



FERNANDO GAMBOA

# The LAST CRYPT

A NOVEL

#1 BESTSELLER IN SPANISH & RUSSIAN

MORE THAN

200,000 COPIES SOLD



# The Last Crypt

Fernando Gamboa

First Digital Edition: August, 2014  
First Printed Edition: August, 2014  
This Digital Edition: February, 2016

© Fernando Gamboa, 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of the author, including reproductions intended for renting or public lending.

[www.gamboabooks.com](http://www.gamboabooks.com)

Original Title: *La última cripta*

Translated from the Spanish by Christy Cox

Edited by Carmen Grau

ASIN: B00MRD6LRD

# Contenido

[Foreword](#)

[The Storm](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[34](#)

[35](#)

[36](#)

[37](#)

[38](#)

[39](#)

[40](#)

[41](#)

[42](#)

[43](#)

[44](#)

[45](#)

[46](#)

[47](#)

[48](#)

[49](#)

[50](#)

[51](#)

[52](#)

[53](#)

[54](#)

[55](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[If you enjoyed \*The Last Crypt...\* you will love the sequel](#)

[ALSO RECOMMENDED](#)

[AUTHOR'S NOTE](#)

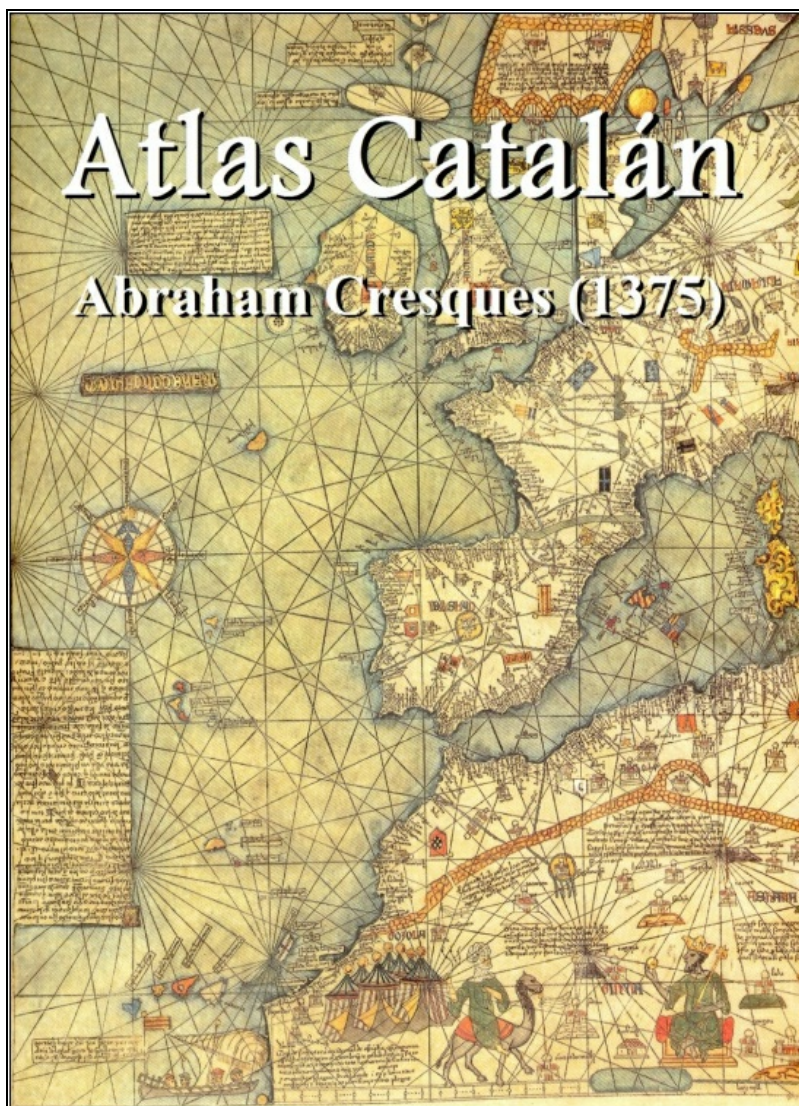
[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

*I believed myself in an adventure, yet it was real life.*

**Joseph Conrad**

# Atlas Catalán

Abraham Cresques (1375)



## Foreword

Before you continue and dive into the story, let me invite you to read some words written by Arturo Pérez-Reverte as a foreword to this book. I suggest you keep them in mind before reading on.

*“So let me fill my pipe. Light your cigars. Get comfortable and hear if you please, what I am about to say. And remember above all, that nothing I tell you can be considered with equanimity from the outside. This means that for certain things it is necessary to make a pact in advance. In adventure novels, the reader must be able to include himself in the plot. To participate in the event and live through the characters.*

*Not good to be too smart or skeptical. If a reader is unable to engage his imagination, to commit and establish a link, no matter how crafty and subtle, he had better not try. One approaches a novel, particularly an adventure one, as Catholics approach Communion or a gambler a poker game: in a state of grace and ready to play according to the rules. Therefore, among the many possible kinds, divisions and subdivisions, readers are basically divided into two groups: those who are in, and those who remain outside.”*

Arturo Pérez-Reverte  
*Captain Ahab’s Doubloon*

And now, yes. Without more to say ... let the adventure begin!



## The Storm

“Trice that mainsail!” bellowed a voice above the raging storm. “Secure those ropes!”

Without replying, several men scrambled fearlessly up the rigging, ignoring the huge waves that swept the deck, ready to reef the canvas before the wind which at this point was blowing at more than sixty knots, damaged or, worse still, completely shattered the ship’s only mast.

Brother Juan Calabona witnessed the scene from the stern castle, much against the Captain’s order. At the mercy of the elements, he was trying not to get dragged off by the next wave, but he would much rather be out on deck than down in the bilge enduring the filthy stench of vomit and urine.

He could hardly believe what he saw. What just hours before had seemed to him a proud ship was now being rocked mercilessly by mountains of dark water striking from all sides, tearing at ropes and shattering wood and bones. A thin rain hurled against those on deck, stinging like needles where the skin was unprotected. Two steps away, which could well have been two leagues, Captain Villeneuve squinted into the walls of water and foam, trying to guess where the rest of the fleet was. He was signalling with his free hand toward an impossible spot, and crying out instructions to the First Mate, who kept nodding without understanding half of what he was being told. Meanwhile, Juan Calabona, soaking wet and holding on to the gangway with all his might, wondered whether it might be the Lord’s will that his journey would end there.

It was eight weeks since they had left La Rochelle under cover of night. Eighteen cogs, between sixty and ninety feet long, had set sail with their valuable cargo cramming the holds, so much so that, it had been necessary to remove the ballast rocks to make room for it. They had needed twenty-two days to reach the Canaries, the “Islands of Fortune”. At one of the most westerly, called La Gomera, they had replenished their stocks of water, fruit and vegetables. They had been sailing for twenty-five, twenty-six or twenty-seven days; who was counting. The water, already putrefied, had been rationed to one single bowl at sunset. The vegetables lasted one week and even the dried meat, maggot ridden, was just a savoury memory. The room for supplies on board had been reduced to its uttermost limit, so that if God did not prevent it by showing them land in the next few days, they would be a

crew of ghosts navigating to the other world.

But those were worries Brother Juan had had hours before.

“Brother Juan!”

He opened his eyes to find the Bosun’s soaking face inches away from his own, yelling.

“Go below deck!” he cried again, raising his voice above the roar of the wind. “It is very dangerous out here!”

The Friar shook his head, at which the Bosun replied with an inaudible curse and, after hesitating briefly, he shrugged his shoulders and turned to face the storm once more.

Juan Calabona then proceeded to sit down on the planks and passing one arm around the gangway light he managed to hold his hands together over his chest, in prayer. Not the right posture, nor the right place but, indeed, the right time to do so.

He noticed then that his precious ring, which he had sacrificed so much to earn, danced on his finger. He had thinned so much that he had to tie his trousers with a cord, reflecting as in a mirror, the emaciated figures of his travelling companions. He became aware that he might lose the symbol which gave meaning to his existence. That was even more frightening than the storm, so he opened a small pouch he carried around his neck and put in the object that identified him as the last hope of The Order, and which, by one of the many inscrutable paths of Divine Providence, had driven him to be on that early November night praying for his life in the midst of a hurricane.

With eyes shut, he strove to withdraw from the whirl that surrounded him and prayed to God for his soul and those of the unfortunate men who were fighting for their lives in that hell of wind and water. He heard, or rather felt in his gut, a frightful splintering sound of death beneath his feet, and knew that the robust cog, designed to withstand the worst gales of the North Sea, had said enough. Deadly wounded, she would never reach her destination.

# 1

I had just reached the surface and still had the regulator in my mouth when I heard Jack yelling at me. He was leaning over the yacht's bow, holding the anchor cable with both hands.

"Ulysses! The anchor has got caught again. Go back down and release it, will you."

"You've got to be kidding me! Again?"

Reluctantly, I put the regulator back in my mouth with my right hand, while with my left I pulled the air device on my life-vest, and slowly sank back into the warm waters.

"*Bloody hell!*" I thought as I went down. "This can't be happening. Five minutes to decompress properly and now I have to go down again and resurface fast because of the damned anchor. Never in my life have I seen one that gets caught so much, every day! I must tell Jack: me or the anchor. There's no room enough for both on this boat."

I looked around until I saw the taut white line that joined the shadow of the *Martini's Law* to the reef, nine yards below. I leaned toward the bottom and propelled myself to the spot where I guessed the end of the cable was, anxious to get the job done.

A moment later I was beside the anchor, over an enormous mass of live coral. Even under the fading light of a tropical early evening, filtered by tons of water, it appeared in all its magnificence. The structures of bright red, yellow, white and purple polyps were all manner of shapes.

Above, below and all around, a myriad small fish of such unique electric blue swirled in a restless cloud without seeming intimidated by as many much bigger fish. There was a solitary huge barracuda, which wandered the reef much as a cowboy would his ranch, watching the cattle grow fat. Curious as they all are, it observed me casually from the side.

I swore and a burst of bubbles rose from my mouthpiece. One of the flukes of the blasted anchor had, strangely enough, pierced a coral piece. I pulled hard, but with the sand and seaweed I was upsetting, I could not see clearly why on earth I was unable to remove something that had gone in by itself.

I paused long enough to check my air supply. After forty-five minutes

of guiding customers and this new plunge, I had about sixty atmospheres. I calculated that, at this depth, there were only three minutes left before I reached the limit level of pressure of my tank. Then I would have to start thinking about going back to the surface.

Impatiently, I pulled the knife I carried on my leg out of its sheath, intending to tear the whole reef apart if necessary. I tried driving it through the coral around the fluke and was surprised at its hardness, as well as its shape, when I looked more closely. It seemed that the fluke had gone through a hole just a couple of inches wide. I had never seen anything like it before, and I was sorry I needed to break it to release the stupid anchor I hated so much. But I had no choice. So I struck at the coral again and again with all the strength I was capable of under water.

“What the...?” I wondered, shocked to find that the knife bounced back with a keen vibration.

Where before there was coral, now appeared a layer of a hard, green substance, showing that what I had hit was coral only on the surface. The anchor had got caught in a rusty iron ring, covered with a rugged layer of living coral.

It took me a few seconds to take in what I was seeing. But there was no mistaking it, I was facing a piece built by man which, judging by the thick covering of coral, had been down there for a long time. “Maybe it will even turn out to be valuable,” I thought.

Then, suddenly, I realized that I was nine yards deep and running out of oxygen, and the anchor was still stuck stubbornly in the reef. I checked my air supply once more and grimaced when I saw the needle of the pressure gauge pointed at the red numerals. I had to act swiftly.

If I went up without releasing the anchor, Jack would be furious, and next he would come down himself, discovering the curious iron ring. Yet, even though I could manage to free it, I would still have to come back another day in order to investigate, and that would force me to explain what I intended to do so that my boss would bring me again.

I looked at the ring, the cable and the anchor, and then at the knife in my right hand. I grinned under my mask.

“Sorry Jack, but I had no choice. I was running out of air,” I explained once I was back on board, handing him the cut off cable and trying to hide my delight. “But don’t worry, we can come back tomorrow and I’ll go down and fetch it. I know exactly where it is.”



“You’d better,” replied Jack, arms akimbo, trying to accept that his one-thousand dollar anchor was not on board with him.

Just after sunrise the next day, indifferent to the cool breeze of the early morning on this Caribbean island north of Honduras, I was waiting anxiously on board the yacht at the dock of Utila. Hidden among my stuff I had a bag with a hammer and a pike, which I put under a towel with the tanks. When a yawning Jack arrived we barely greeted each other with a grunt and left immediately.

Forgetting all safety rules, I dived alone in search of the anchor, while my boss tried to make up for a drunken, sleepless night. I found it easily and began at once to strike at the reef with the spike, dying to discover what the coral was hiding under its rugged surface. It took quite an effort, but once the anchor was free, I could see that the ring was part of a rounded piece of about eight inches in diameter. It continued and widened as I broke the surrounding coral. Gradually it took shape until with one final blow it lay uncovered and free. To my amazement, I was holding something in the shape of a bell of some twelve inches tall by slightly less in width.

As excited as the time I stole a chocolate bar at a supermarket when I was twelve, I put the piece in the cloth bag I had brought with me and swam back to surface inflating my life-vest to compensate for the extra weight. After making sure that Jack was nowhere in sight on the deck, I tied the bag to the lower rung of the stern ladder, just below water, and descended again. This time, I attached the anchor to a retrieving balloon that I filled with air. It shot up to the surface breaking it like a huge red jelly-fish with a fit of the hiccups.

I emerged a moment later at the yacht’s bow, shouting at the top of my voice, aware of my boss’s hangover.

“Come on, Jack! Give me a hand! Hell man, it’s your anchor!”

“Stop shouting, I’m not deaf,” muttered Jack, eyes reddened and half-closed, as he leaned over the gunwale.

I pulled the balloon to the ladder and helped Jack lift it on board, together with the anchor. But I made such a fuss that, between my complaints and his hangover, he would never have seen the black cloth bag tied under his boat even if it had held a piano.

As soon as I was out of the water, he started the engine and made for shore at full speed while I recovered my small treasure and put it away in the

tool compartment.

I was sitting at the bow, with the taste of salt in the air on my face, feeling happy to have smuggled the piece aboard without raising any suspicion. I was satisfied with myself and my little Machiavellian plan: I had been the instigator of the previous night's binge, being fully aware that the robust Australian who had hired me six months before would be in no fit state in the morning.

As we neared the island, I could see through the coconut palms the rusty roofs of the wooden huts, painted in the pastel shades I found so attractive. Many of them exhibited the red flag with the white stripe that credited them as diving centers, as these had become the main economic activity on that small island of Garifuna fishermen. Ten years ago, when I came for the first time, there were only two of these businesses in Utila. There was one street, one bar, one coffee shop, one rudimentary disco and only one automobile that had not many places to go to. Yet, today, once it had become known that the biggest coral reef of the hemisphere surrounded the island, thousands of divers from all over the world came each year to swim in its waters. And yet, although this allowed me to work as a diving instructor in a most paradisiacal spot, deep down inside I yearned for the peace and quiet lost to a questionable prosperity.

I proceeded to unload my equipment the moment we reached the dock. As soon as I was alone, I took the cloth-bag out of its hiding place and, trying to appear relaxed, slung it on my shoulder and walked to the bungalow where I was staying. Once there, I took the piece out and looked at it in the light of day.

The bits of metal I could see had a greenish shade. The rest was a layer of whitish coral stuck to the surface which, although disfiguring the object's silhouette, left no doubt as to it being some kind of bell. Why I had found it, lodged inside a coral reef in the middle of the Caribbean, seemed to me an intriguing enigma.

Eight months might not seem like much time but I never used to stay so long in one place. I had been wandering all over the world, working as a diving instructor most of the time, but taking whatever came my way if there was need. At an age when most men have acquired a home, a car, a wife and a couple of kids, I still had not settled down. I had become fond of traveling in my earliest youth and since then, I had found it impossible to contemplate a

life different to the one I led. I will not deny that, at times, I had doubts and even seriously questioned whether what I was doing had any meaning at all. But then I would go down to the beach, which I made sure was never far, and inhale the smell of the sea, listening to the waves and watching the leaves of the coconut trees reflecting the light of the tropical sun. It was the same scene in different places: the Caribbean, the Red Sea, Zanzibar or Thailand, but I always reached the same conclusion: I would never change this life full of beauty and excitement for all the houses in the world with a garden and a dog.

Utila was beginning to oppress me. For days I had been thinking about a change of scenery. Now that the diving season was coming to an end, it would not hurt Jack if I deprived him of one of his instructors. Besides, the atmosphere at the diving center was growing restless day by day, doubtless for the decline in customers. Therefore, it was not hard to decide to take a holiday and return to Barcelona, where I could see friends, family and as a bonus, find out more about my intriguing discovery.

I packed my scant belongings in a knapsack, carefully wrapping the heavy bell in an old sweater. I would have to pay for extra weight on the plane, apart from the fact that if I were caught at customs carrying an archaeological relic, I could easily spend a long time enjoying the well-known hospitality of the Honduran jails. Yet, I was willing to take the risk.

What I could not even begin to imagine at that moment, as I smuggled the piece along with my diving equipment, was all the adventures and dangers that decision would lead me to.

## 2

A week later, I landed at Barcelona's El Prat Airport. The cab dropped me off in front of my apartment on Paris Street, right in the middle of the Eixample neighborhood. It was a small unassuming penthouse with big windows and a terrace, with two plastic deck chairs yellowed by the sun, one bedroom, a bathroom, a living room and a kitchen which could be described as "cozy". The place seemed designed to scale for my tiny grandmother who had left it to me when she died... As I am over six feet tall I never felt completely at ease there, but what with the times and the small rent I paid, I could well be happy.

I left my bag on the couch and, without turning the lights on, I went to the fridge. As I was about to open the door, I remembered I had no electricity, water, gas, nor of course, food. With a shrug I went to the bedroom and threw myself across the bed, exhausted from jet lag and tourist class seats.

I woke up hours later. Although my inner clock told me it was only two in the afternoon, the sun was already setting over the other terraces and evening would soon arrive. Looking at the red and purple light coming through the window, I was trying to decide whether to take a shower or go to the Chinese restaurant across the street when I remembered again that I had no water. At this point my stomach grumbled angrily and decided for me.

I gulped down some chicken and noodles as I went over what I had to do the following day: visit my mother, to say hello and use her shower, see about getting my services back, and also decide what steps to take next in order to find out the story of that sunken bell. I would have to get up early, in spite of the remaining effects of the hour-zone change, if I wanted to do at least half of the things on the list. So, after a short walk to stretch my legs, I went home to pick up a book about treasure hunters that I had left half-read, took a couple of sleeping pills and went to bed to dream of pirates and sunken steeples.

"Ulysses, dear! When did you arrive? Why didn't you tell me? I would have picked you up at the airport! But, come in, son, come in, don't stand in the door. My goodness, you are tanned!" she cried without pausing to breathe.



She was close to sixty and wore a bright-colored dress. Her hair was chestnut with blond highlights and she wore glasses with thick black frames, like a secretary.

“Hi, Mom. I’m happy to see you,” I managed to say, hugging her closely, as soon as she let me. “How’s everything going here?”

“Oh, pretty much like always. Yet, if I should have died, you wouldn’t have known. It’s been three months without a phone call.”

“I’m sorry, but you know I don’t like to call. Besides, I only deal with women my own age,” I added teasingly. “After all, I do have a reputation to uphold.”

“What a gremlin I have! I always knew I should have adopted that nice Chinese boy.”

“But he might have eaten the dog.”

“Maybe. But at least he would’ve called to say how it was.”

Once the usual interrogation was over and while my mother prepared a hamburger with French fries, I took a long shower. It was always a pleasure to come home after a long stay abroad.

The whole family had moved from Santa Monica, where I was born, to my father’s home city. A good work offer and the wish to return led him to persuade my Californian mother to trade in the Pacific for the Mediterranean. Sunset Boulevard for Las Ramblas and roast chicken for *paella*. She was delighted, but it took me almost a year to get over the move. More or less the time it took me to adapt to a very different way of life. Thank God I spoke the language! I started dating an attractive native girl and discovered the interesting nightlife of a dynamic, creative city which, after the Olympics, had become one of the best places in the world to live. With time, adapting gave way to fondness, and now this city was my home. Even though I had spent the last few years wandering the globe, Picasso, Dalí, García Márquez, George Orwell and Gaudí had lived in this cosmopolitan Mediterranean city. So when I felt homesick I always returned to Barcelona. Although no matter how long I had lived outside the United States I was still Californian from head to toe. (And not only because my passport said so.)

“I see you’re still painting,” I commented, looking at the pictures that covered every wall in the house.

“Oh, yes. And I’m having an exhibition with some friends,” she replied proudly from the kitchen.

“An exhibition? Of what?”

“Don’t be funny. When I sell a painting, I’ll rub the check on your nose.”

“Really, Mom, I’m very happy for you. See? I’m laughing! Ha ha!”

“One more word and you can forget about that hamburger.”

“Okay, okay, I quit. When is the exhibition?”

“We haven’t decided on a date yet, but it’ll probably be in a month or so.”

“Well, good luck to you...” And in case I might lose my lunch, I added, “Not that I think you need it, though.”

After I had told her briefly about my last months in Utila, avoiding any mention of my discovery, and while I ate my lunch, it was my mother’s turn to bring me up to date with all the gossip about her and her friends. This included the juiciest details of those who were still married. Her world was like a secret society in which widows and divorcées tried to push those who, according to them, were still enslaved by men into the happy life of singlehood. After listening for over an hour, more out of love than interest, I gave her the bag with all my dirty clothes and left her with a kiss and a hug. I had a lot of things to do, I said, and would return the next day so she could continue telling me about her friend Lola’s divorce, and to pick up my clean clothes.

I was about to leave when I thought of something and called from the doorway.

“Hey, Mom, by the way, you wouldn’t have Professor Castillo’s phone number around; would you?”

“His number? Don’t know. Don’t think so. Why do you want it?” she answered. Her expression had changed to that of someone who might well have smelled a rotten egg.

“I need to ask him something, so I need to contact him.”

“I can’t think what you could ask that old slob, if it isn’t about dust and cobwebs,” she said with disdain.

“Come on, Mom. It’s important.”

“Okay. I’ll look around, in the garbage, most likely, which is where it should be.” She agreed with a wave of her hand that made it clear she would look for it very reluctantly.

“Thanks, Mom. See you tomorrow.” I closed the door behind me.

Too late, I remembered my mother’s dislike of Professor Castillo. She was convinced that my father’s obsession with archaeological myths in the

last years of his life was a consequence of his friendship with the professor. She blamed him for infecting my father with his madness and monopolizing his attention till the day he died. And the truth is that my father's figure remains in my memory linked to that of Doc, as I used to call him. And that I almost have more memories of my father smiling happily with him than with my mother.

