an ancient society sworn to protect historical secrets and the Philosopher's Library where all these supposed ancient texts can be found does not exist (at least not that I know of). I will now address the facts and fictions behind the Ten Ancient Relics belonging to seven rulers of the ancient world.

Neither of the first two relics belonging to Alexander the Great is fact. The Khaos Blade is a fictitious sword and never existed anywhere or at anytime. The Aegis of Zeus is the shield of the Greek god Zeus, but it has never been linked to Alexander the Great nor is it anything more than a mythological object. As far as the locations where these two relics were found: Siwa Oasis is a real place in the western deserts of Egypt and is home to the fabled Temple of Amun where Alexander proclaimed himself a god and Pharaoh of Egypt (I apologize for any damage I may have caused). The location of Mount Olympus, in Thessaloniki, refers to the highest mountain in Greece. Whether it is the one historians and poets refer to is up to the interpretation of the reader. For continuity purposes, I chose this location. And, as the reader will see, continuity factored in my decision making process.

The Orb of Zoroaster and the Lion Head Scimitar of Darius the Great are both part of the vivid imagination of this author. The locations where they are both found (the ruins of Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam) are actual ancient sites inside the Iranian border. However, the underground tunnel systems linking the two are nonexistent, as are the ancient technological features surrounding the secrets of these locations.

The Royal Crown of Ramesses the Great has never been found, but the Pharaoh's mummy can be found resting peacefully inside the walls of the Cairo Museum in Egypt (it is a wonderful place to visit if you are ever afforded the opportunity). The location of his tomb in the Valley of the Kings, on the west bank of the Nile, across from the modern day city of Luxor, is visited frequently by tourists on a daily basis. As far as any ancient trap systems associated with KV7 and a hidden passage linking it to KV1, the Valley has been extensively excavated by

renowned American Egyptologist, Dr. Kent Weeks and the Theban Mapping Project and, to my knowledge, no such passageway has ever been found.

The Stone Mace of the Ninth Sapa Inca Pachacuti is also not part of the historical record. Although the ancient Inca site of Machu Picchu, which I have suggested the mace could be found under, was, according to some archaeologists, built as a royal estate and retreat for Pachacuti sometime in the 15th Century.

Both of the relics belonging to Vishnu are mentioned in many ancient Hindu texts. They are not, however, part of some subliminal architectural carving found at the temple of Angkor Wat (so please do not bother looking for them if you were ever to visit there). For that matter, there is absolutely no connection with the temple complex at Angkor and the island of Sri Lanka's archaeological site of Sigiriya. The water gardens and magma plug are both part of the site but there is no underground treasure to be found, no underground lake filled with marsh crocodiles, and, as far as I know, there is nothing hidden inside the cisterns resting atop the magma plug palace complex of King Kasyapa.

The Jade Tiger of Yu is also not an actual relic but the man after whom it is named is very much real, as are the Bamboo Annals. In the 6th Century BCE, a mausoleum was built on the mountain where he died, and over the years, many ceremonies have been held there in his honor. However, there are no Black Jade Scepters hidden inside the pool in front of the Yu Mausoleum, nor is there a secret passage leading into the base of Mount Kuaiji and the final resting place of Dà-Yǔ Ling. Then again, his body has ever been found and no one knows where the great ruler's tomb can be found, so who is to say it may not someday be found where this author suggests.

The historical facts surrounding Emperor Constantine have been well researched by many scholars and I have stayed true to just about every factual reference. The emperor's tomb was once located in the Church of the Holy Apostles until the Ottoman Empire seized Constantinople in 1453 and destroyed the church before building the Fatih Mosque on its site. After that, no one knows for sure what happened to Constantine's remains and his fortunes, so it is only a presumption on my part that both are located somewhere under the Fatih Mosque. The ancient underground catacombs and tunnels leading from the hostel several blocks from the Fatih Mosque are fabricated for the continuity of the story. As for his holy relic, The Scepter of Constantine, it does not exist (at least not in the way it is described in this book).

The location of Tikal, in Guatemala, is, as my intelligent readers already know, an actual site protected by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. All of its temples, buildings and complexes have undergone extensive archaeological excavations over the past fifty years, so as an author I needed to be as accurate as I could without harming the integrity of the story. I feel I have accomplished that goal. So, needless to say, everything written about the above ground structures at Tikal are factual. Everything I wrote about referring a mysterious lost Altar of Judgment is untrue (or has yet to be found).

Just one more side note, in the first chapter of this book I mentioned an ancient Norse book called The Prose Edda. The book is real, as is the man who wrote it. As far as what it has to do with our story that will be revealed in the sequel to this book: *The Copernicus Connection*.

Any errors or omissions found in this book rest squarely on the shoulders of this author.

About the Author

Vincent Pauletti grew up in Brooklyn, New York and now resides on Long Island, New York with his beautiful wife and two sons. For the past 17 years, he has worked in the television industry while actively pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Anthropology, with minors in European History and Art History, from Stony Brook University. Vincent enjoys travelling and has been to Greece, Egypt, the Caribbean, and on an archaeology excavation in Thailand. He is an avid reader of all genres, enjoys spending time with his family, and is on a never-ending quest for knowledge. *Advent of Storms*, his latest novel, will be available in all eBook formats, early 2011 through Variance Publishing, and is the first in the fantasy series The Dawning Days. He is currently at work on the follow-up to The Nostradamus Revelation, as well as the second book in the Dawning Days series.