I spent the rest of the day turning my penthouse back into an habitable place. In the evening, still by candlelight, I took the relic out of the tub with ammonia I had left it in when I had arrived the day before. Carefully, with the help of an ice pick and a brush, I began to remove the mass of dead coral covering the metal which, once the ammonia had done its job, came off quite easily.

Methodically, I shelled layer after layer until, way past midnight, I managed to leave it clean but for a green crust I was not sure that I should scrape off. The piece now revealed itself clearly as a bell. It had two stripes around its middle, and between them, there were symbols or faded markings, which at that hour, I found impossible to study any further. Overcome by sleep, I decided to call it a day and go to bed. But as I was ready to blow the candles out, I stood by the table to look at it one more time.

Under the wavering light, the bell shed a ghostly reflection of its past, as if trying desperately to explain a terrible story in a language I could not understand.

By early evening of the following day, I already had electricity and water, and even Professor Castillo's phone number, which my mother had finally given to me. I went down to the phone booth on the corner and dialed his number.

"Hello?" A firm voice answered from the other end.

"Hello? Professor Castillo?"

"Speaking. Who is it?"

"It's Ulysses Vidal."

"Ulysses?" he asked with exaggerated surprise.

"That's right. How are you, Doc?"

"Great, great!" he replied excitedly. "And you? It's been so long since I last heard from you! Are you in Barcelona?"

"Yup, arrived a few days ago. Listen, I'd like to meet you ... if possible."

“Of course, my boy, of course! Why wouldn’t it be possible? Name the day.”

“Is tomorrow too soon?”

“It will have to be in the evening. Want to come by my house?”

“Thanks, but I’d rather you come to mine. There’s something I want to show you.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I’m not sure, exactly. That’s why I’d like you to see it.”

“Still living in your grandma’s place?”

“Still here, for now. Is six okay?”

“I’ll be there,” he confirmed. And after a pause, he added: “It must be very old.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever it is you want to show me must be very old, if you need the opinion of a retired, boring Medieval History teacher.”

My next calls were empty and frustrating attempts to arrange a meeting with some of my old friends. “Too much work at the office,” “My car’s being fixed,” “It’s really bad for me this week,” were some of the lame excuses I was offered. Yet, I could not blame them, the three were married, had too many commitments, and mortgages to pay for the next thirty years. This was one of those times when I felt terribly lonely. Friends I had less and less in common with and a world I felt more estranged from every day, a world I had stopped fitting into a long time ago. It was as if everybody else knew something I did not, something which was essential to know in order to belong.

But, what could I do? If you are not intent on having a family and you do not put too much value on property or recognition, you discover that many attitudes lose their meaning. Perhaps, as a woman once told me, I was stuck in my twenties, still trying to live out dreams, and a voluntary prisoner of the concept *Carpe Diem*.

Perhaps.

But the truth is I would not exchange my life for any other. Although at the moment, I was feeling quite sorry for myself as I wandered over to *El Náufrago*, my favorite bar in the old quarter, to drown my soul in blue gin, and perhaps find another drifter, beautifully curved, to hold onto for the night on that gloomy end of a September evening.

Every time I returned to Barcelona I felt more like an alien in my own



city. The people appeared more concentrated on themselves, the streets felt colder, the children quieter. I always ended up in the Latin and Arab Quarters. Here the people talk loudly in the middle of the street, but they greet each other in passing and look at you in the eye when you pass them on the sidewalk. There I felt completely at ease. More at home at an Algerian café than in a Starbucks (although all I can say in Arabic is “good morning”). I guess this is due to the long seasons spent in faraway countries where people were kind to me, and although I was a foreigner they never made me feel that way.

On my way to the bar I ate a lamb kebab, something I had become addicted to when in Egypt. In the alleys around the cathedral there floated the notes of Paco De Lucía’s *Entre Dos Aguas*. Slowly, I headed to my nocturnal date with lady Blue Bombay Dry Gin.

I woke up late. Hungover and alone, after all. And until I took a cold shower (I still did not have any gas) I could not put my neurons back to work. As I dried myself in front of the mirror I reflected that, in spite of the circles under my eyes, I did not look all that bad. Without being too muscular I was in good shape. Due to all the sun, my complexion was an attractive dark-brown and, although I was far from looking like Brad Pitt, my experience had proven that some women did find me attractive. This on occasions allowed me to enjoy company whenever I felt like navigating on skin; although that had not been the case this time.

After a while, wondering whether to have breakfast or lunch at this hour of the morning or afternoon, depending on how one looked at it, I was standing in front of the kitchen cupboard. I was looking at a jar of peanut butter in one hand, and a can of chili-beans in the other, trying to decide which appealed to me more. In the end it was my sweet tooth that got the better of me, and so I found myself smearing peanut butter on crackers as I leaned over the living-room table, contemplating the green shades of the little bell that stood on it. This small object made everything else in the room appear trivial, mundane and perishable.

Right on time, the intercom buzzed and two minutes later, there was a sharp knock on the door. To be honest, my hand was a little unsteady as I opened it. I had not seen Doc, face to face, in many years, almost since the accident, and although our conversation the day before had been reassuring, I did not know what to expect after ignoring him for so long.

My doubts evaporated as soon as I opened the door.

Facing me was the familiar figure of my father's old friend. Somewhat shorter and with whiter hair than I remembered but otherwise the same: receding chin, open smile and big blue eyes behind tortoise-shell glasses. I was even sure that the powerful muscles he used to sport would be as firm as ever under the inevitable checkered shirt and woolen jacket.

"Ulysses!" he bellowed, crushing me in a bear hug. "I'm so happy to see you again!"

"Me too, Doc," I replied, out of breath. "But if you don't let go, it'll be the last time."

He laughed wholeheartedly, but he did not let go for a few seconds more. Then he stepped back to look at me.

"Either you've grown or I've shrunk," he observed. "You're taller."

"And what have you done to your hair? Did you dye it white to look more respectable? If that's the case, it's not working."

"Look who's talking. God knows what sort of money you must have spent on UV machines to be so tanned. And I bet it's not working with the ladies, either."

We both laughed, happy to meet again and continue with the easy bantering we used to share, as if almost ten years had not passed since we had last seen each other at my father's funeral.

We went into the living-room and for about an hour we caught up on our respective lives. I found out that he had tired of teaching, had opted for an early retirement and now divided his time between going to the gym and writing a most boring (he himself admitted to it) essay on the Mediterranean commercial expansion of the Kingdom of Aragon in the sixteenth century. He did not really believe he would ever publish it, but it kept him busy.

I listed the many places I had been to and what I had done in each one of them. When I got to Utila, I told him briefly about my find.

"Is that it, on the table?" he asked, pointing at the piece which was hidden under a red towel.

I nodded.

"You do like drama! Let's see what we have here." He removed the towel and the next moment, amazement showed on his face.

"What do you think?" I asked after a whole minute had passed without a word from him.

"It's a bell."

“Oh, great. Thank goodness you came. All this time I was thinking it was a clarinet!”

“It’s a bell,” he repeated, ignoring the sarcasm. “A bronze bell.”

“What I wonder is how a bronze bell would end up at the bottom of the Caribbean Sea. Never heard of any steeple right in the middle of a coral reef.”

“No, it is not part of any church. This bell comes from a ship.”

“Since when do ships have bells?”

“Not so many nowadays. But most had one on the bridge.” Stroking the surface with his fingertips, he added: “And this one, by its shape and the layer of rust that covers it, must be very, very old. I’d like to date it, but it would be difficult.”

“Perhaps the inscription could help.”

“Inscription? What inscription?”

“The one on the bell. If you weren’t as blind as a mole, you would’ve seen it, here, between the two stripes.”

“Oh, I see! If you’ll let me take it to the University, I can decipher it in a couple of days,” he cried, clutching my arm with his left hand.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Why not? It’s the best tip to follow if we want to know its origin.”

“It won’t be necessary because I’ve already deciphered it myself.”

“How? You can barely guess what’s written on it.”

“Easy, with paper and pencil,” I replied, amused by his puzzlement. I took a sheet of scratched paper out of my pocket and handed it to him. On it could be clearly read two words in Latin.

“Are you kidding me?” he said almost in a whisper, as he looked at the paper in his hands over and over again.

“No way, Doc. I traced it this morning, although I don’t know what it means. You know my Latin is no good.”

Professor Castillo turned in his chair and stared at me over his glasses for a long time.

“Ulysses, will you swear to me that this isn’t some kind of joke?”

This time it was me who stared at him, wondering at his lack of trust. A drop of sweat ran down his forehead and I thought I could detect a faint tremor on his lips. I had never seen him like that.

“Ulysses, on this bell is written *MILITES TEMPLI*”

“Yeah. So?”

“So, that’s impossible.”

“It might be impossible but there it is.”

And are you sure that you dug it up from the coral, off the coast of Honduras?”

“Of course I’m sure!” I was beginning to be upset by his doubts. “Here’s the proof, isn’t it?” I pointed at it with both hands. “It even has some bits of coral still attached to it!”

“But, don’t you see, Ulysses?”

“No, and I really don’t understand your skepticism. An ancient ship sunk and I found its bell. There are dozens of sunken ships in that area. Maybe with a bit of luck there’s something of more value down there and, if I am the first to find it, maybe I’ll make me some money.”

“No, Ulysses. It’s much more than that. You may have made one of the greatest discoveries in history.”

Now it was my turn to be left speechless.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that *MILITES TEMPLI* was the common name given to the Order of the Poor Soldiers of Christ, better known as the Templars.”

“Okay, so we’re talking about a Templar shipwreck. So?”

“What do you mean, so?” he protested, upset by the fact that his words had so little effect on me. “Don’t you know your history?”

“I know who the Templars were!” I said, slightly offended. “But I can’t see why you find it impossible to believe that they could be the owners of that ship.”

“What is incredible is not *who*, but *when*.

Now I was utterly bewildered. I did not understand, and I raised my brows in mute interrogation.

“Ulysses, the Order of the Temple was created in the year 1118 to protect the routes of the pilgrims to the Sacred Land...”

I raised my hand. “Excuse me, will you come to the point?”

Professor Castillo blinked, slightly unsettled by my interruption. It took him a minute to react.

“To sum up,” he proceeded, “the Order accumulated so much wealth and power that Philip IV of France and Pope Clement V, driven by greed, conspired to take all their belongings from the Templars, under cover of some ridiculous accusations of sacrilege. Consequently, all its members were persecuted and imprisoned, or even murdered in September of *Thir-teen-se-*



ven! In this way, to put a swift, brutal end to the Order of the Temple. So you see, the biggest, most powerful institution of the Middle Ages was destroyed then, forever.”

The professor pronounced these last words like an epitaph, and his brow knitted when he saw that his words did not impress me as much as he must have wanted.

“For God’s sake, Ulysses!” he thundered, raising his hands above his head. “Can’t you see? Don’t you even remember when America was discovered?”

“Of course I know!” I replied angrily. “October Twelve of Fourteen-Ninety ... Jesus! It’s not possible!”

### 3

I had been looking at the menu for a while without paying any attention to it and when the Chinese waiter returned for the second time, I still had no idea of what I wanted to have for dinner.

“Have you decided yet?” he asked, slightly impatient.

“Ummm ... well, yes, I’ll have the chicken with cashew nuts and water to drink,” I said. The menu was still open in my hands but I had seen nothing of the words. “And you, Doc?”

“Me, what?” he replied with surprise, raising his eyes from the menu he had been holding upside down all this time.

“What are you having for dinner?” I pointed at the waiter with my eye brows.

“Oh, that! I’d like salad and water, please.”

It was clear that we both had our minds back at the penthouse across the street. We had agreed to go out to eat in order to relax a little after our unexpected discovery. But we still had a knot in our stomachs and had barely looked at each other since we left my place. In the end I was the one who started on the subject again.

“Suppose that someone had found that bell in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, and decided to put it on their ship?” I ventured.

He discarded the notion with a wave of his hand. “I don’t think so. A ship’s bell was its symbol. They didn’t just use any bell they came across. “And if someone had forged that bell two hundred years later but copying the Templars’ motto?” I insisted.

“And why would they do such a thing? The Templars, as I already told you, were disbanded after a trial where they were accused of sodomy and worshipping the devil. Do you really believe anybody would use their name as a symbol of a ship? It would be as smart as jogging in Central Park made up to look like Bin Laden.”

“Okay, okay! I’m just trying to find weak points in our reasoning. A short while ago it was you who kept saying *It’s impossible! It’s absolutely impossible!* Before we start dancing on the table, I just want to make sure we’re not overlooking anything.”

“I’ve been going over and over it myself, ever since you showed me the

bell, but I don't see how we can be mistaken. The more I think of it, the more sure I am that my analysis is correct."

"Well then, assuming we're right, what shall we do next? Do we tell the Press? Scholars? The Guinness Book of Records?"

"Not a soul, for the moment. We only have a rusty old bell and your word. If we speak now we'll only be labelled as frauds. And even if someone did believe us, they'd try to steal all the glory for themselves. Trust me, even the most honorable researcher would sell his own mother for a discovery like this one."

"Then what do you suggest? That we not tell anybody?"

"That's right. We should search the archives for information about the Templars and their knowledge of navigation, and try to find any proof that might sustain our theory. Then, when we're ready, we can present it to certain academic circles and see how they react."

"Yeah, wonderful. But I've got a better idea. What we need is more proof, right?"

"Right."

"Well, why don't we go to Utila and get it ourselves?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean to get in the water and search. I know the area where I found the bell, and nothing stops us from going there and doing a little poking of our own to see what turns up."

"Are you kidding? An archeological digging of such importance cannot consist of *poking a little*. It must be done after a thorough documentary preparation and under the strictest supervision by the best experts in the world. I'm talking about years of planning and more years of field work."

"Oh, I see," I said, rubbing my chin. "And all this research, if it should take place, would you be directing it? Or watching it on Cable TV on *Deep Sea Detectives*? As you yourself just confessed, competition is fierce in your field. Do you honestly believe we would be allowed to even appear on the credits at the end of the film?"

"Well ... the truth is, it would be difficult to participate in such a big undertaking," he admitted, looking down at a dish of salad we had not even seen arriving. "I imagine that sooner or later they would elbow us out."

"And you think that's fair?"

"Well..." he said without much certainty, "what's really important is the discovery in itself, not who discovered it. Surely, the people who do the

job will be better than I am and better prepared.”

“Are you really serious?”

“No, not really ... Oh, Jesus, I don’t know...” he said doubtfully. “But anyway, we don’t have the means, nor the necessary permits. We couldn’t do anything even if we wanted to.”

“Not us alone. But I know someone who does have the means. And as for the permits in Honduras ... well, there are many ways of getting those.”

“And who’s this someone who can help us?”

“It’s a man called John Hutch. I met him several years ago, when I was looking for a job in Florida. And what’s more interesting is that he owns a company called *Hutch Marine Explorations* that recovers sunken ships.”

“Are you talking about a treasure hunter? You don’t want to involve the University but you’re willing to involve a treasure hunter?”

“Exactly. A treasure hunter with a ship equipped with the latest technology to discover sunken vessels. With a good staff of specialists in recovery and more than ten years of experience. He is, undoubtedly, the best in his field, and we’d save ourselves a good deal of paperwork.”

“And you trust him?”

“Absolutely not! But we’d sign a contract and make sure we took our share of glory. The only drawback — I sighed, staring at the Chinese bread — is that treasure hunters, as you call them, only have one motive, money. And I’m not so sure that fame and prestige would be stimulating enough for Mr. Hutch to join our little adventure. We might have to make something up, convince him that he may find gold and jewels under that reef. I’m sure you can think of something that sounds authentic, and with your resumé and venerable air, I can convince him that it is true.”

The professor smiled under his glasses and settled himself in his chair with evident satisfaction.

“My dear Ulysses, that, fortunately, won’t be necessary.”

“And may I ask why not?” I was surprised at his smug attitude. “People like Mr. Hutch only respond to gold.”

“It won’t be necessary, my friend, because that story already exists.”

“How? What story?”

“The story you want me to make up,” he said with a growing smile, “about gold and jewels buried under the reef, inside a ship belonging to the Order of the Temple. Haven’t you ever heard about the lost treasure of the Templars?”

The night before I had been unable to get him to say anything else. After he left me in suspense about the Templar treasure, he had clammed up and kept the conversation limited to chit-chat. His last words on the subject had been: "Tomorrow. My home. First thing in the morning." So here I was, in front of his house, at nine a.m. after a sleepless night because of him. As a small revenge I had been ringing his doorbell for quite a while.

"Ulysses?" asked a distorted voice.

"It's the pick-up service for retired teachers." I disguised my voice. "We have been informed you have one."

"Come on up."

With a buzz, the heavy latticed door clicked open and with a shove I walked into the downstairs hall. Dark as a cave, like so many old buildings, it had an old concierge desk under the stairs and, way in the background, as if ashamed of its archaic mechanism, the elevator lurked in the shadows, suggesting it would be better to take the stairs.

Even so, I gathered my courage and got in. Guessing at the numbers, as they were practically worn away from use, I pushed what I hoped was the right button. It wasn't. It turned out the elevator only got as far as the fourth floor and I had to walk up to the last level. Here I finally rang the bell beside an old wooden door on which a small plate read: EDUARDO CASTILLO, PROFESSOR OF MEDIEVAL HISTORY. I would have paid to see the owner of that plate appear dressed in an old robe and swearing like a sailor for disturbing him so noisily. But instead, the man who opened the door was looking remarkably cool.

"Boy you look awful!" he said, noticing the circles under my eyes. "Didn't you sleep well?" he asked ironically guessing at the reason why.

"No, it's my everyday makeup."

We went straight to the living room and I realised I had never been in his house before. He had frequently visited my parents' house and even mine, but this was the first time I had set foot in his. The inside of the flat was just as one would imagine the home of a bachelor retired history professor. Old-fashioned furniture, walls that had been last papered when colour TV was invented and the ugliest looking lamp hanging from the ceiling. But most of

all, books. It was literally a house of books. In wall-to-wall shelves and up to the ceiling, in book cases, piled on chairs, on tables and on the floor. Books everywhere. Of every size and type. But the majority were classic hardcovers in leather or cloth with the pages lovingly sewn together and the unmistakable smell of old paper which sometimes said more than the words they contained. Facing me, an elegantly framed map of the world of six-by-ten feet occupied a good part of the wall. This was unexpected in the home of a man who, I believed, had never traveled any more than was strictly necessary.

“Care for anything to drink?” he asked as he invited me to one of his armchairs.

“No, thanks. I already had breakfast.”

“O.K. Then, let’s get working.” He sat down. “I was going to tell you about the legend of the Templar treasure, right? How about we start with a little history?”

“If it can’t be avoided...”

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt.” He rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and clasped his hands together. “Let’s see. As I told you last night, the Order of the Poor Soldiers of Christ was founded in 1118 by a French knight named Hugh de Payens with the honourable intention of protecting Christian pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land from the hordes of bandits that filled the roads to Jerusalem. It was a monastic-military order. That is, monks who, instead of copying manuscripts or tending herb gardens, went about on horseback, in full armor and brandishing swords. A great novelty at the time which lent them the unconditional support of the Church and granted them a prestige that did nothing but grow in the two following centuries.”

“Wait a sec, Professor,” I interrupted. “If they were monks, how come they were allowed to carry weapons and kill with them? Isn’t there something in the Bible regarding *ye shall not kill* and all that?”

“You’re absolutely right. And in fact, the Pope’s support to the Order brought about no small fuss among the theologians of the time who had to somehow justify a religious band that went all over Judea cutting throats. But the Church, highly skilled in these matters, established in the letter *De laudibus novae militiae* that although it was better not to spill human blood, not even that of the infidels, if there should be no other way to defend oneself against them, it would not be a sin to take the sword in the name of Christ. Anyway, what’s most surprising is the renown the Order acquired in the first

ten years of its existence, given that there were only nine men to carry out their highway-police work.”

“Only nine?”

“Well, yes. And furthermore, it seems that they didn’t often go beyond the walls of the city. After swearing their vows of chastity, poverty and obedience before the Christian King of Jerusalem Baldwin II, he granted them the privilege of setting up their general quarters in the explanade of the temple, right over the site of the ruins of the Temple of Solomon, where they remained most of their time. This is why they became popularly known as the Templars. So, as I was saying, during their first years they didn’t do much for the pilgrims. Instead, as rumor had it at the time, they threw themselves into a feverish archeological search of what would have been the cellars of the ancient Jewish temple. There, according to legend, were hidden the most valuable relics of the Israelites, such as: the seven-branched golden candelabrum called the Menorah, Solomon’s Table or the famous Ark of the Covenant.”

“And, did they find them?” I leaned forward in my chair.

“Hmmm. Nobody knows for sure. As I told you, it’s all rumors and legends. But it is quite intriguing that a few years later Hugh de Payens, accompanied by several knights, set out on a secret trip to Paris carrying a mysterious box of great proportions. From that moment on the Order enjoyed what today would be called a “boom” becoming, in a very short time, the most important institution of the Middle Ages. It even surpassed any European state of that time in power and wealth.

“But how could they go from being only nine soldier-monks under a vow of poverty to something as big and powerful as you say? I don’t see it.”

“Well, that’s part of the mystery involving the Templars. In fact there are those who suggest that there is only one place where they could have gotten together all the gold and silver they needed to finance themselves. And this place was no other than America.”

“Then it was true! We have proof!”

“Not so fast, stranger,” he replied. “That is no proof. It might be, and your bell seems to confirm the fact that the Templars were roaming the American coasts, but it’s a big leap to demonstrating that their riches were due to the import of gold and silver from the Americas.” He paused and continued, “Besides, I truly believe they didn’t need it. They made huge amounts of money acting as bankers on an international scale.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. If they set up a bank ... that would explain everything.”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly a bank. But thanks to the donations from the most pious kings and noblemen, they accumulated a pretty good amount of favors and castles all along the Old Continent and so, they introduced the concept of a bill of exchange, payable at any of the posts under their command. That meant if a merchant or a nobleman wished to travel, say from Burgos to Milan, he needn’t carry all his money on him, for the risk of being assaulted on the way. What he did was entrust it to the Templars in exchange for a document, with which, on arrival at his destination, he could retrieve said money. Therefore, between all the donations they received and skillful economic management, they became a sort of multinational with vast resources and great influence. They even made loans to kings and princes which, paradoxically, meant their demise.”

“Elaborate, please,” I urged, more and more interested in the subject.

“It so happened that in 1291, St John of Acre, the last Christian bastion in the Holy Land, fell into the hands of the Saracens. This meant a tremendous blow to the prestige of the Templars as they lost their *raison d’être* as protectors of the Holy Places and of the pilgrims that came to them. In consequence, without this aura of invincible warriors, defendants of Christianity, they also lost the favor and admiration of the clergy and nobility of Europe. Of the Order of the Poor Soldiers of Christ nothing remained but the name and, of course, they had long ago ceased being poor. The enormous gains they accumulated after two centuries of prosperous business provoked the envy and greed of kings like the French Philip IV the Handsome. He was an ambitious, machiavellian, ruined monarch who was probably looking greedily from his palace across to the home quarters of the Order of the Temple in Paris, a sort of medieval Fort Knox where they kept all their wealth in gold and precious stones.”

“Don’t say any more. That’s when he plotted with the Pope and arrested all the Templars.”

“Exactly,” he confirmed, pleased. “On September 14, 1307, under false accusations he ordered the arrest of all the members of the Order, including the Grand Meister Jacques de Molay. He confiscated all the possessions the Order had in France and assaulted the Mother House of the Temple, certain of obtaining all the gold it held in the cellars.”

“And wasn’t it so?”



“The only thing Philip IV got was a huge surprise. Although his soldiers searched every inch of the building, they found not a *sou*.”

“Then ... what happened to all that gold?”

“Nobody knows. It simply vanished.” He underlined his last words with his hand as a magician would do to make a rabbit disappear in a hat.

It took me a few minutes to take in all the information, my gaze wandering over the bookshelves, and when I had my thoughts in order I addressed my friend again.

“To be honest, Professor,” I said disappointedly, “although the story you’ve just told me is really impressive, I can’t see the link between the missing gold and our little bronze bell. The truth is, I don’t see how we can convince Hutch with such a weak argument.”

The professor was looking at me fixedly. He seemed to be expecting me to say just that.

“You see, Ulysses,” he continued slowly, sitting back more comfortably in his chair, “the story doesn’t end there.”

“And you call me melodramatic!” I replied in mock anger. “Are you going to tell me everything or do I have to wait until tomorrow!”

He chuckled, pleased to have teased me, and proceeded with the tale.

“After capturing all the Templars in France, the king ordered them to be tortured, hoping one of them would reveal the hiding place of the Order’s treasure. But whether for loyalty to the Order or because they didn’t know, in spite of the terrible tests they were put to, they all kept a vow of silence.” Here he made a pause, took off his glasses slowly and while he cleaned them with his handkerchief he added, “All except one.”

“I think you’ve read too many thrillers, Professor, and you’re making me nervous with so much pausing.”

“I’m getting there ... but let me enjoy the moment. I’m having such a good time.”

I gave up, sat back and indicated he could continue when he wished.

“You see, there was a member of the Order, by name Jean du Chalon, — he stood up and went to the window — who, after being tortured, confessed to having witnessed the complete withdrawal of the accumulated funds from the cellars of the House on the day prior to their massive arrest. According to his words, fifty knights watched over the treasure as it was transported from Paris to the port of La Rochelle, on the west coast of France, which, coincidentally was under Templar command. There, according to his

explanation, the treasure was loaded on eighteen ships which set out on an unknown course.” Looking distractedly toward the street below he added, “And nothing more was ever heard of that fleet nor of the riches it carried.”

I let a whole minute go by, chewing on what I had just heard until I hesitantly asked, “So, do you then think the bell I found in Utila belongs to one of the ships in that fleet?”

“I don’t just think so, Ulysses.” Turning from the window, he added, “I’m certain of it.”

“Well, the bait is set,” I said, as I clicked on the “send” icon. “Now all we have to do is wait for his answer.”

“Are you sure it wouldn’t have been better to phone him?” asked the professor.

“No, it wouldn’t. It isn’t easy to locate a man like John Hutch, much less explain such an incredible story to him over the phone. I’m sure he checks his email every day and what we’ve written will certainly arouse his curiosity.”

“I do hope so.”

We had walked into his studio an hour before and I had been surprised to find it a spacious room, minimally decorated. An LCD TV hung on the wall like a painting and in the middle of a huge functional-style desk there was the latest computer equipment: scanner, printer and flat screen monitor.

“Wow, Professor! You’re definitely full of surprises. I’d never have thought you a fan of the latest technology.”

“Well,” he said smugly, “we all have our little vices. But don’t you tell anybody, I must keep up appearances.”

We could do nothing for the next few hours until we got an answer, probably in the afternoon. So I decided to satisfy my curiosity by asking the professor to tell me more about the Templars and their mythical treasure.

“Why would you be so sure that this bell belongs to one of the ships that carried the treasure? Couldn’t it be from a prior trip?”

“Oh yes, of course it’s possible, but unlikely. Although I’m convinced that the Temple cartographers knew of the existence of the American continent, I doubt there was fluid traffic between the Old and the New continents. If they had made too many transoceanic crossings they would eventually have been discovered. Some sailor would’ve blabbed or some English, Castilian or Portuguese ship would’ve encountered them sooner or later.” He paused and went to the bar counter. “Besides, the route they had to take in order to reach America by riding the Equator Stream from the north started at the Canary Islands where they would’ve been obliged to stop to get food and water supplies. A continued presence of Templar ships there would’ve raised the inevitable suspicion. Therefore, as they were never

discovered and there's no record of unusual ships of the Order near the Canaries, it's logical to assume that very few attempted such a risky journey."

"I'm surprised that you take it for granted that in thirteen something they already knew about America!"

"They really knew long before that." He pointed at the various bottles. "Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks. How long before?"

"Huh! Who knows! Since the Phoenicians or maybe earlier."

"But, how could they have crossed the Atlantic at that time? And why isn't there proof of it anywhere?"

The professor shook his head.

"The question, Ulysses, is rather: How is it possible that no one, even by chance, should've discovered an immense continent that runs all the way from the North Pole to the South Pole? If you throw a bottle into the ocean off the shores of the island of Hierro, in the Canaries, it'll very likely arrive on American shores, all by itself in a couple of months. And don't forget, the Phoenicians, for example, were excellent seamen. Hang on," he said before I could interrupt him, "I have something to show you."

He left the room and I could hear him moving books around until he exclaimed, "Eureka!" and came back in, smugly holding open a dusty old book.

"Here you are. It's a story reported by Herodotus about an expedition ordered by the Pharaoh Necho II. Phoenician sailors were sent to find out what was beyond the Red Sea in 608 B.C. It goes like this: *"... he ordered the Phoenicians to set out with their ships to sail through the Pillars of Hercules to the Mediterranean and Egypt. So the Phoenicians sailed from Eritrea, toward the south. During this navigation they landed anywhere in the Lybian coast – that's how Africa was known then – when Autumn came. There they planted crops and waited for them to grow. After harvest they set out again. Thus they spent two years and on the third year they rounded the Pillars of Hercules and reached Egypt."* He looked at me proudly. "So, what do you say to that?"

"I'd never have thought that cruises would've been in fashion six hundred years before Christ."

He ignored me and went on. "But that's not all. In the nineteenth century, an inscription was discovered in Parahiba, Brazil. It was written on a

rock by the survivors of a ship that set out from the Red Sea, rounded the Cape of Good Hope and, as it was making its way up the west coast of Africa, was dragged off-course by the currents to an unknown shore.” He stopped again, dramatically, and added, “That inscription was made in Phoenician characters.”

“I see,” I said, although I wasn’t very convinced.

“You do, but you don’t fully believe me, do you?” He sensed my skepticism and added, “Crossing the Atlantic isn’t as complicated as you’d expect, if you know the right winds and currents. There are those who have done it in a row boat or a surf board. Several years ago, Thor Heyerdahl sailed from Africa to South America on a raft similar to those common in Ancient Egypt, which shows that, technically, it was possible to do the journey in that time.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But Heyerdahl knew where he was headed whereas five hundred years ago the Atlantic was thought to be an immense ocean that reached the coasts of China, full of enormous sea creatures that would eat up any ship that left the safety of the coast.”

“But I bet you don’t know who started that myth...”

“No idea.”

“The Phoenicians, Ulysses. The Phoenicians did.”

“And why would they do something like that?”

“Very simple. For the second oldest reason in History: money. The Phoenicians were the best navigators and merchants of their time. And it is well known that they traded products in faraway regions such as India, West Africa or Iceland. It is therefore logical that they would try to keep their routes secret, intimidating anybody who showed an interest in going any further than the Straits of Gibraltar with stories of monsters and disasters. In a way, the fact that the story was kept alive for more than two thousand years suggests that maybe someone was interested in keeping it so.”

“Are you talking about a Phoenician-Templar conspiracy? With all due respect, Professor, isn’t this going too far?”

“Think of it,” he said, looking at me intently. “The Phoenicians or someone else before them, arrive in America. They decide to keep the secret. They frighten others with legends of monsters so they won’t follow their steps. And, with the passage of time, those legends become part of the collective memory. Yet, when centuries later, during their stay in Syria and Palestine, the Knights of the Temple discover some documents that specify

how to reach an unknown land using favorable winds and currents, they decide to investigate. And *Bingo!*”

“Bingo?”

“They discovered America, you moron! Or, rather, they *re*-discovered America. For some reason they decided to continue exploiting the fear of the sea of that time and kept their secret until our dear Christopher Columbus made his triumphant entrance on the stage.” He crossed his arms with satisfaction as he concluded.

“Allow me to act as the devil’s advocate,” I objected. “But all this evidence is circumstantial. If this were a trial, the accused would walk free for lack of proof.”

“You want proof?” he challenged. “Would you believe me if I were to prove to you that Columbus wasn’t the first to reach America? And that, furthermore, he was able to achieve that honor thanks to some unequivocally Templar knowledge?”

“Surely that revelation would light the flame of truth in me.”

“It had better,” he replied, wagging a threatening finger at me, “or else I’ll throw you out of my home with a kick in the butt for being so ignorant and stubborn. Okay, as I have already explained, the Order of the Poor Soldiers of Christ ended up dismantled at the hands of Philip IV, King of France and Pope Clement V. The last Grand Meister Jacques de Molay was burnt on 18 March 1314. At first sight it would seem that everything came to an end there. All the members of the Order were either incarcerated or roasted, their wealth confiscated and the treasure vanished, end of story. But no! It turned out that in the rest of Europe, not all Templars were imprisoned. In fact, in kingdoms like that of Portugal they were sheltered in their flight and in a skilful maneuver, they became protected under the cover of a new Order they themselves created with the blessing of the King of Portugal: the Order of Christ. Honest they were, but also unimaginative in the choice of their new name.”

Professor Castillo paced his studio, gazing into vacancy, as if he were lecturing a class of college History students.

“This Order was the repository of all the files of the Templars, including maps, planispheres, and navigation charts, although the possession of these documents was kept secret for one hundred years. Until the beginning of the fifteenth century, when they began to reveal part of their nautical knowledge to the Court of Henry the Navigator, Prince of Portugal,

under whose patronage maritime exploration enjoyed a period of prosperity such as never before. Portuguese ships reached the remotest corners of the African coast, setting up prosperous colonies in places like Madeira or the Azores. Strangely enough, they never went further than the Cape Verde Islands where just by drifting with the trade winds, they would have reached the beaches of Brazil in only a few days. This unusual behavior was no doubt the consequence of a pact between the Order of Christ and Prince Henry. Protection in exchange for knowledge. But limited knowledge at that because, clearly, the old Templars didn't want anyone else to set foot in America. As proof, let me refer to the fact that the Portuguese ships that did sail further than Cape Bojador, off the shores of the Canaries, had to paint a Templar Cross on their sails for identification."

"You mean to say that ... that big red cross that appears in all paintings of the ships of Columbus was a Templar cross?"

"Absolutely."

"You're not going to tell me that Columbus was a Templar?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Will you let me finish explaining or not?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Please, proceed," I said with a wink.

He mused, "Where was I? Ah, yes. I was saying that the Templars, under the cover of the new Order of Christ, were in control of all the maritime traffic in the Atlantic. But it so happened that after a mysterious shipwreck, there arrived on the Portuguese beaches of the Algarve, a shabby sailor who with his gift of gab, cunning and ambition, managed in less than three years, to marry Doña Philippa Moniz de Perestrello, a woman of noble lineage, daughter of the Portuguese discoverer Diego de Perestrello, a man of faith tightly related to the Order of Christ. This wrecked sailor, whose real name, religion or country were unknown, with his new influence acquired great experience as navigator under Genoese merchants. He even reached such faraway places as the coasts of Guinea. But his big prize came when, looking through a chest of his recently deceased father-in-law, he came across some rare navigational charts that belonged to the Order of Christ. These showed land unknown to him "*at 750 leagues west of the island of Hierro.*" This man, as you must have realized, was no other than he who called himself Christopher Columbus."

"Then..." I said, stunned with this revelation, "you mean Columbus reached America because he had a map to show the way?"

"Not only a map, but a whole bunch of notes about distances, sea

currents, winds and days of navigation. Although, unfortunately, they were in code, which accounts for any apparently inexplicable navigational error in that first crossing. For example, he mixed up Castilian miles with Arabic ones, which led him to predict the exact distance to the new land in the wrong measurement. This almost cost him a mutiny on *La Santa Maria*.”

“Honestly, it’s hard to believe...”

“Well, you may start believing because it is rigorously true. All you have to do is read the Capitulations of Santa Fe, which Columbus made the Catholic King and Queen sign in 1491, one year before he set sail. In them he is certified as “*Admiral and Viceroy of the lands he has discovered in the ocean seas*.” He literally said that he had discovered, not that he was going to discover.”

Professor Castillo stopped talking, waiting for my reaction. But it took me a while to digest what I had just heard.

“I’m speechless. It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever been told in my life.” I muttered at last.

“Then, from now on, will you believe what I tell you?”

“Well, you do know I’m a skeptic. But regarding this subject I’ll trust your knowledge.”

“Attaboy,” he said and stood up. “Now, let’s go get a beer at the bar downstairs. My throat is parched from so much talking.”

The beer turned into a snack and then into lunch and coffee so we didn’t get back to the flat until well after four o’clock in the afternoon. During all this time he provided me with many more details about this “parallel history” that is not found in school books. He explained that Egyptian amulets, Carthaginian coins or Phoenician tools appeared regularly all over America. However, it turned out that some of these objects had been purchased in the Old Continent and buried in the New, so as to be “found by chance” by some amateur archaeologist. The whole had suffered for the part, as they say. The result was that now none of these findings had any credibility.

We also talked extensively about Christopher Columbus.

“Isn’t it interesting,” said the professor “that even now we still don’t know for sure who he was. The official version is that he was a Genoese sailor. The son of a cloth dealer whose ship was attacked by pirates in the course of a trip along the coasts of Portugal, which is why he appeared on that beach in the Algarve. But more recently, it has been proved that the only



document which confirmed that he was a Genoese had been coarsely manipulated, so the rest of the story doesn't have a leg to stand on. Among other things, Columbus never wrote once in Italian, not even when he addressed Genoese bankers asking for money. Most probably, he was the son of either Catalan or Majorcan merchants of Jewish ancestry, which would explain why he never revealed his true origins, not even to his own children. As you know," he concluded with a mischievous grin, "being a Jew wasn't very good for one's health."

At his home again, we went straight to his studio. On the corner of the computer screen blinked the little envelope that meant he had mail.

## 6

“And what did you expect him to say?” I said in reaction to his disappointed look. “This is the best answer he could give.”

“But going all the way to Florida to speak to him? I really wasn’t counting on that...”

“Do you have anything else to do? Fold socks? Or clean the fishbowl, maybe...?”

“No, it’s not that ... I’m just not crazy about traveling by plane.”

“Are you afraid of flying?”

“Not afraid, Ulysses: Terrified,” he admitted wringing his hands at the mere thought.

“Sorry, but I need you to convince Hutch. You lend credibility to the whole business.”

“Oh, but...” he muttered, trying to find an excuse.

“No buts, Professor. I’ll make reservations on the web right away and, in four days we’ll visit the “treasure hunter”, as you call him. Meanwhile, let’s gather all the information we can on the Templars and their fortune. We must convince Hutch that we’re not a couple of lunatics. So apart from the bell, we must show him all the possible proof that there’s something of real value in that reef and that it really will be worth his while to invest his time and money in retrieving it.”

Five days later we landed in Miami, with Professor Castillo up to his ears in tranquilizers, letting himself be pushed around with an expression of idiotic happiness on his face. As had been agreed, a yellow pickup from Hutch Marine Explorations was expecting us and after a brief introduction we put our luggage in the back and crammed into the cabin with the driver. We set off immediately for the Florida Keys where Hutch had his headquarters.

We crossed Homestead, where *Key Largo* was filmed and drove over the longest road in the world built on water. Two hours later we arrived at the tourist site of Key West, the most southern city of the USA. It is a tropical enclave with neat wooden houses, with flags on the lawn outside each porch and signs everywhere offering boat and submarine tours and fishing.

Our chauffeur left us at a small hotel on the outskirts and said he would

be back at five. So we had time to freshen up, grab a bite and bring the Professor “back to life” with numerous strong black coffees.

Right on time, we crossed the doors of the Hutch Marine Explorations’ offices. A middle-aged man in a flowery shirt got up to greet us.

“Ulysses, my boy! So glad to see you!” he cried.

He was well over six-feet tall. His blue eyes had a questioning look, and his deceptively friendly smile hid a brain like a cash register. He gave each of us a strong handshake.

“Hiya, Hutch. How are things going around here?”

“Well, pretty much like always. Lots of work, you know,” he replied in his peculiar drawl.

“Seems things aren’t going too bad. By the way, I recognize a lot of signs and posters in Spanish.”

“Aah, after all the Spanish gold I’ve taken I figured it was the least I could do. Learn a bit. Although ... as usual, there is a woman. A little Cuban lady who’s driving me crazy...”

“Watch it. At your age you’d better be careful. You could have a heart attack.”

“Ho, ho ... I may have less hair and more of a paunch but I’m still in good shape,” he said defensively, flexing his arms so that his biceps showed.

“I see, I see...” I turned to the professor. “Here, let me introduce you to Professor Eduardo Castillo, one of the greatest experts in Medieval History.”

“Pleased to meet you, Professor. How do you prefer to be addressed, Professor? Or *Mr. Castillo*?”

“*Professor* is okay, thanks. It’s what I’m used to, Mr. Hutch.”

“Well, well!” Hutch seemed to be in a good mood. “Ulysses, Professor, let’s go into my office.”

We went in and sat down in some very comfortable black leather armchairs. I let my eyes wander over the many trophies that Hutch had rescued in previous subaquatic diggings: a perfectly preserved flint pistol, a gold coin floating inside a methacrylate cube that served as a paperweight...

“It’s a gold doubloon minted in New Spain,” Hutch replied to my unspoken question. “It was the only thing of value that I got from a seventeenth century Spanish galleon. A fiasco that nearly drove me to bankruptcy a few years ago. Just because I didn’t investigate enough and let myself be driven by other people’s enthusiasm.” He looked straight at me.

“But you learn from experience. And that’s why I have it on my table, to remind me never to make the same mistake again.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the professor was watching me. I decided to ignore the concealed meaning behind Hutch’s words and went on.

“I want to thank you for seeing us, John. I know you’re always busy. But, when we finish telling you why we’re here, you’ll realize that we’re offering you the biggest chance in a lifetime.” As I said this I felt like a charlatan selling an all-purpose tonic, but I was trying to show him that I was absolutely convinced of the success of a possible search. I also wanted to give the impression that any odds against were out of the question.

He leaned back into his seat. “We’ll see.” Then he added with a calculating look, “Now, tell me more about what you said in your email about the biggest treasure in history.”

“What did you think?” asked the professor, once we were back on the street walking away from Hutch Marine Explorations. We had spent more than two hours there among photocopies, drawings and maps.

“Truth is, I’m not sure. If it were a sunken Spanish galleon, there’d be no problem. But as soon as I said the word *Templar* I thought he was going to throw us out. Anyway, he’ll give us an answer in a couple days so, in the meantime all we have to do is enjoy the Caribbean, the sun and the *mojitos*.”

“Okay. While you do that I’ll get down to analyzing all the information we’ve brought.”

“No way,” I objected. “You’re coming with me. As soon as we get back to the hotel, we’ll change and go out and burn this place down!”

“Well, mm ... you see, I don’t think I brought the right clothes.”

“It doesn’t matter, almost everybody just wears a bathing suit. Because I assume you did bring a bathing suit.” The way he looked at me was answer enough.

Three days went by before we got a call from Hutch’s secretary, giving us an appointment for that same evening at six.

Somewhat nervous, we arrived punctually at his office. With rather more formality than the first time, he invited us in. The three of us sat down in a silence only punctuated by the purring of the ceiling ventilator. Hutch seemed to be gauging us carefully. His eyes went from one to the other, but he mostly looked at me with what I thought was a shadow of distrust. After a few minutes, my hands were sweaty and I was beginning to think about other

submarine retrieval companies when Hutch leaned forward on his massive mahogany desktop and picked up his paperweight.

“You’ve got a deal,” he said as he played for a few moments with the transparent cube. “Of course I may come to regret it one day, but you’ve got a deal.” He shook my hand.

“Wonderful!” I said. “When do we start?”

He asked, raising an eyebrow, “We? You’ve done your part, if we find the treasure you’ll get a percentage of the profits but your job here’s done.”

“No way, John. We want to take part in the search.”

“Sorry, but that’s not negotiable. My team is already formed, and they’re the best. I’ve got professional divers, oceanographers, archaeologists and historians already on my pay roll.” With a firm wave of hand he ended, “We don’t need anybody else.”

“But the professor is an expert in Medieval History. Nobody knows more than he does about the Templars and their secrets. And I’m a good diver, so we can both be of help.”

“I said no, Ulysses. This isn’t like teaching a class at college or guiding tourists under water.”

Hutch did not seem ready to yield. The professor was following the conversation with a look that plainly said, “*I was afraid it would end like this.*” I refused to take no for an answer. I had promised the professor we would both be a part of the search, and quite apart from that I had been looking forward to it enough to risk my last (and perhaps only) card.

“John,” I said as calmly as I could manage, “If we don’t go, there’s no treasure to look for.”

This was a transparent bluff. I prayed that the professor would not realize and give us away with a rage of insults to me and my entire ancestry. But it was either that or leave in humiliation. I still had not given Hutch the exact location of the possible wreck so I was trusting that if I stayed inflexible, I would get my way.

Hutch’s stare was unfriendly. He stayed stubbornly silent while he weighed pros and cons and calculated costs and benefits, not to mention how much he might lose if he just sent me to hell. I had no doubt that if he thought for a moment, he had the slightest chance of locating the hull without me to give him the coordinates, the professor and I would already be on our way home. John Hutch was a man who did not take blackmailing well. Nor did he take kindly to two “amateurs” wanting to impose conditions.

He settled back more comfortably in his soft black leather seat, perhaps expecting me to back off. The first one to speak would lose as both of us knew.

He gave way at last, barely hiding his irritation. "All right. But you'll both work on the ship without any payment." He gestured menacingly at us and added, "And if you turn out to be a burden on the operation I'll drop you off at the nearest port. Understood?"

I looked at the professor who with a slight nod let me know he agreed to these conditions.

"Okay, John. I think it's fair," I said. "And, as I said before, when do we start?"

The *Midas* was rocking heavily. The waves crashing against the prow whipped up clouds of spray that the southeastern wind deposited on the deck. Since our departure from Key West two days before, the weather had done nothing but worsen although this was not unusual as we were in the midst of the hurricane season. That day, the sky had dawned heavy with cloud and its leaden gray reflected on a sea that at moments looked as though it were covered with mercury.

In spite of sailing the supposedly warm Caribbean Sea, I was wearing a jacket to protect me from the thirty-knot wind, which blew rain against my face and forced me to squint.

In a few more hours we would arrive in Honduran waters. Before nightfall, we should be anchored above the same reef where less than a month ago I had found the little bronze bell. So many things had happened in those two weeks that it seemed to me I had been searching for that enigmatic treasure a lot longer.

I could imagine the look on my mother's face when I explained that I had not called by to see her again because I was in Florida, looking for a sunken ship in the company of Professor Castillo.

"Are you joking?"

"No, Mom, it's the truth. We leave for Utila the day after tomorrow." I was trying, unsuccessfully, to inject her with my enthusiasm.

"But you just arrived! And besides, what does that wretched Eduardo have to do with all this?"

"Mom," I said soothingly, "he's just helping me because I asked him to. There's no sense in keeping on hating him."

"I knew I shouldn't have given you his number. It's my fault."

"Listen," I interrupted, "I called to say I'm fine and tell you about my plans, not to have a fight, okay? I'm doing something I believe in and I'll be in the company of the professor for quite a while. So, stop this nonsense and wish me luck."

"Oh, dearie. Of course I do. It's just..."

"It's what, Mom?"

"Oh, nothing, Ulysses. Nothing. It's only that I seem to be listening to

your Dad all over again. Be very careful, please.”

I was going over this conversation in my mind when I heard a friendly “Hello!” behind me. Cassandra Brooks, the attractive, petite, chief archaeologist of the expedition was leaning on the rail beside me.

“What’s up?” she asked. “Trying to catch pneumonia?”

“Hi, Cassie. Just looking for a bit of quiet. Besides, I get less dizzy out here than in the cabin.”

“Same here, pal. Keep it between us but I’ve already had half a box of anti-sickness pills.” She stared at me and asked, “What’s bugging you?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. Or maybe ... I’d like to find this treasure. But more than for the money, for the satisfaction of achieving something important.”

“Oh, you want to be famous?”

“No way. It’s not that. But, at my age I’m still roaming and sometimes I have doubts... This would make me feel good about myself.”

She put her hand on my arm. “Ulysses, you can’t rely on finding a sunken treasure to make you feel good about yourself.”

Then it was my turn to look at her intently, charmed by her deep green eyes.

“You’re right.” I put my hand over hers on the rail. “You’re so right.”

We had met just a few hours before setting out but had immediately hit it off and already felt like old buddies. Maybe it was because of our common Spanish background. I had been very surprised when I was introduced to a beautiful blonde woman with emerald green eyes, English surname but born in Acapulco.

“You can imagine it,” she had told me when I asked her about this, a few days before. We were sitting in the sun at the ship’s prow. “My dad, your typical American, he goes to Acapulco on holiday and there he meets my mom, with whom he falls head over heels in love. They get married, stay to live in Mexico and they have me, a yankee *señorita* in eyes, hair and surname but with a truly Mexican heart.”

“You may congratulate your parents on my behalf,” I had said, trying to be gallant, “because the experiment came out so well.”

“Thank you.” She blushed under her tan, which made her look even more attractive.

“And by the way, what led you to Marine Archeology?”

“The truth is it was almost inevitable. My dad was a deep sea diver and



my mom was an archaeologist. What else could I choose?”

“But do you like what you do?”

“Love it,” she said. “Always lived near the sea. Learned to dive with my dad before I learned to walk and archaeology is my passion. Curiosity flows in my veins like blood, and finding a hull that’s been sunk for hundreds of years gives me a thrill like nothing else. What I love most in this world is unearthing something nobody else has seen or touched in centuries.

“But what you do here, with Hutch, that isn’t exactly archeology.”

From the look Cassandra gave me, she might have swallowed a toad. She lowered her eyes.

“I know, I’ve even thought of saying to hell with it a couple times. But work is scarce and although I don’t like John or his methods, he pays nicely ... and it’s not easy to resist the temptation of discovering sunken treasure.”

“I totally understand: I have a bout of gold fever too, even though I’ve never had the least interest in getting rich. But here I am,” I added with a smile.

Next morning at seven o’clock, called by Hutch to the sound of siren and loudspeakers, the search team and the crew gathered on the fore deck. In all there were about twenty people, comprising divers, oceanographers, marine geologists, specialists in submarine detection equipment, computer experts and of course, marine archaeologists, among whom was Cassie. Professor Castillo meanwhile stood aside leaning on the rail. I guessed he might be a little lost in an environment that was alien to him.

I was surprised at how a small crew could handle a ship of more than fourteen feet. There were only six of them, assuming I had seen them all. I remembered during the first dinner on board how Captain Preston had drawn me a picture of the technological wonders that made *The Midas* unique of her kind. But what with the beers I had drunk that night and the rocking of the ship, all I could recall was how hard it had been to find my cabin.

Finally, Hutch appeared on the bridge deck, accompanied by Goran Rakovijc, who had been his shadow ever since we had boarded. An imposing ex-soldier of Serbian origin and dark past, he had an unfriendly face and a mysterious total loyalty (according to hearsay) to Hutch.

Hutch imposed silence with a gesture. “Ladies and gentlemen! Some of you already know why we’re here. But most of you, as a safety measure, haven’t been informed yet. And this isn’t because we don’t trust some of you.

In fact,” he added with a smile, “we don’t trust any of you.”

There was laughter. Someone shouted, “Hey John, you must know what happened to your wife was an accident!” Hutch made the gesture of firing with his finger at one of the crew and when the laughter subsided, he continued.

“We’re here to find a treasure. But not any treasure.” He gestured toward the rough surface of the sea. “A few feet underneath the keel of *The Midas*, hidden by sand and rocks, the treasure of treasures lies waiting for us.”

He paused, waiting for his words to have an effect.

“Seven hundred years ago, when we thought the white man hadn’t yet arrived in America, a small fleet set out from Europe with its holds full of gold, silver and precious stones. It reached these waters. We still don’t know why but, at least one of those ships sank with all her riches inside.” He glanced at us. “Thanks to Professor Castillo and Ulysses Vidal, today we know where. Exactly under our feet.”

He took a breath. Leaning over the rail so that the wind blew his clothes around him, he raised his voice.

“No one will ever have found so many riches in one single wreck. Not even me.” Again, laughter. “Because of that, what we’re about to do isn’t only to get rich. If we reach our goal, and let there be no doubts that we will, we’ll be making history! This treasure is waiting, fellas! Let’s go for it!”

A unanimous chorus of cat-whistles and cheers sounded on the deck of *The Midas*. It faded away in an ocean which moment by moment looked ever more gray and menacing.

Half an hour later, somewhat quieter, a group of seven people sat around the enormous wooden table in the meeting hall. Over it stretched the detailed chart from the US Oceanographic Institute, which corresponded to the islands of The Bay. The meeting was presided by Hutch, flanked by his lieutenant Rakovijc and the captain of *The Midas*, Nicholas Preston. There was also Clive Brown as Chief Diver, Cassandra Brooks as Head Archaeologist, Professor Castillo as Historical Advisor and myself, as the discoverer of the wreck.

“Gentlemen,” said Hutch as we sat down, “I believe you’ve all been introduced to each other so we’ll skip formalities. I’ll explain why we’re here and what we’re going to do in the coming days.”

He gave all of us a quick look and continued his speech.

“Mr. Vidal, here” he indicated me “less than a month ago, discovered an object buried in the reef. This object, according to all the evidence, came from a ship that belonged to a monastic military order of the Middle Ages which accumulated enormous wealth. That order was known in its day as the Templars.”

He paused briefly, waiting for his words to sink in.

“One particular day, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, nearly two hundred years before Columbus arrived in this continent, eighteen ships were launched from France with all the treasure of the Order in their holds. We believe one of those ships sank in these waters. Our mission is to locate the remains of the ship, excavate carefully around the remains, rescue it and take it home with us. Each one of you has before him a detailed report of what I’ve just told you.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“Some of you have already worked with me in previous recoveries. And I wish to warn you as well as the newcomers that this time it’s going to be a more difficult task. What we’re looking for is not only a great treasure, we have the possibility of making history in our hands ... by changing history. If we manage to prove that there were Europeans sailing these waters a long time before what’s believed, all the schoolbooks of the whole world will have to be rewritten. And when your children in years to come read that the intrepid explorers of *The Midas* solved the enigma of the discovery of America, you’ll be able to tell them proudly that you were there.”

“But why exactly is it going to be more difficult this time?” asked Brown, the Chief Diver, always pragmatic.

“Basically because we barely have information about the type of ship we’re looking for, her size, tonnage. She’s been under water twice as long as any other hull we’ve searched for. Because of that she’ll be more decomposed and sunk in the mud than any of the others. And, if this weren’t enough,” he added more seriously, “in those days ships didn’t carry artillery. As you all know, nowadays, the best way to find a sunken ship is through magnetic detection of the iron of her cannons. Fortunately, *The Midas* is the best ship that’s ever been built for the location and study of hulls: On top of this we have the best technology of the twenty-first century: potent cesium magnetometers, density discriminators and the best lateral sweep sonar on the market. To sum it up: if the ship is below, we’ll find her.”

We all remained silent until Cassie timidly raised her hand.

“What’s up, Ms. Brooks?” Hutch asked.

“Well, it’s only curiosity because, like nearly all members of this team I work for a salary.” Looking straight at Hutch she added, “A more than generous salary, I have to say. But I’d like to know if the approximate value of this treasure we’re looking for has been calculated.”

Hutch pointed at the professor, who became instantly uneasy at being the center of interest. “Professor Castillo is the one who can tell you that with more accuracy.”

“Ahem. Well, the truth is that the value it would reach today is incalculable. Consider for a minute that we’re not only talking about precious stones and metals, but also about jewels centuries old, the work of goldsmiths, gifts from monarchs, religious relics...”

Hutch cut in. “About five hundred million dollars.”

Brown let out a long whistle in admiration. And everyone, without exception, remained breathless for a second.

“The wealth accumulated by the Templars,” Hutch went on, “is calculated to be around ten thousand million dollars at today’s exchange rate. As we know that eighteen ships were launched with the whole treasure of the Order, simple division gives us the pretty sum of five hundred million dollars per ship. Isn’t that right, Professor?”

The professor was rather peeved by the interruption. “Yes, well, we could say so. That would be an approximation.”

“Any more questions?” asked Hutch. No hands were raised. “Okay, then to work. You all know what you have to do and there’s no need for me to say that time is of the essence. We’re in the middle of the hurricane season. A very active front is coming in our direction and at any moment we might be forced to get out, so there’s no time to lose. At this precise moment we’re already drawing the first maps of the sea bed and by this afternoon I expect to have divers in the water.”

He paused for a final time. Looking at each one of us, he said gravely, “I’ve hired you because you’re the best, and because of that I expect the best from each one of you. Don’t let me down.”

He got up from his chair and added, “And don’t you forget: *tempus fugit*.”

One hour later all the search equipment was ready and a cesium magnetometer was thrown in the water. This was a missile-shaped apparatus six and a half feet long with sensors fixed on the underside. According to the explanation I was given, these were capable of tracking a coin in a basketball court from about seven feet away, thanks to something called “90 gamma waves.” We also started to tow a sophisticated digital sonar from the Dutch Company Marinescan, which could transfer a perfectly detailed image of the sea bottom and of any object bigger than a hand to a computer screen. The *Midas* began its search by tracing a two mile square. Starting from the outside, this progressively spiraled to a point around the spot where I had found the sunken bell.

When I asked Captain Preston why this wasn’t done the other way around, starting the search at the point where it was more likely to find something, in other words “from the inside out,” the captain just shrugged.

“Hutch decided. He’s always done it this way. I’m not going to tell him otherwise.”

“But we’d finish sooner the other way, don’t you think?”

“Look here, son, if you’re in this, there’s something you’ve got to keep clear in your mind. John Hutch is the boss here. You may wonder if his approach is the right one. You may even question his methods, which may sometimes be unorthodox. But John is a living myth among sunken galleon hunters, and on board this ship you’d better not query his decisions with anyone. He’s not a man who lets himself be questioned about anything he does.” He put his hand on my shoulder and repeated with emphasis, “*Anything.*”

We sailed for more than nine hours at a rate of some ten knots in a very rough sea, gradually reducing the search area. It was already dark when this first tracking session was finished and we were summoned to the meeting hall; the same group as in the morning. I had spent the day hanging around the deck, impatient to dive and start the search for the ship or whatever was down there. It was something I’d been looking forward to ever since Professor Castillo had told me of the importance of my find.

Once again we were all sitting, waiting for the conclusions we assumed Hutch would offer and chatting among ourselves. From what was said I guessed I was not the only one eager to start the underwater search.

After a few minutes, Hutch appeared, followed as always by the intimidating figure of Rakovijc. He took his time to sit down while one of the computer operators hooked up the huge plasma TV screen, which covered one wall of the room, to a laptop. Then he addressed us with visible enthusiasm.

“Gentlemen,” he announced, smiling like a shark and showing all his teeth, “we found it.”

A round of applause ran through the room, with laughs and whoops of joy. I hugged Cassie, who returned the hug together with an enthusiastic kiss on my cheek.

When there was silence again, Hutch pressed a couple of keys on the laptop and turned to the screen on the wall.

“Less than a mile from the place Mr. Vidal indicated, we got this sonar image of the sea bottom.”

A surface made up of different shades of brown with rising ground shown as orange appeared on the screen. What at first looked like just one more hump turned out on closer inspection to be the clear outline of a ship’s hull with its edges outlined almost in yellow.

Hutch went on. “It’s buried under a thin layer of sand about fifty feet deep which will make the retrieving work a lot easier.” He turned to Cassie. “Is your equipment ready, Ms. Brooks?”

“Absolutely. By the time it’s light tomorrow we’ll be in the water measuring and making a preliminary study.”

“Perfect,” said Hutch, approvingly. Turning to Brown, the head of the diving team, he repeated the question.

“We’re all ready and eager to begin work,” Brown confirmed. “We’ll help the archaeologists do their tasks and when they’re finished, we’ll start to clean the area and pump the sand out.”

“Wonderful!” said Hutch. “Any questions?”

I raised my arm. “I have one. How can the ship be so far from the place where I found the bronze bell?”

“That’s a question that may have several answers. But the most likely one is that the ship sustained a breach in the hull and the decision was made to throw away any unnecessary objects such as the bell in order to eliminate

weight.” With a touch of impatience he added, “Any other question, Mr. Vidal?”

“I have one. If you don’t mind, of course,” said Cassandra, throwing me a lifeline. “Has the magnetometer detected anything down there?”

“Oh, sure! Thanks for reminding me, Ms. Brooks.” Hutch’s tone was one of unconvincing politeness. “It has detected something.” He turned to the rest. “The truth is that when it passed over the area in question, the magnetometer nearly jumped off the scale.”

That night I could barely sleep. On the one hand I was eager to start the search. On the other, and due to the strengthening waves, I was suffering from a slight queasiness which churned my dinner in my stomach. What’s more, I couldn’t take my mind off that kiss on my cheek, apparently innocent but something I could still feel on my skin.

Inevitably I got up looking dreadful, but noticed at breakfast that I was not the only one.

I had been included in the diving team under the orders of Clive Brown. This experienced diver had worked successfully for Hutch before. I was assured that he always put the safety of his divers before anything else. Because of this, his men respected and trusted him completely. They suggested that I do the same. We chatted as we prepared our gear on deck. We were already sweating when we got into the two-inch neoprene suits, thick enough for this latitude but a must if we were to spend several hours every day at a depth of fifty feet.

The remarkable thing was that we would not be using the traditional compressed air bottle system in this dive. In its place, we were to carry sophisticated apparatuses that recycle air by absorbing the carbon dioxide of the user’s exhaled breath, commonly known as rebreathers and made by Silent Diving System. Although I had already had a chance to try them, it still seemed unbelievable to me that with an air filter and two small bottles integrated in a thin case, you could double your stay under water without having to increase decompression time. It also added another advantage which was very practical for certain underwater tasks: it did not expel the consumed air, which made for a far better visibility as there would be no curtain of bubbles constantly dancing in front of your visor.

Once we were ready, we jumped into the water from a special platform at the stern of the *Midas*. Then, loaded with photo and video cameras, Cassie

and her team followed us.

We gathered together a couple hundred feet from the *Midas*, as we had agreed at the briefing, and when I saw the pretty archaeologist nearby I swam toward her.

“Nervous?” she asked when I reached her side.

“Just a little,” I lied. “And you?”

“I feel like a bowl of jelly,” she said and put the regulator in her mouth.

After giving the OK signal, we emptied the air from our inflatable vests, sinking gently and leaving the distraction of the choppy surface behind us for the quiet of the deep.

The sun was still low at that time in the morning. The clouds covering the sky the past two days and the roughness of the ocean made for a visibility of only thirty feet, even though the water there was usually crystal clear. Even so, we all went directly down in a compact group. While we descended I noticed that the *Midas* was not anchored to anything even though there was no chain or rope joining the ship to the seabed and yet, strangely enough, it remained completely still over the bottom, indifferent to both currents and the constant push of the waves. I made a mental note to ask the captain about this when we went back to the ship.

I was lost in thoughts like this, when the group began to swim parallel to the bottom in a northerly direction, with me at the tail end. Some feet ahead, Cassie made a sign to stop and advanced alone, very slowly, touching the sand with the tips of her fingers.

Soon enough she stopped and fanned the sand away. When it settled again, it uncovered, in contrast with the whiteness of the sand, what appeared to be a dark worm-eaten wood plank which must have been buried centuries before.



Given their experience in similar situations, the group spread out in formation, in pairs, over a wide area, trying to find the limits of the hull and so set the boundaries for the excavation site. In only half an hour, a number of red flags bordered a rectangular area of about sixty five hundred square feet. Cassie's assistants were taking detailed photographs in order to later recreate a digital mosaic of the site on the computer.

My mission consisted of controlling the safety of the team from an elevated position. This was more or less what I used to do with the groups of amateur divers I took on submarine excursions when I worked for diving centers, although my usual job was as a diving instructor.

Obviously, on this occasion I could be more relaxed, because the feverish activity taking place several feet below me was being carried out by expert divers. As a result, I was free to enjoy the spectacle of a dozen men moving precisely in a sort of underwater ballet.

In less than an hour the work was completed and we all returned to the surface. My duty was to go up last so as to make sure nobody was left behind. After checking that we were all there we backstroked to the *Midas*, which was rocking heavily because of the waves. This made the team's return to ship an awkward business.

Once on board, we shed our neoprene suits. The archeological team went to download their cameras into the computers while the professional divers stayed on deck cleaning the equipment and refilling the air tanks for the following day.

I did not see Cassandra again that morning. She would have been locked up with the computer geeks, trying to fit all the pieces of their photographic puzzle together. I did come upon Professor Castillo on the bridge, gazing absently at the dark line of the horizon.

"What's up, Professor? Are you getting bored?"

"Well, I'm ashamed to say so but, in the circumstances, I am. I'm out of place on this ship. I feel I'm more of a nuisance than anything else."

"Nonsense," I said. "As soon as we start bringing things up from down below," I pointed down at the rough sea "you'll be the one to identify and catalogue them. Nobody knows better than you what we might find."

“Yeah ... you may be right. But I see everybody busy at something and here am I, just looking. I feel like an old pensioner watching the tide go in and out.” He laughed gruffly.

“By the way, Ulysses,” he added, “Hutch has summoned us to a meeting at twelve. I imagine he’ll want to know what you’ve found and to be honest, so do I. Can you tell me anything?”

“Wish I could. But from where I was, with all the suspended sand I could barely make out a couple boards here and there. But I’ve no doubt,” I added, leaning on his shoulder, “that they’ve found our ship.”

At twelve sharp we were all gathered in the meeting hall with the exception of Cassie who must have been finishing her report. Hutch was eying his expensive mini-sub impatiently. The rest of us meanwhile chatted animatedly about the morning dive, wondering how long it would take us to uncover a treasure which only a fine layer of sand was keeping hidden from us.

Ten minutes later Cassie walked through the door with her hair dishevelled, still in the bathing suit she had worn under her wet suit. Obviously she had not had time to go to her cabin and change.

“Excuse the delay,” she said to Hutch as she sat down and brushed her hair away from her face. “But I just finished this minute.”

“It’s okay, Ms. Brooks,” said Hutch. “Apology accepted.” With a look toward the black folder she had left on the table, he added, “What have you brought us?”

“Well, as you know, we’ve only set the boundaries of the area the sonar and magnetometer have taken us to, and topographed it.” She took out a CD from the folder and inserted it in her laptop. “But at this point I can assure you that we’ve found the hull of a wooden ship.”

With a couple of clicks and a few swift movements of her wrist, she relayed the image to the plasma television. She rose from her seat and stood by the screen like a teacher addressing her students.

“What you see here,” she said, indicating a fuzzy image of a sandy seabed with black streaks, “is the digital combination of the two hundred-odd photos we took this morning. As you can see, there are several dark objects scattered in the sand. These are wooden planks torn from the hull of a ship.” She passed her finger over the screen. “If you look closely, you can make out their shape.”

“It looks as if it’s lying on its side,” said Brown, tilting his own head to

see better.

“That’s what we thought too, probably on its port side.”

I was intrigued. “But, how is it that those planks we see aren’t either covered in coral, or eaten away by bacteria after hundreds of years underwater?”

“Good question,” she replied with a wink. “The truth is that I believe we’ve been extremely lucky. The only reason why it hasn’t happened is that the remains have been completely covered by sand until very recently. And that’s protected them from decomposition and coral growth. Perhaps the same hurricane that sank it covered it with sand afterward and kept it practically intact in its tomb until we arrived.”

“I see. And how big do you think the hull may be?”

“I’ve calculated between eighty-six and ninety feet long and maybe thirty feet wide.”

“Does this match the usual measurements of medieval ships?” asked Hutch.

“Well, to be honest I’m no expert in naval construction of that period. But someone here is. What do you have to say, Professor Castillo?”

Taken by surprise again by all the heads turning to him, he cleared his throat twice to collect his thoughts.

He began to explain didactically, “In the thirteenth century a kind of vessel called a cog appeared in Europe. It was very robust thanks to its double hull of overlapping boards. It had a stern castle, and on occasions a smaller one aft, one mast and an inside rudder.”

He rubbed his chin. “Barely any identifiable remains of these ships have been found but, from what we do know, they were prepared for long commercial journeys in the Atlantic for example, to Spain and Iceland. They would have been perfectly capable of getting here with enough supplies. And yes, the measurements of the hull match those of a cog.”

“Well, Professor Castillo, thank you for the lesson,” said Hutch with a trace of sarcasm. “It seems that we have indeed found our sunken ship. So if there’s nothing more to add, we’ll start excavating this very afternoon.” He leaned on the table with his hands together and turned to the chief diver.

“Mr. Brown, your team will pump out sediments. Work together with Ms. Brooks so that the samples are gathered and catalogued as they come up with the sand. You only have twenty-four hours. By then I want the whole starboard side clean so we can start the second stage of our recovery.”

He turned his head toward me.

“You, Mr. Vidal, will carry on under the orders of Mr. Brown.” Then, turning to Professor Castillo, he added: “You’ll remain on deck to identify and classify everything the archeological team brings on board.”

“It’ll be my pleasure,” replied the professor, amused by the commanding tone of the ship’s owner.

“Okay, gentlemen, get your gear ready and go eat something because it’s going to be a pretty hard day. In a couple of hours I want everybody in the water.” He stood up and left the room followed by Rakovijc, who had not said a word since we had come aboard.

After a calorie-heavy lunch of veal sirloin with braised potatoes, I was on deck feeling ready for anything. In front of me, the sand extractor hose was coiled in readiness to be put in the water. One end was set in a hollow, prepared on the deck floor for that purpose, by the stern platform. The other opened like the jaws of an anaconda, except that it had two steel handles on each side of the opening.

"I needn't remind you of the delicacy of this operation," said Brown interrupting my thoughts. "We'll just pump out the sand and notify the archaeologists of anything we find. Under no circumstances will we move or pick anything. Our job is to clear the area and that's just what we're gonna do." He frowned and added, "We're the fucking cleaning ladies so, pick up your vacuum cleaners and start vacuuming, girls."

He took my arm. "Ulysses," he said, "you'll start as nanny, same as this morning. But we'll all take turns at the pump, including you. Have you ever used one before?"

"Only once, years ago, working at the docks. But it was smaller and I didn't use it for very long."

"Never mind. It's pretty much the same. Only this one is the most powerful there is. It was built especially for us and it sucks three hundred and fifty cubic feet of sand per minute." He squeezed my arm. "What I mean is that you should be very careful. A few months ago one of our men passed his hand across the opening by mistake while it was working, and now he uses his elbow to scratch his balls."

We all carefully lowered the pump to the bottom. Immediately it started pumping sand at a terrific speed. Some members of the team set up a series of masts to the bottom, so as to surround the excavation site. How these worked I had no idea. The archaeologists, with Cassie leading, followed the tracks left by the pump like hounds after a fox. I kept my position several feet above the others just as I had done in the morning, concentrating on the regular coming and going of the divers and the progressive uncovering of the hull. The remains of this were beginning to be more visible.

I was rocking between currents, intent on my watch, when I felt a

humming at my back. When I turned to see what it could be, I nearly jumped out of my suit. Three feet away from my face were two huge eyes which dazzled me. A pair of arms jutted from the sides of an enormous head and seemed to be threatening me with terrible claws. My inaudible scream transformed into an eruption of bubbles. If I had been on land I would certainly have fallen on my butt from the shock.

It took me a couple of seconds to recognize that what I was facing was no monster come up from the depths to eat me but a harmless ROV, a remote controlled small submarine equipped with lights, cameras, sensors and a pair of robot arms. Presumably, I thought, at this very moment someone would be laughing their guts out behind a monitor in the control room. It seemed that Hutch did not want to miss any stage of the search, and this was his way of being present without having to don a diving suit.

Several shifts of divers had been organized, so that there would always be one down at the hull. Brown had made a quadrant where he calculated to the minute the time we could each stay underwater, according to the US Navy decompression tables. He organized everything down to breaks for snacks, sleeping and even to go to the bathroom.

Late in the evening my turn to dive was coming up. I was skeptical about the wisdom of carrying on the search in the dark, with the risk of missing something important or even damaging the site. Even so, I got into my suit, put on the great Scubapro vest they had lent me, and made sure the torch battery was charged. Then, with the rebreather at my back, I took the classic “duck step” with my fins on and dropped into the water. The sun was already touching the horizon.

When the other three members of the nineteen-hundred hour group were in the water, I gave the immersion signal and we began to descend. A moment later, when I looked below me, I was paralyzed by an amazing sight.

At my feet, the whole working area was lit by powerful underwater lights set on those masts I had seen being fit in hours before. The white sand of the bottom sparkled magically under the artificial lights, while in the center of the area the dark hull of the ill-starred ship was powerfully emphasized by the darkness amid the contrasting brightness that surrounded it. Above it, adding to the dreamlike quality of the scene, a team of divers moved under the lamps like moths attracted to light.

It was a hard night's work. I still had to go down to the hull twice more. My final return to ship coincided with a fiery dawn I had barely time to

notice, because I was so tired, while I floated on the surface of a rough sea, on my way back to the *Midas*'s boarding platform.

I had a few hours of sleep before preparing for the next dive, so I got out of my wet suit, dried myself and collapsed on my berth. I never even noticed either Professor Castillo's snoring in the cabin we shared or the increased rocking of the ship.

The alarm went off at midmorning. Feeling somewhat restored, I went to the mess hall ready to finish the ship's supply of peanut butter. Cassandra and the professor were already there chatting animatedly at a table. I greeted them as I passed my tray along the self-service counter and filled it with everything I thought I could eat.

"We were just talking about you," said Cassie as I sat down with them.

"Oh. That scares me!"

"Don't worry, Ulysses," the professor said self-defensively, "almost all of it was good."

"Sure. But I bet that 'almost' will have been some shameful episode that's been blown out of proportion."

"Just enough to make us laugh a little," said Cassie with a wink at the professor. "By the way, how was the night work?"

"Long, very long." I nodded to show how tired I'd been.

"If it's any consolation, I believe in a couple of hours more we'll have finished pumping out all the sand. Do you still have another shift?"

"In half an hour I have to be in the water again. Nitrogen's going to start coming out of my ears at this rate, what with so many immersions in a row."

"Hmm ... that'd be cool," she replied sarcastically, rubbing her chin in feigned interest. "Let me know when it happens, I'd love to take a couple of shots."

"Yeah, yeah ... you laugh. But when I die it'll be on your conscience."

Until then the professor had been following the conversation in silence. "What on earth are you talking about?" he asked.

"You don't dive?" Cassandra asked, surprised.

"If God had wanted man to dive He would've given him fins and gills."

"Oh, I see you don't," said Cassie with a smile. "Will you explain or shall I?"

"You do the honours."

"It's like this, Professor," she said, leaning on the table, "Every time we dive, our metabolism absorbs the nitrogen and oxygen in our bottles. Then

when we come back up to the surface, a small part of that nitrogen remains in our tissues. It's gradually expelled from our body in the course of the next few hours. The problem comes when you dive too many times in a row. The body doesn't have time to eliminate higher and higher concentrations of nitrogen, and it all builds up."

"And what happens then?"

"Well, it depends on the number of dives, the length of time you've spent under water and the depth of the dive. But it can vary from a simple tingling in the limbs to a cerebral air embolism."

Professor Castillo shifted in his chair and turned to me with alarm.

"Are you sure what you're doing isn't too dangerous?"

"Don't worry," I assured him, "we have computers that calculate exactly how long we've spent in and out of the water, just so this doesn't happen."

"I do hope you know what you're doing. If anything should happen to you your mother would kill me. A couple of times at least!"

"Everything is under control. Besides, from now on it'll be Cassie who'll be spending the day under water with her team. So you should be telling *her* to be careful. I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to her."

I was looking admiringly at her serene features as she fiddled with the spoon in her empty cup and stared at the coffee dregs. She looked up at me and smiled fondly.

Once again in daylight, as I was swimming down to the hull, I was taken aback by how fast things had gone. Less than twenty-four hours before all we had was a sea of sand with a few scattered pieces of blackened wood showing, together with a couple of virtual images from the soundings. Now, a whole side of the ship had miraculously appeared intact, with only a few boards torn from the hull and one frame peeping out like a whale's rib. Even to an amateur like me the prow and the stern were clearly identifiable, with the suggestion of a castle a couple of feet above what I could now recognize as the deck. I had never felt such a thrill at a discovery before. I was beginning to understand the passion that moved archaeologists like Cassandra to spend their life searching the seas of the world. It was magical and surreal, like watching a movie at the cinema. I could not believe we had brought to light a ship few people knew had ever existed, sunk in a place no one could ever have imagined. It was like discovering the tomb of an Egyptian pharaoh



under the Great Wall of China.

This time, although there was still one team left pumping sand, our job consisted of taking hundreds of new pictures of the hull before returning to the *Midas*.

When we returned to the surface, under an overcast sky, surrounded by foam-crested waves, Cassie was waiting for us on the platform. She took the cameras and headed straight to the computer lab.

As I was climbing back on board with the help of a couple of teammates still in my wet suit, Brown came up to me with a huge cigar in his mouth.

“How did it go, kid?”

“Great, it went great. We already have one side cleared and everything photographed.”

“Wonderful,” he said and slapped me on the shoulder. “Mr. Hutch asked me to tell you there’s a new meeting at twelve hundred hours.” He turned to go.

It was my turn to grab his arm. “Hang on a second, I want to ask you something.”

“Shoot.”

“Who handles the ROV from the ship?”

“Usually Rakovijc. Why d’you wanna know?”

“No reason. Simple curiosity.” And I left thinking that Mr. Rakovijc, “the shadow,” as he was secretly known among the staff, seemed to have a peculiar sense of humor.

As a result of the many hours of lost sleep the previous night, I fell asleep promptly in my berth. When I found it was more than ten minutes after twelve I stumbled out of my cabin and ran to the meeting hall. When I arrived, everybody turned to look at me. I mumbled an excuse and sat by the professor, although I noticed John Hutch’s annoyance. Evidently he was not pleased.

“You may continue, Ms. Brooks,” he said to Cassandra, who was standing by the screen on the wall.

She turned to indicate the new photo composition of the hull, “As I was saying, we’ve uncovered practically the whole starboard side. It’s in an astonishingly good state of preservation in spite of all the centuries it has been underwater. We assume it could’ve sunk because of a storm, as there

doesn't seem to be any trace of a collision with the reef. That same storm must have covered it immediately. This fact would have isolated it from the action of those microorganisms which usually eat the wood of sunken ships.

"Hasn't there been any sign of personal items, or things the ship could have been carrying?" said the professor, who seemed to be losing his habitual shyness. "Because I haven't been given any."

"Not yet, although it's not so odd. When the ship sank, the denser objects like weapons or coins or ceramics that might have been thrown off would have fallen on to the sand and sunk gradually in the seabed. It's possible that they may be buried at a deeper level than the ship itself."

"Good," said Hutch, closing the subject. "In that case, if Ms. Brooks has no objections, we'll move onto the recovery phase." He stood up and moved to the other side of the big TV screen. "This afternoon your team will cut out a ten-square-foot section of the hull right here, where we presume the main hold is." He pointed at a spot in the dark mass of the hull. "We'll fit a protective frame in the opening to stop it from fracturing, then we'll take the ROV in with one camera."

He turned to his audience with a look of satisfaction.

"Gentlemen," he concluded with a glint of greed in his eyes, "let's see what Santa Claus has brought us."

The excitement had gotten to all the staff. In the *Mida's* mess hall there were only nervous faces mine included, of course. Despite the hard work of the previous day and the knowledge that there was more to come, I could barely eat. I was gripped by anxiety and restlessness, and I was not the only one either. Neither the professor nor Captain Preston, who was sitting in front of me, had touched their food.

"Is this the usual atmosphere, Captain?," I asked.

"Only just before a recovery," he replied absentmindedly. "Uncertainty is always the worst feeling. Once we know what's hiding inside that hold, be it good or bad, things will settle down."

"And what do you think?" the professor asked him.

"I think it's better not to think. I've been doing this long enough to know that anything could happen." He paused to stare at the ceiling. "I remember eight years ago, in Cuban waters, we came upon what looked like a seventeenth century pirate ship loaded with silver stolen from the Spaniards. We reached an agreement with Castro's government to share the goods. But after months of investigation and a whole week of searching, during which we even lost a man, the moment we brought the first piece up on board, a Cuban frigate appeared and opened fire with its cannon. We had just enough time to pick up our divers, kick up our heels and leave."

"No kidding! So you were left with nothing!"

"Yup. Just a bronze bombard covered in coral. Maybe you noticed it at the entrance of Hutch Marine Explorations." He added making a face, "Now it's a rose flower pot."

I could not help but sympathize with the old sailor's stoicism. At that moment, I remembered I had been wanting to ask him something since the day before.

"Pardon my ignorance, Captain, but could you explain how it's possible for the ship to stay put without an anchor?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Hmm ... I see you've noticed. Not everybody does. Do you want the short explanation or the long one?"

"Let's have the short one."

"Magic."

“Okay... Let’s have the long one.”

“This ship,” he began with obvious pride, “as I’m sure John will have told you at least once, has all the latest gadgets in naval technology: high precision Global Positioning Systems, MSE, active and passive radars, RILF and the ultimate from Rytheon in detection, sonar and follow-up systems. We’re better equipped than any warship in the world.” He sat up very straight in his chair. “But what I’m proudest of is the Dynamic Positioning System or DPS. With the information gathered by the GPS, the *Midas*’s main computer knows the ship’s coordinates every minute, with an error margin of just a few inches. Then, the computer sends the data to a series of small propellers set along the keel which keep the ship apparently still. It adapts to the currents or winds with no regard to the depth underneath and without the risk of the anchor slipping loose at the worst possible moment.”

“I had no idea that was possible,” I admitted, stunned.

“The technology isn’t new,” said the captain trying to shrug it off. “But we’ve driven it to its maximum efficiency. As I’ve already told you, this may be the most advanced ship in the world.”

After a light lunch, the archeology team, led by Cassie and with three extra divers, left the *Midas* to slowly sink into a rough sea. A cloud of air bubbles followed in their wake. With the help of the ship’s crane, the rest of the divers lowered the Deep Ocean Engineering’s ROV Phantom IV. This was the one that had scared me the day before.

The moment I stopped being useful on deck, I ran to the control room where the ROV was being operated from, and found it crammed with people: Captain Prescott, Brown, the professor, a couple of divers, Rakovijc, and, of course, Hutch, trying to see the images the robot was sending to the monitor. As Brown had told me, Rakovijc was guiding it with a simple joystick in a metal box covered with buttons and screwed onto the surface in front of the fifteen-inch television. This showed the speed, direction, depth and position of the machine, besides color images.

The lights of the ROV went on at a depth of thirty-five feet, taking a small cuttlefish that was passing in front of it by surprise. When the robot reached the hull, the divers were already there drilling a couple of holes into the hull and inserting extending hooks which ended in a handle. Wasting no time, they took another pair of tools out of a bag: mechanical saws. Eyes agog, I watched as they applied both to a marked section of the hull until

there was a square hole about three and half feet wide. The cut out section of wood was separated using the handles they had just installed. I watched how Cassie, unmistakable with her blond ponytail streaming behind her, observed every movement made by the divers, who turned to her every now and then for approval. She approached the hole and checked the edges with her hands. She made a sign to the divers, who hurried to join some extensible aluminium frames to the opening with exact precision.

After this everybody moved aside, and Cassie raised her thumb to the camera. At the other end, Rakovijc slowly drove the ROV until it was just on top of the hole he would need to maneuver it through. Everyone in the control room held their breath the moment Rakovijc pushed the joystick forward and the robot entered the darkness of the dead ship that had lain buried for centuries. It took all of us with it into the mysteries of its womb.

The front lights of the machine showed a narrow space barely wide enough for it to turn. It advanced parallel to the hull, but its lights revealed nothing relevant. You could only see wooden bulkheads and further down what looked like hundreds of heaped-up round stones.

“Those stones were the ballast of the ship,” whispered Hutch as if he could read our thoughts. “Now we need to find the hatchway to the cargo hold.”

The ROV continued on its exasperatingly slow way until it was blocked by what appeared like wooden bars.

“A ladder,” he finally said, unable to contain his enthusiasm.

At first I could not understand, but when the image moved to the right I realized that what I had thought were bars were really the rungs of a ladder; I had not identified it in its horizontal position.

The robot kept moving toward the right until it reached an open hatchway. It passed through and arrived at a bigger hall, softly lit for the first time in hundreds of years. The ROV then swivelled until it faced a small wooden door. Upon closer inspection, this turned out to be locked with a thick, rust-covered padlock.

“That’s it!” Hutch exclaimed excitedly. “Go to that door!”

The ROV moved forward faster this time, in response to its owner’s urging. Its pilot had not shown the slightest sign of emotion whereas the rest of us were sweating, fists clasped, our hearts pumping blood at twice the normal speed.

When it reached the door, and I was ready to ask how the hell we were

going to get past it, one of the ROV's metallic pincers appeared on the right of the screen and with a swift move grabbed the padlock. Then it was the left arm of the ROV which appeared, leaning on the door frame. At a slight nod from Hutch, Rakovijc maneuvered the controls and the padlock burst under the pressure. Once the splinters had settled and the view was clear again, the ROV pushed through what was left of the door, crossed the threshold and lit the entire interior.

A muffled exclamation caught in eight throats. It was after a few seconds that the professor could utter a timid, "No, no. It can't be..."

Clearly distinguishable, in spite of the blurry image which filled the screen, was an array of iron military equipment from centuries ago: hoes, plows, ax-heads, swords, armor, helmets and hundreds of other utensils, all corroded, piled against the side of the hold in a chaos as absurd as it was real.

There was no doubt that we had stumbled upon an important archeological discovery: a sunken cargo ship, perfectly preserved and full of objects of the time. But definitely not the one we had expected to find.

As a final proof, in the bottom right corner of the screen there appeared what was unmistakably a heavy harquebus: a kind of firearm, from very much later than the time of the Templars.

All of us present in that meeting hall were struck dumb by the disappointment of a few hours before. We kept our eyes down, not looking at each other. Clive Brown was chewing on a cigar butt which seemed to be absorbing all his tension. Cassandra was studying the veins in the wood of the table. When I crossed glances with Captain Preston, he arched his eyebrows with a bitter grin as if to say, "I told you so". Hutch, with Rakovijc seated to his right like a statue of salt, was going over and over the brief report Cassie had given him a few minutes before. Meanwhile Professor Castillo, armed with a magnifying glass, was studying the digital photo that showed the latest image taken by the ROV in the hold of the hull.

"There's no doubt," he said, breaking the tense silence. "It's a flint harquebus, probably Spanish, from the sixteenth or seventeenth century." He looked straight at Hutch. "In spite of the rust it's perfectly identifiable, which eliminates the possibility that this is a Templar ship from the beginning of the 1300."

"Then you fully agree with Ms. Brooks's preliminary report?" asked Hutch.

The professor nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Well, well," said Hutch harshly. He stretched his jaw and cracked his neck to relieve the tension. He stared again at the document in front of him and asked in a low voice, "Does anybody have any theory that can explain what's happened?"

Of course we all kept silent. We had not the remotest idea why we had failed. Every sign had pointed us in the same direction. The only thing missing was a map of the treasure with an “x” marking the spot. Yet, unbelievably, the treasure was not there. Instead we had another sunken ship, and this had left us even more baffled and disappointed than if we had found nothing. Ironically, in any other circumstances, our discovery would have been celebrated with champagne and mutual congratulations. But we had all had in mind a hold full of gold, silver and jewels, and finding nothing but a hoard of farming tools and rusty swords had left us in absolute despair.

“Couldn’t it simply be that the ship we’re looking for is outside the area we’ve searched?” I suggested timidly. “Or that we’ve overlooked it?”

“With the equipment we have, the second option is impossible,” said Hutch calmly. “Any iron object buried in the sand would have been detected. And as for it being outside the area of search, it’s possible but highly unlikely. A wooden vessel loaded to the brim doesn’t move several miles while it sinks. And if the bell you found had fallen in the water for any other reason, the fucking ship could be anywhere in the Caribbean, if it really did sink in the first place.”

I was determined to make my point. “And wouldn’t it be worth our while to broaden the search area, just in case?”

“Ulysses,” he said impatiently, “the calculations of drift involving winds and currents are conclusive. There’s no sense in prolonging the search for a vessel we’re not sure exists, in a location we cannot determine.”

“Even so, I think...”

“Mr. Vidal!” he interrupted, now visibly upset. “Why do you think we operate twenty-four hours a day? I own the best ship, the best technology and the best specialists in marine recovery, but all of that means a very high cost per day of work. Wasting one week is very expensive. Wasting one month would mean my ruin. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Of course I understand! But down there you have the remains of a four-hundred- year-old wreck. Time hasn’t been wasted. And not being prepared to continue the search for a few more days, seeing we’re already here, is utterly foolish!”

John Hutch got up from his chair in a rage. For a moment he seemed ready to explode ... but in the end he checked himself. He sat down again slowly and closed his eyes. After a few seconds, he looked at me more calmly and said with just a hint of anger, “I’m a professional treasure hunter.



Probably the best in the world. And not a junk dealer or an antiquarian. I don't have to discuss my decisions with you. In fact, I don't even know why you're in this room..." He inhaled and addressed the rest, "So, if nobody has anything to add..."

"I agree with Ulysses," said a firm female voice.

Cassandra was defiant. Hutch turned to her in disbelief.

"Honestly, Ms. Brooks, I don't give a damn what you think. This isn't a democracy. This is my business, my ship, and my operation. That means I make the decisions. And I say we leave." He turned to the chief diver. "Mr. Brown, you have until noon tomorrow to pick up all the gear from the bottom. We'll leave at fourteen hundred hours. End of the meeting."

He stood up brusquely and went out without another word, followed by Rakovijc who, for the first time, fixed his cold gray eyes on me. His manner was not friendly.

The sound of the door slamming shook the hall, but before its echo had faded Cassandra's voice could be heard clearly, "*Pendejo...*" she muttered under her breath, as she stared angrily at the door.

I was facing the gray door of cabin number six. Its steel plate muffled the sound when I knocked.

"Yes?" said the voice on the other side.

"It's me, Ulysses."

"Come in, it's open."

I pushed the heavy door and found Cassie lying on her bunk, in shorts and tank top. She had a book in her hands and was wearing her MP3 earphones. She quickly disconnected them.

"Hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all. You're no intruder."

"What were you listening to?"

"Some jazz. It helps me relax. But sit down, man, don't just stand there."

"Are you okay?" I asked as I moved her desk chair up close to the bunk. "Didn't see you at dinner."

She made a face. "Didn't want to see Hutch in case I got indigestion."

"Well, just in case, I brought you some fruit." I took an orange and an apple out of my pockets.

"Oh, you're so sweet, Ulysses." She kissed me on the cheek, put the

fruit on the bedside table and lay down again. "Now, tell me, what brings you to my humble abode?"

She looked really beautiful, with her tousled hair around her shoulders, a face free of makeup and an open intense look in her eyes which, had I not been sitting, would have made my knees knock.

"The fact is," I began, a little afraid she could read my thoughts, "I feel a little guilty about what happened at the meeting. I messed up and you paid for it."

"What do you mean? What mess?"

"I mean that because of my stubbornness you had a confrontation with Hutch. I'd be sorry if I'd caused you any trouble."

"Well, be less sorry because I'm never going to work for this *hijo de la chingada* son of a bitch, ever again. It's not the first time something like this has happened, and I'm fed up." She put her hand on my knee. "So, don't worry. I was going to send him to hell one of these days anyway. I'm an archaeologist, not a tomb raider."

"Huh! I hadn't imagined you in a moral dilemma like this."

"How else am I supposed to feel? Hutch, as you must have realized, is only interested in gold. He doesn't feel remorse about destroying a unique hull if he believes it'll bring him some sort of benefit. He uses me as a means to reach his goal as efficiently as possible. But not because he cares about submarine archeology.

We both fell silent, and I wondered whether she thought the same of me. After all, why fool myself? I had arrived at this ship driven by greed too.

"And now what will you do?" I asked.

"What do you mean? With my life?"

I nodded.

"No idea, man. Truth is I've never bothered about the future. I just do what I feel like doing at any given moment. What will be, will be."

I was definitely liking this girl more and more. I changed the subject.

"Would you like to see the place where I found the bell, before we leave? The reef is spectacular, and don't forget, tomorrow we have the day off."

"*Órale!* It's been a long time since I've dived for pleasure." She put her hand on my knee again. "What time shall we meet?"

For the first time since we had left Florida, the sky was blue and free of any

trace of cloud. It seemed as if the Caribbean were happy that we had stopped poking her guts and were leaving for good. The surface was absolutely still, and toward the south we could even glimpse the dark shape of Pico Bonito, on the Honduran coast. It was not yet nine in the morning and the temperature was pleasant. But the sun climbing high on the horizon and the total absence of wind warned of a truly sultry tropical day.

I was preparing my gear when Cassandra appeared with hers, in a sexy bathing suit, with a smile on her lips.

“Morning.”

“Morning,” I replied, trying not to drool. “Aren’t you putting on your wetsuit?”

“Not today. I prefer it like this. What? You don’t approve?”

“Of course I do!” I assured her.

Cassie laughed when I blushed. “Huh! I’m glad I’m not the only one who colors up.”

“The thing is we’ll have to swim on the surface. The reef is a little way off,” I said as I adjusted the diving computer on my wrist.

“How far?”

I pointed to the east. “About half a mile in that direction.”

“Hm.” Cassie rubbed her chin, thinking. “Hang on a minute. Wait here, I have an idea.” She disappeared.

Two minutes later she came back carrying two black plastic suitcases. She laid them on the floor carefully and opened one of them to show me what was inside.

Wrapped in flexible grey foam were two pieces of equipment: a small analogue remote control joined to a propeller approximately seven inches in diameter, and a black cylinder the size of a can of beer with the *Advance Diving Technology* stamp on it.

“What the hell is that?”

“It’s an IPS. An Integrated Propulsion System. It’s like a diving torpedo. You hook it on to the air tank. That means your hands are free to do whatever you need and you don’t have to carry it up and down, with no idea what to do with it once the battery runs out. Besides, it weighs less than ten pounds and you control it with one finger on this switch here. It’s the latest in diving technology. It’s cost Hutch a small fortune, but you and I, my friend, are taking it for a ride.”

She smiled impishly.

Once in the water, only the faint buzz of the propellers disturbed the natural silence. Cassie advanced on my left, carrying a small metal detector she had insisted on bringing “just in case”. Letting ourselves be driven by the impulse of the electric motor, we crossed a barren stretch of white sand in the direction of the reef right in front of us. We had come upon a small half-buried ray which scuttled away as soon as we swam over it. A school of tiny silvery fish accompanied us for a while, forming a ring of bright living light around us.

As we were getting closer to the mass of coral I thought that, ironically, the adventure of the search for the Templar ship was going to end precisely where it had begun some weeks before.

We browsed among the coral, which was shaped like giant brains. We chased a poor octopus until it sprayed its ink on us, then played with a hawksbill turtle that had come to the reef to be cleaned up by the little fish. Coral reefs are usually places where the ocean life in its infinite variety of shapes and colors reaches its ultimate. Besides, this particular one, with the barren plain of sand surrounding it, reminded me of an oasis in the African savanna, where all species, predators as well as prey, gather in search of food and shelter.

I was watching Cassie amusedly as she tried to lure a wary lobster out of its hiding place when out of the corner of my eye I spotted a dark shadow moving toward us fast. I barely had time enough to turn and see a huge bull shark lunging at us.

I launched myself toward Cassie as fast as I could to protect her, but my movements seemed to be in slow motion. When the girl, who had not seen the shark, saw me come hurling on to her with no warning, she put her arms out and brought up her knee against my stomach, pushing backwards with a startled look in her eyes. But that was nothing compared to her expression of fear when the shark, after grazing my air tank, promenaded its good twelve feet of length a few inches from her mask.

Despite her initial fright, Cassie recovered rapidly. When I reached her side once again, she took the initiative and pointed at a small coral projection which would at least cover our backs.

I had never experienced such an unprovoked attack from a shark. Although it is well known that an adult bull shark has the same amount of testosterone as a male elephant in heat, it is also true that they very rarely attack divers, much less as directly as this. What was more, in several months

of work on that same reef, I had only seen a few white pointed sharks, and they had never bothered me. Unfortunately, this was no use at the moment since our immediate problem weighed about eight hundred pounds and possessed mechanical saws for teeth. And the worst thing was that we could not see where the hell it had gone.

We stayed close to the wall, waiting, but we knew that sooner or later we must move. The shark could wait indefinitely. We could not.

After a few minutes of total stillness, with all our senses alert, I decided to venture a little. I peeped around the ledge that protected us. The shark was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps it had left as suddenly as it had appeared. I turned around to face Cassie, who grabbed my hand forcefully without realizing what I meant to do. Gesturing, I made her understand that I wanted to take a look and that I needed her to watch my back. She gave me the thumbs up, and with a racing heart I pushed upwards.

What happened then could be summed up as a mixture of surprise, confusion and panic.

As soon as I stuck my head out, I came face to face with the huge open jaw. Several rows of teeth sharp as scalpels projected outwards with the clear intention of snapping around my neck. Fortunately, I was still holding Cassandra's hand, and I used it to pull myself back downward with all my strength. The huge jaws closed with an audible snap just over the nape of my neck. The monster grazed our heads again. Then, when it was about seventy feet away it turned around and slowly but determinedly came at us with its jaws open.

It was a more than critical situation. We were trapped against a coral wall. Yet if we swam out we would be at its mercy. We would have to do something anyway, before our air supply died out... that is, if we were still alive before that happened. I wanted to apologize somehow to Cassandra for putting her in this situation, so I did the only thing I could think of at that moment. I grabbed the small knife I always carried at my ankle and made a deep cut in the palm of my hand. Then I left our shelter, trusting that my presence and the taste of blood would draw the shark away from Cassie, leaving her to escape. I looked back at her one last time and signaled stupidly not to worry while I swam away and lured the shark after me in the process.

"I won't make this easy, you bastard," I thought, setting the IPS to max. I headed toward a small opening in the reef, close to where in a previous life I had found the bell that had led me into this situation. I was feverishly

searching for something I could use to defend myself, but, ironically, the zeal we had shown in clearing the area of trash had turned against me. And perhaps it was going to cost me my life.

The bull shark was only a few feet away from me. Its hunched back and open jaws were an unmistakable sign that it was ready to attack. Just then I reached the small nook where I had thought to hide, but the propulsion device attached to my tank trapped me with half my body outside and my legs at the mercy of the shark. Obviously I had to do something. There was no time to unhook the IPS, so with the skill of experience I got rid of the whole gear in a flash. I left the tank and vest outside but kept the end of the regulator which connected me to my air reserve. I molded myself into the narrow opening, praying that the beast would not take the tank.

I trusted that at least Cassandra would be safe by now, because my own situation was going from bad to worse. I could see the shark passing back and forth a few feet away from me, no doubt wondering how to take a bite out of me. The blood streaming from my hand and my vulnerable predicament meant the beast would not leave easily. I would have to find some way to scare it away, or I would end up as boloney.

My small knife was totally useless with an animal like this and my flippers did not seem intimidating enough as weapons. That left only the air tank, the vest and the IPS. I racked my brains, and I came up with an idea as improbable as it was absurd. I moved half way out of the opening, holding the regulator out of my mouth together with the spare one, and challenged the shark to come and get me. The moment it saw me it rushed straight at me, showing off its terrifying jaws. I waited until it was as close as my fear would allow. Then I connected the IPS and pressed both regulators at the same time, so that a small cloud of bubbles was pushed into the shark's face by the propeller. To my surprise, the shark stopped short and, distrustful of this strange being who was firing jets of compressed air at it, decided to search for a less troublesome bite. It turned, waved its tail with contempt, and finally disappeared as it had arrived, fading away in the deep blue ocean.

Without wasting any time, I put my gear back on and turned to go toward where I had left Cassie. To my surprise she was looking for me. Far from hiding or swimming away, she had risked her life trying to help me, which gave me an idea of the kind of person she was.

When we met again we hugged in underwater relief, kneeling on the bottom to relax after checking that we were both unharmed.

Then, Cassandra's hand closed sharply over my arm. I looked all around apprehensively, imagining the monster was making a comeback. But no: when I turned to her questioningly, I saw her attention fixed on the blinking red light of the metal detector that still hung inert from my wrist.

Right where I had been about to become shark meal, the detector was signalling that, somewhere lying hidden among the coral, was an iron object of great density. As we were so close to the spot where I had found the mysterious bell, I immediately guessed it would be some object related to it. Cassandra must have reached the same conclusion. Holding the gadget firmly, she set it at maximum and started to track the area inch by inch. She was concentrating on the tiny light, with everything we had just gone through completely forgotten.

I had not gone back since discovering the bronze bell. It had not occurred to me that there might be anything else of interest in the surrounding area, since I had been diving with tourists in that same place for months and had never seen anything unusual in the whole reef. So when I saw Cassie feel the surface with her hand, take her knife out of its sheath and pick at the coral with all her strength, I was stunned beyond belief. After a few minutes she wrenched out a small piece, tore off something and held it in front of my face. I could make out what to all purposes appeared to be a wide, slightly misshapen ring made of gold, with a remarkable mounting made of the same material.

We had already used up three quarters of our air supplies. Once we had made sure there were no more objects in the surrounding area, we headed back toward the *Midas* with our IPS set on maximum power. We reached the ship in ten minutes and helped each other up to the stern platform, under Brown's disapproving eyes. He was guessing, rightly, that Hutch had not given us permission to use the equipment we were wearing. But before he could say a word, we told him of our dangerous encounter with the shark. He immediately sent down a team with anti shark poles to the hull, where there were still some divers working.

While we took the gear apart, pretending to be cool, I kept wondering about the episode with the bull shark. I shared my concern with Cassie.

"It makes no sense. Sharks only attack that way in cheap films," I said as I hosed down the gear we had just used. "It seemed to come for us, the bastard!"

"You know, I think that was my fault."

"Yours? Why?"

"Look..." She turned around and pointed at her butt. A thread of blood ran down her right leg, apparently originating in a tiny cut just where her bathing suit ended.

"How did you do that?"

"Not sure. I think it might've been while we were playing with the turtle. I must've cut myself on the coral and not realized it."

"That explains everything! Those beasts can smell a drop of blood from miles away."

"They do have a great sense of smell! Next time I'll wear the wet suit for protection no matter how warm the water is!" She took my hand and looked up at me with what seemed like sincere admiration. "And by the way, what you did down there was very stupid, but very brave too. I'll never forget it." And tiptoeing up she gave me a kiss, a quick, moist, tender kiss on the lips.

Once we had the material set up to dry we went to the cabin the professor and I shared. But first, we stopped at the infirmary to disinfect Cassie's cut and



have a couple of stitches put on mine.

When we got to the cabin, we found Professor Castillo lying on his bunk in his underwear, reading. He nearly fell off when we burst in.

"You should knock before coming in!" he complained, rushing to get his trousers.

"Forgive us, Doc, but we're in a hurry," I said. "Come take a look. It'll surely interest you."

Cassie took out the small piece from inside her bathing suit. She put it on the table, soaking several documents in the process.

"What can it be?" I whispered.

"I'd say it's a ring," she whispered back.

"Yeah, I can see that. But it's not an ordinary ring, it's too big."

"May I see what you have there?" the professor said at my back.

I moved aside so he could see. "Of course!" I said, "That's why we brought it in."

Professor Castillo opened a drawer and took out the magnifying glass he claimed he took everywhere. He picked up the piece between his finger and thumb and looked at it carefully.

"Well, well."

"Well, well, what?" I asked impatiently.

"It looks like a ring..."

"It looks like a ring," I mimicked. "What a gathering of experts!"

Still hunched over the object, the professor turned to me. He gave me a teasing look and finished his sentence.

"But it's not."

On either side of the professor, Cassandra and I exchanged perplexed glances behind his back.

"Then what is it?" she inquired.

"A seal, my dear. A Templar seal."

Now the three of us were hunched over the gold piece the professor was still holding in his fingers, our attention riveted.

"It was just a few feet away from where I found the bronze bell," I whispered answering the unspoken question.

"Was there nothing else?" asked the professor, his eyes still fixed on the magnifying glass.

"Nothing else in at least a thirty-five feet radius," said Cassandra absentmindedly.

“But there could be something further away, right? The reef is quite big.”

“Maybe another small piece. But if there were something big the *Midas*’s instruments would’ve detected it. And we don’t have time to go back and do a proper search.

“But ... maybe if we spoke to Hutch...”

“Seriously? After that scene yesterday, he’d throw Ulysses overboard. I’ve already told Hutch the magnetometer didn’t detect anything, which means there’s nothing much else left down there. Hutch won’t waste another day searching this reef, and besides...” She straightened up brusquely and fell silent.

“Cassie?” I asked, surprised at her sudden change of attitude.

“Besides...”

Suddenly, after a long silence, she stared at me with wide open eyes. You could see an idea forming in her mind, but she did not say another word until she pointed a finger at me, and asked in a shaky voice, “How big would you say that reef is?”

I was intrigued by the question. “I don’t know, about fifty feet long by thirty-five wi...”

Then I understood what she was getting at.

“... wide.”

Cassandra beamed. “Jesus Christ! We had it right in front of us!”

We both fell silent, staring at each other with a foolish smile on our lips until the professor got up between us and looked first at one and then the other.

“Will you please tell me what you’re talking about? It’s the second time you’ve acted as if I weren’t here, and I really don’t like that.” He crossed his arms on his chest. “Would it be too much to ask to be told what’s going on?”

I bowed. “Of course, Doc, it will be a pleasure. You said yourself just the other day that the usual measurements of a medieval cog were about seventy feet. Didn’t you?”

“Well, yes...”

“Well. That is roughly the size of the reef where I found the bell. And where we found this seal today. Doesn’t it seem like too much of a coincidence to you?”

“Are you telling me that the remains of our sunken ship are inside this

reef?”

“No, Doc. What I’m telling you is that the Templar ship *is* the reef.”

The dining hall was empty with the exception of Cassie and myself. We had been quiet for several minutes and I found that I was watching the bubbles of the soda in front of me, hypnotized, as if they had the answer to all the questions that were buzzing in my mind.

“What I don’t understand is why the magnetometer didn’t detect it,” I said, finally taking my eyes off the bottle.

“Obviously, because there weren’t enough ferrous elements for it to register it.”

“Then that would mean it can’t be one of the ships that carried the treasure.”

“Not necessarily. For example, if the ship had a small leak which made it sink slowly, they may’ve had enough time to transfer the cargo to the other ships. Remember it was a fleet of eighteen vessels.”

“Okay. Suppose it did happen that way. At least we should’ve detected the iron pieces of the actual ship. I don’t know ... nails, rings, hinges ... all that.”

“There’s an explanation for that, Ulysses. In those days they used very little iron on ships. Medieval metallurgy wasn’t good and iron rusted fast. So, they tended to use wood and rope: more resistant to saltpeter and easier to replace.”

“Then, there’s no evidence to prove it’s impossible for those remains to be our ship.”

“None that I can think of.”

“But the gold isn’t there.”

“Nope.”

I sat there, pondering our defeat. In the end I had no choice but to accept it.

“So,” I said, finally, “this is the end...”

Cassandra turned to me in silence. She looked tired and disappointed.

Downcast, we returned to the cabin where the professor was still examining the ring with the mounted seal. He looked up when we walked in and shook his head disapprovingly.

“My goodness! You two look as if you just came back from a funeral.”

“Almost.”

“Come on, it can’t be that bad.” He sounded cheerful.

I was upset by his good mood. “What can I say? Just when we discover where the hull we’re looking for is, it turns out it’s crumbled, empty and covered by three and half feet of coral.” I collapsed on the bunk. “No treasure, no proof, no nothing, just an old bell and a dented ring.”

“Well, don’t get too gloomy. This isn’t the end.”

“What do you mean?” Cassandra was intrigued.

“Just that. This isn’t the end. We still have the bell and this very interesting seal.”

“I see you’ve cleaned it thoroughly,” she said.

“I have... It’s clearly a Templar seal. If you look closely you’ll see two riders on just one horse engraved in the middle. Unquestionably a Templar symbol.”

“Seriously? What does it mean?”

“Good question.” The professor enjoyed showing off his knowledge. “As you know, there have been many theories concerning the Templars, most of them highly unlikely. It’s been told that they had supernatural powers. That they made pacts with the devil, with aliens, or that they protected Christ’s lineage. All nonsense. Some people, for example, have claimed this image was an allegory of homosexuality or a cabbalistic key. But most likely, it’s the simple portrayal of the vow of poverty all members of the Order had to swear to. Two knights on one horse is a good metaphor, don’t you think?”

“Okay, Doc.” I sat up on the bunk. “That’s all very interesting, but it doesn’t take us anywhere. Unless, of course, the horse those gentlemen are riding knows the way.”

“The horse doesn’t. But I do.”

“How...?” Cassandra was astounded.

“I’m saying that I think I do know where to go from here. Haven’t I told you about the inscription?” he added innocently.

“Damn it, Professor. Spill it out!” I was finding it hard to keep calm.

“Oh, come on...” He was trying to appear offended. “You insist on depriving an old man of his simple pleasures.”

“Drop it, Doc. Stop pretending and tell us everything. This isn’t an Agatha Christie novel.”

“Okay, okay. It turns out that after I’d cleaned the ring very carefully, I discovered a Latin inscription on the outside. It reads, *Ioanes Calabona Magister Mappamundorum*. Would you be able to translate it, Ulysses?”

“No idea. I only speak Latin on Sundays.”

Cassie laughed.

“Very funny. It means “John Calabona Master of Maps,” said the professor.

“No kidding! It’s the cartographer’s seal!”

“That’s right. One thousand points for the gentleman here!”

“But ... I still don’t see where this takes us.”

“It takes us to the inner side of the ring.”

“You should write mystery novels,” said Cassie.

“*Et tu, Brute?*” he recited dramatically. “Oh dear! How impatient you, young people are!”

“Move aside, Cassie. I’m throwing him out the hatchway.”

“Ulysses, remember that violence is the last resort of the incompetent.” He was evidently enjoying our puzzlement. “I’d better get to the point before you hurt yourselves. Inside the ring, as I mentioned, there’s another inscription. Three more words.” He winked at me, “Let’s see if you can translate them this time.”

“Don’t insist, Professor. You know my level of Latin. You should ask her. From the way she laughed, she must speak it like Seneca.”

“I didn’t say it was in Latin, Ulysses. In fact, it’s written in Catalan.”

“Catalan!” Cassie and I repeated.

“Exactly, my dears. And the text reads, *Monestir de Miramar*.

“Miramar Monastery... Does this mean that the owner of this ring was a Catalan cartographer monk?”

“Not necessarily. You must realize that in the Middle Ages there was no doubt that the best cartographers in Europe came from Majorca. That was where they drew the nautical charts that all vessels of that time navigated with. The common language on the island was Catalan. Therefore, the owner of the ring might’ve been from that island and, as the ring indicates, a member of the Order of the Temple. So, we have a ring that belonged to a Templar knight named Ioanes Calabona. He was a cartographer traveling on one of the ships. Presumably, being a *Master of Maps*, he must’ve known where they were headed and had some sort of map or nautical chart. Because, honestly,” he ended sarcastically, “I can’t imagine the Templar fleet wandering around the Caribbean, carrying a treasure like that and not knowing where to go.”

He paused and breathed deeply.

“I suspect,” he went on, looking at us, “that the key to this enigma may be several thousands of miles from here.” He looked out of the hatchway. “Perhaps in a convent seven hundred years old.”

“You don’t mean to say that the Templar treasure is hidden in that Miramar Monastery, do you?” asked Cassie.

“What I think the professor is suggesting is that we forget about the hull and follow the tracks of the ring.”

I was quiet for a moment, lost in thought. The engines of the *Midas* came to life with a dull vibration.

I spoke again. “Finding our mysterious cartographer’s monastery might be our only chance to trace the treasure and find out where that fleet was going.”

“Are you saying you’re going to go on searching for the treasure after this fiasco?”

“What I’m saying, Cassie, is that we are going to continue the search. Or do you have anything better to do in the next couple of weeks?”

Ignoring the tedious film, I watched the dry plains of Castile, slowly sliding past, three thousand four hundred and fifty feet below me. On my right, the professor was napping, drugged to his ears once more because of his fear of flying. On the next seat, by the aisle, a petite blond Mexican archaeologist was reading Pérez-Reverte's *The Queen of the South*. I guess she must have seen me looking at her out of the corner of her eye, because she half-turned and smiled.

"What's up?"

"Nothing ... I was just thinking how glad I am that you're on this plane."

"And I'm glad that you let me come with you. Anyway, I was sick of Hutch and I needed a change of air. Besides, that ring and the crazy story about the treasure have me just as fascinated as you two."

"Sure. But remember there's no guarantee that we can find it."

"God, Ulysses, I know that! The truth is I don't believe we'll find anything."

"So?" I don't understand."

Cassie closed her book and sighed... "I think the professor is right."

"About what?"

"You're an idiot."

We landed in Barcelona at midmorning. We took a cab to the professor's house and left him there, still half groggy, trying to remember which bag he had put his keys in. Despite this he insisted that we leave and that he had everything under control. I gave the driver my address, and shortly afterward we were standing in my living room with luggage all around us.

"Told you it was tiny."

"But it's cute. And you have a terrace."

"Also tiny."

"Oh, you know what they say: size doesn't matter."

"There we agree. In fact, I prefer beautiful women who aren't too tall."

"Good to know." She gave me that impish smile of hers. "But now tell me, where shall I put my stuff?"

“You can leave it in my ... in *the* bedroom, because there’s only one.” I pointed at the door. “I’ll leave you space in the closet.”

“Don’t bother. We’re hardly going to be here any time at all. I’ll just leave my things in the bags.”

“Whatever. But you have the bedroom and I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Ulysses, I appreciate your kindness but it makes more sense if I sleep on the couch. I’m smaller.”

“No way! You’re my guest, and you’ll sleep in the bed.”

“All right, I won’t argue. Show me the rest.”

We made the tour of the penthouse; inevitably brief with just two rooms to cover. We ended up lying on the bed fully dressed, after agreeing to take a few minutes to recover from the long trip and the jet lag.

An annoying tune woke me up six hours later. I had a persistent feeling of *déjà vu* which increased as I sleepily watched the twilight creeping in through the window. The feeling disappeared the moment I turned over and met her emerald-green eyes fixed on me.

“You snore,” she said seriously.

“You do too.”

“Not true!”

“Yes it is,” I taunted her.

“I do not snore!”

“No? Steven Spielberg just phoned to ask if you could be in the next *Jurassic Park*!”

“Oh, you liar!” She got to her knees on the bed laughing, then grabbed the pillow and began hitting me.

The music that had woken me was a message from Professor Castillo’s cell phone, inviting us to lunch at his place the following day. This made me realize I was as hungry as a wolf, as Cassie must be too.

We decided to change the clothes we had been wearing for the past twenty-four hours and go to the Chinese restaurant for dinner. Cassie, quicker than I was, opened her bag, grabbed the first piece of clothing she found, and ran to the bathroom. As she went, she stuck out her tongue at me.

Sitting on the bed, I waited with a wicked grin on my face while the water started running.

“Ulysses! How the hell do you turn on the hot water?”

Dinner went smoothly. We had rice, noodles and *sangria* galore. It was well



past midnight when we got back home. We sat on the couch in the dark, exhausted from a combination of alcohol, jet lag and the events of the past week on the *Midas*.

“I hope he meets a big white whale...”

“Who?”

“Hutch, of course! Who else?”

“Didn’t know you were holding a grudge against him.”

She meditated her reply. “Not a grudge... In fact, I really hate myself for working for him for so long ... helping him plunder sunken ships...” She paused and then went on regretfully, “I got good bucks and the thrill of adventure in exchange for my principles. I despise myself.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. At some point we all do something we’re not too proud of.” I put my hand over hers. “What’s important is that you realized your mistake and changed it. That’s more than most people do. A lot more.”

“That’s sweet, Ulysses, thank you. But I’m not telling you this for you to comfort me. I just needed to let it out... Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. It makes me happy that you trust me enough to share with me how you feel. And I’m happy to be with you now ... with my hand on yours.”

There was a trace of a smile as she looked down.

“Me too, Ulysses. Me too.”

Her hand was getting warmer under mine. The faint moonlight shone through the window and fell on her hair. It seemed to strike her pupils, filling them with a light that seemed to pour out of the depths of her own eyes.

I was staring at her in silence. I believed I knew what was crossing her mind. Something I had not felt in a long time came flowing straight out of my heart, ran along my arm, down to her hand, and up to her lips, which I could barely see but imagined moist and yearning. Something inside me was urging me to complete the circle and join my lips with hers. In her silence I sensed the same idea. Slowly I drew closer, inch by inch. I could feel her breath on my face and my eyes were closing in anticipation. I tilted my head so our lips could meet and then, suddenly, I felt a firm hand on my chest.

“Ulysses,” she said drowsily, “It’s late. And tomorrow we have a very long day.”

Fortunately, I had set my alarm for 11 a.m. Not even the brightest sun falling full on the couch where I was sleeping had woken me up. I stretched noisily and went to the bathroom, not yet fully awake. Mysteriously, the door refused to open when I turned the knob and pushed. Thinking it had got stuck I pushed harder. Then, an indignant voice said from inside, “Don’t be a brute, man! You want to break the door down?”

For a moment I was mystified, then everything rushed back to shake my sleepy neurons into activity. I remembered I was not alone at home. Who was it that had spoken from the bathroom? And what had happened or rather *not* happened the night before?

“Sorry. I ... I didn’t know you were in there.”

“And who did you think it was, then?”

“Umm ... I mean ... I ... Forget it, nothing. Will you be long?”

“Only till I’m finished.”

“Yeah, sure.”

The reasoning part of my brain was still too sleepy to follow that or any other conversation, so instead I went to the kitchen thinking about strong coffee.

Ten minutes later the door opened. Light footsteps pitter-pattered briefly and a small figure wrapped in a towel flashed by the kitchen and into the bedroom. She left a good morning hanging in the air and sudden butterflies in my stomach.

“Mmm. That coffee smells wonderful. Will you make me some, sweetheart?”

“Sure,” I replied dumbly and murmured to myself, “*Sweetheart?*”

The coffee was not yet ready when she sat at the table drying her hair with a towel. She was wearing a youthful flowery dress that made her look exactly like a college student.

“What is it?” she asked when she noticed me watching her.

“Nothing ... only that it’s the first time I’ve seen you in a dress.”

“D’you like it?” She got up and straightened it out.

“Very much. You look very pretty.”

“Thanks. Bought it years ago but I love it.”

Just then the coffee pot whistled. I motioned her to stay put and served the smoking coffee in a small cup. She looked at it perplexed.

“Tiny cup...”

“It’s a coffee cup. If you want a bigger one I’ll have to serve it in a glass.”

She took the cup by the handle, brought it to her lips and took a careful sip, then put it back on the table. “Ugh! It’s too strong and bitter.”

“You didn’t put any sugar in.”

“It’s not just that. It’s ... it’s too ... too thick. D’you always have it like this?”

Suddenly I understood and was amused. “Oh, I see! You’re used to American coffee. Should’ve told me.”

“And how was I to know you’d prepare such a *potion*!”

“It’s not a *potion*, Cassie. That’s coffee. What you normally drink is washing water!”

“Call it what you like. At least it’s drinkable!”

We took the subway to go to the professor’s house. There was an uncomfortable silence most of the way. We looked at the passing tunnels through the scratched window which reminded me of the one on the plane. I wondered what impels some people to damage the thing which lets us see outside.

From time to time our eyes crossed, fleetingly. I could not fathom what was going through her mind but I kept recalling the warmth of her breath, the light reflecting in her pupils ... and her hand on my chest stopping me from getting any closer.

Then I had felt frustrated, now there was a feeling of ridicule. I would have betted my right arm that she wanted me too. Her comments, gestures and insinuations had been evident even to me. Yet, obviously, I had been wrong. I had acted like a donkey in spring, throwing myself at her at the first opportunity. Now, I was expecting her to say any moment that she was moving to the professor’s so I would feel more comfortable.

And I had it coming for being a smartass.

When Professor Castillo opened the door, he was wrapped in an elegant silk robe. He had apparently recovered from the time change and sedatives. On his clean-shaven face was a cheerful expression. There was a slight scent of after-shave lotion.

He waved us in and asked how we were.

Cassie looked at me askance. "Very well, thank you."

"Did you guys have enough room in your little home?" he asked mischievously.

"Yeah, well ... sort of." I was waiting for Cassie to say something any minute.

"We're very comfortable, thank you. Everything's swell." She turned to me and winked as we walked down the hallway.

If someone had stuck a needle in me, no blood would have come out.

I was aware that in general I was not very good at reading women but, in this case, the little Mexican had totally baffled me. I decided there and then, as I walked into the living room and sat down on the old-fashioned sofa, that from then on I would stop trying to understand her. I would simply go with the flow as in one of those complicated films which you trust you will understand before the final credits.

"I'm glad, I'm glad." The professor pointed at the dining table where plates and cutlery were arranged on a magnificent tablecloth. "Would you care for an aperitif or shall we eat directly?"

I looked at him foolishly, with my mind still elsewhere. It was Cassandra who answered.

"Professor, I'm starving."

I was unaware that the professor was an amateur chef, so the sirloin with pepper sauce and garnish came as a delicious surprise. We celebrated with generous glasses of Rioja wine and ate up everything he served. We felt pleasantly stuffed after the vanilla ice cream topped with nuts and caramel sauce.

The plates were still on the table when the professor poured us each a glass of brandy. I made myself more comfortable and savoured the sweet drowsiness.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked. There was a pleased look on his face as he crossed his hands over his stomach.

Cassie licked her lips. "Delicious!"

"What's for lunch tomorrow?"

He laughed at my not altogether joke, then leaned his elbows on the table and glanced from one to the other with an expression I knew very well.

"I've discovered something," he announced with a touch of mystery in

his voice.

Cassie and I looked at him wide-eyed waiting for the revelation. But the professor enjoyed his little mind games and waited as long as he dared, or at least until he saw me frown impatiently.

He pulled out the gold ring from his robe pocket and held it up between his index finger and his thumb. "As I suspected, the seal on the ring belongs to the Order of the Temple. And the inscription points to its owner being some kind of cartographer."

"Didn't we know that already?"

"Until this morning it was just a guess. But yesterday I sent an e-mail to a colleague at the University of Palma. A few hours ago I received confirmation of my theory."

Cassie was alarmed. "Did you tell this colleague of yours everything?"

"Of course not, my dear. Only what was strictly necessary. But I promised to go see him in a couple of days. He's the biggest expert in *portolanos* of the fourteenth century."

"*Portolanos*?"

"That's how the first navigation charts were called."

"Very good, Cassandra. Congratulations! I see you've done your homework."

"I'm a very smart girl."

"And weird," I added without thinking.

She fixed her eyes on me. She had guessed my meaning. I was expecting a rebuff, but instead she said with another wink, "That's part of the charm."

The professor observed this exchange with a hint of surprise. Apparently afraid the conversation would take an unsuspected turn away from the subject at hand, he went on "Ahem... As I was saying, I promised this professor we'd visit him and I've already booked tickets for three people to Palma, the day after tomorrow.

"I see you've finally succumbed to the beauty of flying," Cassie said mockingly. "Or is it the sedatives you're fond of?"

"I never said we were flying. We're going by boat. We'll leave at nine in the morning."

"Wait a minute. Why should we go? Wouldn't it be better if you went alone? To be honest, I haven't even unpacked yet and I was looking forward to spending a few days at home relaxing."

The professor looked at me and then at Cassandra.

“Sure ... relaxing. Well, I’m sorry, kids but I need you to come with me to Majorca. Because my colleague,” he added with apparent indifference, totally aware of the effect his words were going to cause, “has provided me with an interesting address on the island. Someone has to help me snoop in a certain old monastery in Miramar.”

“We could’ve been there in thirty minutes by plane,” I complained as I tried to get more comfortable in my seat.

The professor did not lift his eyes from the book he was reading. “A trip by boat is nicer and it’s only going to be four hours.”

“Four hours of boredom...” I said, shifting like a dog. I was already tired of this shiny *Transmediterranea* catamaran. It was like a floating carpeted coach traveling on a never-ending grayish-blue surface.

Cassandra returned that moment carrying a tray with three cups of coffee. She gave us one each and sat back between the professor and me.

“You can’t imagine how hard it’s been to explain to the waiter how I wanted my coffee. You’d think it’d be easy enough to understand!”

“Maybe it’s your sweet Acapulco accent,” I suggested. “Truth is, even I only understand half of what you say.”

The professor saw an opportunity to join in the teasing and said, “Ha! Then you really listen to what she says?”

“Oh, go to hell! Both of you!”

“See, Doc? That’s what happens when you leave a country that is only half conquered. They lose their respect for you.”

“True... so true,” he agreed, trying hard not to laugh. “You teach them to read and write and look how they pay you for it.”

Cassie turned to me, biting her lip. At the same time she elbowed me in the ribs catching me off guard and ending the joke.

Once I had recovered my breath I tried to concentrate on the adventure novel in front of me. I was on the same page as I had been the day I left it to fly to Miami with Professor Castillo. I kept thinking back to the night before, when I had taken Cassandra on a tour of Barcelona city. We had stopped to listen to some musicians on *calle Bisbe* and we had ended up at *El Náufrago*. There she had explained, laughing, that tequila should be taken straight and that lemon and salt were for *gringos* and teenagers. By three in the morning we were discussing the best places in the world for scuba diving. If they had not started to pull down the blinds at the bar, I believe we would still be there, laughing and chatting at the same table. In the end, we took a cab to my

place. In the elevator we stood face to face, staring into each other's eyes without a word. An unmistakable tingling ran up from my feet to the back of my neck. And I sensed why she had not kissed me the night before.

We left our scant luggage at a modest hotel near Palma's *Plaza de España*. Then, we took a nice stroll to walk our lunch off, and arrived at the building that housed the university's History Department where we were to meet the professor's friend.

We walked in, and after asking the janitor for directions, we found ourselves outside a solid wooden door on which a plate read: Prof. Lluís Medina. The professor knocked twice and after getting a loud curse for answer, he opened the door and walked determinedly into the office.

"Eduardo, my friend! Long time no see!" came a powerful voice from inside. "And how tanned you are."

"How are you, Lluís? Get your fat ass out of that chair and give me a hug."

Meanwhile, Cassandra and I waited outside the office. A couple of minutes later the professor remembered we were there and came to the door for us. Once inside, I was surprised to meet such a big man. He was tall and square, and with his shaven head he made me think of an oversized version of Telly Savalas in *Kojak*. In two strides he was in front of me. He smiled as he offered me his hand.

"You must be Ulysses," he said in an appropriately deep voice.

"That's right. And this young lady is Cassandra Brooks."

He dropped my hand which was almost pulp after his super-strong handshake, and took hers much more delicately. "Well, well... This I wasn't prepared for. Nice to meet you, Ms. Brooks," he said in English.

"We can speak in Spanish if you want," she said, amused, "I speak it pretty well."

"Oh! Excuse me. I assumed by your surname... In that case, *un placer*," he added still holding her hand.

"The girl is an archaeologist," said the professor.

"So she's a colleague!" The big man was excited. "Double pleasure then." Turning to the professor he added, "If you're going to come in such good company, you may visit me as often as you wish, Eduardo. As many times as you wish!"

"I can imagine, you old goat." The professor patted him on the stomach



and added, "But if you go on expanding sideways, you won't be able to seduce even a walrus!"

Both professors made a curious picture: one was short, with the typical shabby academic look, whereas the other resembled a retired basketball player in his Sunday suit rather than a renown scholar. But, in spite of the differences in looks, it was obvious that these two were really good friends, probably the result of a shared passion for history.

He invited us to sit but, seeing the lack of furniture I decided to stand and leave the chairs to Cassie and the professor. I noticed that this office was a scale model of the living room at Professor Castillo's house. Hundreds of books of all kinds and sizes covered the walls. And here too, most of the books were bound in old leather. The only concession to wall paper was a space, framed by bookshelves, where there hung a huge rectangular map. It was divided into vertical sections that showed the whole of Europe, Asia, North Africa, and a portion of the Atlantic together with a group of islands I could not identify. It was profusely decorated with drawings of kings, castles, flags and improbable animals.

"Extraordinary, isn't it?" Professor Medina said from behind his desk when he noticed my interest.

"What year is it from?" I asked with sincere curiosity as I tried to decipher the variegated writing on the map.

"It's a reproduction of the famous *Atlas Catalán* by Abraham Cresques, the majorcan cartographer. The original was drawn in this city at the beginning of the fourteenth century." There was pride in his voice as he added, "It's the first atlas of the world we have knowledge of."

When I heard the date I turned instinctively to Professor Castillo who gave me a significant look in return.

"I didn't know they made such good maps," I admitted in surprise as I turned to the wall again. "I remember seeing some from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries that my father kept in the house but they looked like children's scrawls compared with this one."

"That's true," said Medina. "But Abraham Cresques turned out to be ahead of his time, and this map in particular was a present from Prince John to King Charles VI of France. That shows just how fine and important it was."

I could not take my eyes off that beautiful map of the world. I looked at the line of the Mediterranean coast, perfectly outlined by the succession of

ports named on it. The mountain ranges, such as the Atlas, looked like long golden snakes lying in the sun. The inner cities were pictured as fortresses with a different style according to whether they were Christian or Muslim. Even such faraway and unknown places as Indonesia or Thailand were decorated with images of elephants and dark skinned monarchs. It was beyond me to imagine the tremendous effort it must have taken a man seven hundred years ago to compile so much information, so precisely. How many sailors and travelers he must have questioned at a time when hardly anyone ventured past the borders of their own shire. And those who had reached the land of the Great Khan or navigated south of the Canary Islands could be counted on the fingers of one hand. I could not help but feel a surge of affection for Cresques, and a deep admiration for his talent and undeniable perseverance.

I heard Professor Medina say, “Well, Eduardo, tell me. What was all that talk on the phone about a cartographer monk and a seal?”

The professor gave a partial account of the cause of his interest. He obviously skipped all involvement of the seal with America. He said he had found it in an antique shop in Barcelona and that his ultimate aim was to publish the results of his investigation in some specialist magazine. Lluís Medina listened with interest, leaning back in his seat with arms crossed. He occasionally interrupted to ask for some clarification. When the professor finished his elaborate exposition Medina remained silent, unmoving, like a living Buddha dressed in an Armani suit, digesting the story we had fed him.

“And these are your assistants?” he asked after a while.

“Something like that.”

“I see.” He glanced at the floor and then at his friend. “Look, Eduardo, we’ve known each other for a long time; nearly thirty years. And this... is the biggest piece of bullshit I’ve ever heard from you.”

The three of us were speechless, partly from shame and partly expecting a burst of anger from the big bald guy whose eyes were fixed on the professor. A few tense seconds that seemed like minutes went by, then suddenly the professor let out a guffaw that startled all three of us.

“Of course it’s bullshit!” he exclaimed innocently. “What did you expect me to do? Give you all the information, just like that? What I need to know is whether you’ll help me or not.”

For a moment, Medina remained still, as if he had not heard the professor. But gradually a smile began to appear on his enormous face until it turned into another guffaw.

“Of course I’ll help you, you damned crook!” he bellowed. “How couldn’t I?” He laid a finger on the open map on the table.

“Here’s the Monastery of Miramar, on the road from Valldemosa to Deià. But I must warn you that very little remains of the original building.”

“How much is *very little*?” I asked.

“Well, a part of the house, one section of the patio or courtyard and four columns of the old cloister.”

“Hmm, It isn’t much, no....”

“You must take into account that the Monastery of Miramar was built

in 1276. It wasn't until 1872 that the Archduke Luis Salvador decided to buy it and restore it. If it hadn't been for him, nowadays there wouldn't be one stone left on top of another."

It was the professor who spoke this time. "And do we know who founded it?"

"Absolutely," Medina replied with evident satisfaction. "It was no less than Ramon Llull."

"Unbelievable!"

Cassie and I looked at each other in silence. Neither of us had any idea who they were talking about. Finally the two historians saw our ignorant expressions.

The professor said reproachfully, "I can understand about Ms. Brooks because she studied in the US. But you, Ulysses? You should know who he was."

"I have a vague idea of him being a Majorcan mystic of the Middle Ages... but I don't see what's unbelievable about it."

"What's extraordinary about Ramon Llull founding the Monastery of Miramar," he explained impatiently, "is that he wasn't just a mystic, as you said. He was also a novelist, poet, philosopher, theologian, linguist, astronomer... and a forerunner in maritime charts."

Cassandra nearly jumped out of her chair. "Was he a cartographer? Then, there's no doubt that this is the monastery the ring mentions."

The professor nodded. "Very possibly. But what I find disappointing is the fact that so little remains of the original building. I doubt we'll find anything there."

"And in Llull's writings?" I ventured. "If he founded the monastery and our mystery cartographer set out from there, they must have known each other. Right?"

"That's true," said Medina. "But it's also true that the vast majority of his works didn't make it to our day. I've read the few that have survived from cover to cover several times, and I can assure you there's no reference of a Templar cartographer in any of them."

"And a reference to geographical knowledge he wasn't supposed to have?" Cassie asked.

Medina didn't answer. He looked at her carefully, then at me, and finally addressed the professor.

"Are you going to tell me what you're really looking for, or will I have

to figure it out myself?”

Professor Castillo looked at us for approval. We both nodded.

“We think the owner of this ring... knew of the existence of the American continent.”

“I could see that coming. So you’re looking for the famous Templar-American connection.” He was obviously disappointed. “Allow me to give you some advice: drop the subject and don’t waste any more of your time. Others have tried before and there’s never been the least inkling of proof that that connection ever existed. The Knights of the Temple were never in America. That’s just a fantasy fed by pseudo-historians with the sole aim of selling more books.” He dropped both hands on the table and, looking at Castillo reproachfully, added, “I’m surprised you allowed yourself to get tangled up in something you know perfectly well is a myth.”

The professor didn’t lose his cool. “You asked and we answered. The question remains the same: are you going to help us?”

“I believe you’re losing your mind, Eduardo. And I’m afraid you’re dragging these charming young people with you.” He turned to Cassie. “Do yourselves a favor. Drop it and save yourselves money and time.”

“We’ll risk it.”

“Okay... suit yourselves. But remember I warned you. I’m a bit busy now but come by tomorrow morning. Say at nine. By then I’ll have checked my files for all the information I can think of that might be useful.”

“Thanks, Lluís. See you tomorrow.” The professor got up from his chair. It was clear the meeting was over.

“So, where do we go now?” asked Cassandra once we were in the street.

“I don’t know about you two, but I’m going to the hotel to rest.”

“No way!” I objected. “Now we’re all going to rent a car and drive to the Monastery of Miramar.”

“Honestly, I don’t think it’s worth it. If as Lluís says there’s so little of the original monastery, it will be a waste of time.”

“Like looking for a Templar-American connection?”

He clicked his tongue and turned to Cassie, interrogating.

“I say let’s go right now. That’s what we’ve come for, isn’t it?”

“All right” he conceded, “if it’ll make you happy...”

“That’s my man.” I grabbed their shoulders. Let’s see what we find in this old monastery.”

An hour later I was driving a Mercedes SUV down the road from Valldemosa to Deià. Cassandra was sitting beside me, checking every little side road, trying to locate the one marked on the map she had open on her lap.

“It has to be around here.”

The professor was not at all happy to have been dragged into this drive. He grumbled, “I do hope there’s some kind of sign or else we won’t be able to find the blasted monastery. We’ll be driving round in circles.”

“Don’t panic! I’m sure we’ll find it. In the meantime, enjoy the ride.”

I was not being flippant with my suggestion. On the right were gentle wooded hills. On the left, a succession of abrupt cliffs marked the boundary between the island and the Mediterranean. The sea looked calm and sensual as it reflected the orange light of the autumnal sun.

“There it is!” said Cassie, startling me, as she pointed her finger ahead.

There was a clear sign that warned of the detour to the Monastery of Miramar. A chill ran down my spine as I read those same words that were engraved on a golden ring seven centuries old.

I turned into the path, and soon I was parked beside the outer gate of the property. It looked closed, and I wondered if perhaps the monastery was not open to the public. We got out of the car and checked that it was indeed locked. There was an anachronistic intercom, so I pushed the button once and then again, several times, impatiently.

Almost five minutes went by before a hoarse voice finally asked, “*Qui hi ha?* Who’s there?”

I replied in my most conciliatory voice, “Good evening. We’re a group from Barcelona and we wish to visit the monastery.”

“No visits unless pre-arranged.” The voice was dry.

“Sorry, we didn’t know. But now that we’re here, wouldn’t you let us in? Just for a quick look?”

The voice was rude. “I said only pre-arranged visits.”

I was annoyed by his lack of manners and I dropped mine, sure it could not make matters any worse.

“Listen. You don’t mean to say that we’re not getting in after coming

all this way because of some absurd rule, are you? Don't you think the same people would've come if we'd called yesterday?" As an afterthought I added, "We won't leave until you open the door!"

"Suit yourselves," was the indifferent reply, and he hung up.

I had obviously been wrong in assuming things could not get worse. They had.

I wheeled and faced Cassandra and the professor, who looked discouraged. With my hands in my pockets I went back to the car. I was furious at the man over the intercom but also at myself. I should have foreseen that possibility.

"Just a second, there may be something I can do." The professor took out his cell phone and moved a little way from us. He spoke animatedly into it. Finally he said *thank you* and *goodbye*. Then he came back to the car.

Cassie looked at him, questioningly. "So?"

"Let's wait a few minutes and see what happens."

Less than two minutes had passed when a new voice came over the intercom.

"Are you still there?" it asked, worried.

Cassandra replied, "We are ... still."

"Excuse the delay. Please, come in."

With a short buzz, the gate opened. A moment later a monk in Franciscan clothing was guiding us through the monastery. He justified himself by saying, "We didn't know you were collaborators of Mr. Medina. He is the greatest expert on Ramon Llull on the islands. Our doors are always open for him or any of his assistants. They were a great help when we organized our exhibition."

"It's all right," said the professor with a dismissive gesture. "It was just a misunderstanding."

Cassie was looking at the blackened paintings on both sides of the corridor. "What exhibition?" she asked.

"About Llull and the Archduke, of course." He looked confused. "I understood that was what you came to see ..."

"In part," the professor said quickly. "But first of all, while there's still light we'd like to see the remains of the original monastery."

"Oh, sure, sure! Whatever you wish. But let me warn you that you'll be disappointed."

The professor turned to give me a look. I made a face at him and said,

“We are warned.”

We followed the monk to the middle of an open courtyard. The four surviving columns of the first monastery stood alone, proud and useless.

The Franciscan made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “Here you have all that remains of the monastery founded by *mossen* Llull.”

We walked around the columns, fingering their surface with interest, looking for some significant sign or mark. But time had done its work all too well and any inscription that might have been present seven centuries ago had been smoothed out.

“And the rest?” I asked. “Mr. Medina said there was more.”

“Oh, true, there is. One section of the vestry belonged to the original monastery. But it was so decayed that we covered it up.”

“So this is all?” Cassie was annoyed.

“I told you you’d be disappointed.”

We remained silent, eyeing each other but, when I was about to suggest we leave, Cassie turned again to the monk.

“The exhibition. Can we see it?”

The monk was obviously delighted to leave the courtyard, where a cold breeze was beginning to blow. “Of course. Follow me. You’ll find it really interesting.”

The hall was big and austere, with an atmosphere that had been carefully contrived. It was filled with a series of evenly spaced glass cases that contained one-hundred-year-old books and manuscript charts. On the walls was a mixture of portraits of old friars and moth-eaten maps in paper or parchment, protected by glass.

“*Híjole*” Cassandra exclaimed. “That sure is one collection!”

“It’s the most important exhibit dedicated to Ramon Llull or the Archduke Luis Salvador in all the island. They were both significant figures in the ancient history of our region, each in his own way.”

“This Archduke you’re talking about, is he the one who bought the ruins in order to restore them?” I asked.

“That’s right. It is interesting to note that he devoted a great part of his life to following Llull’s steps. Not only did he buy the remains of this monastery, but he also compiled all the information he could about its founder. Most of all, he was interested in his role as a geographer. This led him to acquire dozens of maps, charts and manuscripts that were related in some way to Llull and cartography.” He paused deliberately. “It’s a bit odd



that although cartography was far from the most important part of his work, the Archduke ignored everything else that wasn't related to this discipline. He even casually gave away some extremely valuable original documents by Ramon Llull himself which didn't mention the subject the Archduke was obsessed with. All the same, in order to respect his memory, we presented the materials of the exhibition according to the importance he assigned to each document during his life.

"It's remarkable," the professor said. "And does anyone know the reason for this obsession?"

"Actually, no. Only wild theories about the search for a treasure, or something like that. Personally, I think it is just a load of nonsense."

I felt all my blood go to my feet and a drop of cold sweat run down my cheek. Judging by the expression on the friar's face, the same thing happened to the other two. He looked at us with real concern.

"Are you all right?" he asked taking the professor's arm. "You've all gone suddenly pale."

A few minutes later we had recovered from the shock. Left alone in the hall, we wandered and studied each map and document, grateful for the modern Catalan, English and Spanish translations in the captions beside them.

Given the large amount of documents, we had decided to examine only those with any reference to the Knights of the Temple, transoceanic navigation or any type of secret map. Finding anything like that was unlikely, but we had to start at some point. Reading everything there would have taken us months.

I started at the far end of the room. At first I tried to read the original manuscripts, the vast majority of them in old Catalan. Then I simply skimmed through them until in the end I was so engrossed trying to interpret even the complicated captions that I had to ignore the originals.

In the end, after three hours of fast reading and with my head on the point of exploding, I dropped into one of the chairs by the door. When Cassie saw me she dragged herself to the chair beside me. She also looked exhausted. The professor, intoxicated with the sight of those yellowed parchments and exquisitely hand-drawn maps, went on studying the contents of the cases.

"Do you remember what the monk said about the lay-out of the documents?" Cassandra asked after a while with curiosity.

“Yeah, he said something about them being laid out according to their importance.”

“No, Ulysses. Not according to *their* importance but to the importance the Archduke attached to them.”

“Hum, you’re right. So?”

“What did he say he attached importance to?”

“Cartography?”

“Exactly! But, why?” She was looking straight ahead, not at me.

“Because he was after the Templar treasure, just like us?”

“That’s what I think. Therefore ...” She left me to finish the sentence.

“Therefore, the document occupying the most prominent place in the exhibition will be the one which, according to the Archduke, is most closely connected to the treasure,” I mused.

My gaze followed the Mexican’s stretched arm. It was pointing at one lonely glass case right in the middle of the hall.

“Has anybody looked at that cabinet?” she asked. The professor adjusted his glasses and turned to look at her. “Because I’d say that’s a pretty prominent spot.”

“What do you think?” Cassie asked the professor.

“Disconcerting, to say the least,” he replied without looking up from the parchment. “It makes no sense.”

“There’s no reference to treasures, discoveries or cartography. It’s just a will!”

“Besides,” the professor continued, “it was written in 1432, more than a century after Ramon Llull died. I don’t even understand what this document is doing here!”

I had read the transcription again and again, but I could make no sense of it, even though something told me that the key was right there. As the professor had said, it was dated July 1432. It was addressed to a notary and signed with an unfamiliar name: Jaume Ribes. Yet, there it was right in the middle of the hall, with the dozens of manuscripts which filled the cases like satellites orbiting around that central parchment.

The document in question was written in Portuguese. It was about a legacy of possessions and titles whose apparent beneficiary was a child; perhaps the writer’s son. The only indication of any connection with cartography was an obscure reference to the name Cresques, the author of the Catalan atlas I had been admiring a few hours before in Lluís Medina’s office. This Jaume Ribes quoted Cresques in a curious context. It was a sort of poem at the end of the will, an incoherent riddle that caught our attention. It went like this:

*Fugin l’alumne del magistro  
Arribá a la més humild vila  
E sota la yum d’en petit Cresques  
Guardá el camí del Brau  
A la negra Allexandria.*

“That’s not written in Portuguese. I’d say it’s Old Catalan!”

“Makes sense,” said the professor. “Jaume Ribes is a Catalan name. But what I don’t understand is why the rest of the letter is in Portuguese.”

Cassie put in, “I’d say that if there’s something relevant here, it’ll be at

the end, in the poem. It looks too complicated to be a children's riddle, and the reference to Cresques makes me wonder if there's more to it than meets the eye."

"The owner of this collection must've thought the same," I said, "or else he wouldn't have placed it right in the center of the room. Besides, the fact that it's so different from everything else here suggests it's something important and unusual."

The professor translated aloud: "*The pupil fleeing from the Master. Arrived at the most humble village. And under the light of little Cresques. He protected the Bull's path. In black Alexandria ...*" He looked up at us. "Does all that mean anything to you?"

Our silence was enough to make him bend over the glass case once again, with a sigh.

Cassie stretched her back and yawned. "I think that if the Archduke studied this letter, which presumably he must have, he couldn't have managed to decipher it, because he didn't find the treasure. So, how are we going to manage it in half an hour ourselves, considering we're tired and hungry? At least I am."

"You're absolutely right, my dear. We'd better go back to the hotel. We can come back tomorrow."

"It may not be necessary," I suggested. "I imagine they must have copies of the documents here. Let's take advantage of Medina's influence and ask the monk for them."

At that same moment, as if he had read our thoughts, the friar's voice said behind us, "Have you found what you were looking for?"

"Maybe," I said. "But we were wondering whether you have copies of what's on the display."

"Of course. The originals are too valuable to work on."

"And ... could we have one to study?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible. We can't allow the exhibition material to leave the monastery. That's a condition imposed by the Archduke's heirs."

"Not even a copy?"

"Not even a copy. I'm so sorry," he added apologetically. "We didn't set the rules. Not even Mr. Medina has that privilege. Every time he needs to consult something, he has to come here in person."

"I don't understand the restrictions. But, could we at least borrow some paper and a pencil?"

Cassie and I copied the whole letter (or rather the Catalan and Castilian transcriptions). We hoped that if we could have time to study it thoroughly we might make something of it. While we were busy writing, the professor chatted with the monk, whose name turned out to be Brother Francis, about how extensive and remarkable the exhibition was.

“I see you are interested in Jaume Ribes’s will.”

“Yes, we are,” admitted the professor. “As it is in the middle of the exhibition we figured there has to be more to it than it appears from the contents.”

“True. The Archduke kept it in his personal safe along with the deed to his title of nobility. I’d say it was his most precious possession, even more than his whole property.”

“And do you know why?”

“I’m so sorry to disappoint you once more but he never told anyone or left anything written for that matter. We’re left in the misty world of speculation.”

I put the pencil down on the glass case and asked, “And what speculation would that be?”

He looked rather downcast. “Very limited, I’m afraid. The only real connection is that he was an important cartographer from the Court of Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal. And, well ... — he swept his arm at the whole room — you’ve seen his fixation with maps.”

“That would explain why it’s written in Portuguese,” said Cassie. “But why are the last verse lines in Catalan?”

“Well, obviously, miss. He was Majorcan!”

“Oh! I didn’t know that.”

The monk remained silent and watched closely as if seeing us for the first time. At last he asked in surprise, “Don’t you work with Mr. Medina? On the phone he said you were his collaborators so I assumed you were familiar with the material in the exhibition.”

The professor put on his best poker face and said dryly, “We are Mr. Medina’s collaborators. But I can assure you that in all my years as professor of Ancient History, I have never once come across the name of Jaume Ribes.”

Brother Francis studied the professor, obviously trying to gauge how truthful he was being. He finally crossed his hands in the classic monk’s stance, regarding us as if we were three adults seriously questioning who

Santa Claus really is.

“Jaume Ribes,” he explained patiently, “was the name he took at baptism when he converted to Christianity. You may know him by his Jewish name: Jaffuda Cresques, son of Abraham Cresques. The man who made the Catalan atlas, the most important map of the world in the Middle Ages.”

The beams of the Mercedes swept the winding road. The sea, gentle a few hours before, looked like an impenetrable dark mass that did its best to swallow the lights every time they were focused in that direction.

Inside the car we were all silent, musing about we had just found out. The professor, in the back seat, was reading the Catalan transcription of Jaffuda Cresques's will for the umpteenth time. Cassie meanwhile was doing the same with the Castilian translation. She finally broke the heavy silence.

"Fleeing from the master," she recited, "arrived at the most humble village and under the light of little Cresques, watched the Bull's path, in black Alexandria. "There's no way you can make any sense of it."

I was skeptical. "Do you really believe there's a message hidden in those lines?"

"There has to be. Why else would he write something so cryptic in a will? She glanced in the rear mirror and asked, "Don't you think so too, Professor?"

The only answer she got was the hum of the car engine.

"Professor," I called. "Are you still with us?"

"Huh? What? Oh, sorry. Did you say something?"

"I was asking if you agree that there must be a message hidden in the will," said Cassandra.

"Well, I was thinking about the same thing, my dear," he replied vaguely, then sank back into his own thoughts.

"So?" I insisted.

"Huh? Oh, yes, of course. Well ... the truth is, I don't know."

"Wow, you're a great example of scientific analysis!"

Cassandra jumped to defend him. "Come on, Ulysses, don't be a pain ..."

"Leave him," said the professor, coming out of his lethargy. "He likes to tease defenseless old people."

"He-hey! You came to at the smell of blood!"

Cassandra was looking at me out of the corner of her eye and at the professor in the rear mirror.

“You’re a pair of loons. This isn’t so much an investigation, more like an episode of Chapulín Colorado!”

“You’re right, Cassie,” I leaned toward her and said in a low voice, “You see, the teacher hates me.”

“Grrr! Don’t know why I get involved!”

The professor said, rather crossly, “For heaven’s sake, Ms. Brooks! Enough, already! Let’s get serious.”

She glanced at him through the mirror, but said nothing.

“Have you discovered anything in the will?” I asked, getting back to business.

“Not yet. But I bet you my pension the last lines mean something.”

“Perhaps the place where the Templar treasure is hidden?”

“I don’t think so. If we accept that it was taken to America, there should be a very exact map or description of the place. But I doubt very much if that description is in those five lines. Besides, the word *magistro* has me confused.”

“Why so?”

“Because it’s translated as master, but “master” in Latin is *magister*. Although it’s probably nothing. Maybe our friend Jaffuda simply wasn’t fluent in Latin and this is just a mistake. And maybe Medina’s team saw it as such and decided to translate it as “master” which is most probably the word intended.”

“Summing up,” said Cassandra, sounding discouraged, “it might not mean anything at all. Maybe, as Medina said, we are chasing a mirage, a ghost ...”

The road twisted and turned while her last words echoed inside the car.

“We’re chasing a damned ghost in a foggy night,” I said, my imagination caught by the mist illuminated by our beams “But for my part, I’ll grab anything wearing a sheet and dragging chains behind it!”

They did not reply but judging by their looks, my friends were thinking just the same.

When we got back to the hotel the professor preferred to stay in his room with the document, so that we were left alone in a half empty dining room. The buffet was practically ours.

Cassie waved her fork with a piece of veal on it. “I don’t understand. If this Cresques knew about the treasure and if that sort of poem he wrote



shows the way to find it, why didn't he go after it himself?"

"Maybe he did," I said chewing on some lettuce.

She pointed her fork at me as if it were a magic wand and she were threatening to turn me into a toad with it. "Well, in that case, there are two possibilities: One, this will be a joke and someone is laughing in hell about it, and two, the lines aren't his and he couldn't decipher them. Because, as far as we know, he didn't leave an inheritance of ten thousand million dollars, not to mention relics and precious stones."

"There's a third possibility. He did know the answer to the riddle and decided not to make it known and not to go after the treasure either."

"Why not?"

"Easy," I said while I chased an olive across the plate. "Because, perhaps he didn't want to find it, he just wanted to protect it."

"Are you suggesting that Jaffuda Cresques, a converted Jew, was really a latter-day Templar knight who was trying to protect the greatest treasure of history from the greed of infidel Christians?"

"I was thinking more that it's too much of a coincidence that the ring belonged to a cartographer who was educated on this island. And that another cartographer, also Majorcan, included in his will what appear to be details of how to find something his colleague had hidden in an undiscovered continent a century earlier."

"I don't see what you mean, Ulysses."

I stared into the glass of red wine in my hand. "I was asking myself whether Jaffuda wasn't simply passing on a riddle to his own son in his will. A riddle he might have inherited from his own father, Abraham, who was also a cartographer. But who might in turn have received it from ... for example Ramon Llull, another Majorcan cartographer who lived during the last years of the Order of the Temple. And who, coincidentally, founded the monastery we visited this evening, where the owner of a certain Templar ring was also educated..."

Cassandra chewed on my words at the same time as on the meat she had finally put in her mouth, and looked at me, with her eyes narrowed.

"You know what? Maybe you're not such an idiot after all."

"Well, isn't that funny. My high school maths teacher used to say the same. Of course, he was wrong."

"Hey, kids. Glad you're here," said the professor as soon as he opened the

door to his room. We were bringing him the fruit he had asked for. "There's something I want you to see. Come in, come in."

Cassie and I exchanged weary looks. All we wanted was to go to bed and sleep until the next day, so the professor's invitation was not enthusiastically received.

He waved us to sit down while he put some order among the many papers on the small desk. As the only chair in the room was the one he was using, we sat on the edge of the bed, hoping he would be brief. While we waited, I noticed a half consumed, hand-rolled cigarette in the ashtray. There was an unmistakable scent in the room. I was stunned.

"Do you smoke marihuana, Professor?"

He looked at the cigarette and shrugged.

"Very rarely. But I always carry a little weed. It helps me relax. Would you care for a drag?" he offered.

We were amused but shook our heads.

He began to explain. "You see, while you were enjoying your nice dinner, I stayed here and studied the transcriptions."

"Are you upset because we went down for dinner?"

"No, no. I didn't mean that. Or maybe I did. But don't mind me too much, I'm a little stoned."

"Don't worry, we can see that," said Cassie.

"What I wanted to tell you is that after reading the will over and over, mostly the last part, I believe I've found some meaning in it." He fumbled among his papers and waved a sheet at us. "What our friend Jaffuda seems to have left us is some sort of travel journal."

"Please elaborate," said Cassandra.

"Look, if we concentrate on the final lines we find the following: *Fleeing from the master*. It tells us that someone fled from somebody else, namely a pupil from his master. We don't know who they were or why one of them was fleeing from the other. But we can surmise that both characters are relevant to this story. Mostly the pupil, who seems to be the main character." He added to himself, "When we get back to Barcelona I'll have to consult my files for any reference to something like this happening at the beginning of the fifteenth century in Majorca. Although it won't be easy."

"Professor, we were talking about this at dinner. Ulysses thinks that this riddle might've been written a century before. He says that maybe it was passed on by his father, who could've written it or received it himself from

someone else. I think he might be right.”

“You believe that the key to the Templar treasure might have passed from generation to generation, just like Grandma’s silverware?”

“Why not?” I said. “It makes sense. According to your friend Lluís, Ramon Llull was the best cartographer in Europe at the time when the Templars escaped to America. Would it be so outrageous to suppose that he advised them in some way? And that in the process, found out where they were going to hide? He left this knowledge to his disciple Abraham Cresques, who in turn left it to his own son in the form of a riddle.”

“Wait a minute, Ulysses,” Cassandra interrupted me and put her hand on my leg, which distracted me. “You said they were fleeing. Could the pupil be the Templars, and the master ... I don’t know, perhaps the Pope? Or the King of France?” She turned to the professor.

“Well, I don’t know ... it’s not impossible. But I don’t see how anyone would see the relationship between the Temple and the Church or State in terms of the bond between a master and his pupil. Really, my dear, I don’t believe he could mean that.”

“Then, I don’t see how we can unravel this.”

“Patience, my dear, patience. I’m not done yet.” He finished reading the poem. “... Arrived at the humblest village and under the light of little Cresques, watched the Bull’s path, in black Alexandria.”

Skeptically, I asked, “And, have you reached any conclusion from all this?”

“To be honest? The humblest village could be anywhere. I’ve no idea what the light of little Cresques can be. And, as to *black Alexandria*? I don’t know her. I only know the one in Egypt and that isn’t black.”

“Doc, you’ve skipped the bit about the Bull’s path.”

“Very good, Ulysses. You’ve been paying attention. I skipped it on purpose. I wanted to leave that for the end. You see ... the first thing that caught my eye was *Brau* meaning bull, with a capital B, as if it referred to someone or something important.” He started pacing the room as if he were back in class. “I turned it over and over until I realized that bull in Latin is *Taurus*. Now, if we break this word we get *T-aurus*. The T was used in the thirteenth century as the logo for the Order of the Poor Knights of Christ. And *aurus* is nothing but gold.” He leaned on the table and finished. “So if we join the pieces we are left with ...”

Cassandra leapt ahead of me enthusiastically. “We find the way to the

Templar's gold!"

At nine o'clock sharp, after parking our rental car in front of the History Department, we were knocking at the door of Lluís Medina's office.

"Come in!"

"Good morning, Lluís," said the professor.

"*Hombre!* Good morning to all three!" He quickly freed his desk of the mountain of papers which had half hidden him. As before, we were short of a chair so I chose to stand.

"How did it go in Miramar? Did they make any more trouble?"

"Absolutely not, Lluís. After your call everything was smooth as silk."

"Good, good," he said, pleased. "And ... did you find what you were looking for?"

"Maybe ... but we're not a hundred per cent sure."

Surprised by the professor's short answer, Medina eyed us impatiently and arched his eyebrows.

"Well ... I can't help you if you don't say what's bugging you."

The three of us exchanged looks. Without words we agreed that our best shot was to tell Medina what we had discovered.

Cassie started. "We believe that Jaffuda's will contains the key that leads to a ... ahem, treasure."

"You mean the last lines?"

"Aha ..."

Medina looked at the professor. "And surely, my good friend Eduardo guessed that the word *Brau*, in the fourth line, refers to the Templars' gold."

The professor was stunned. "You knew?"

"Eduardo, I've been studying the documents in that monastery for years, including that will. I know it by heart."

"Then, we're right," I said. "The riddle refers to the *T-aurus*?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you just ..."

"I just said that I guessed my friend Eduardo would reach that conclusion. I didn't say it was correct."

"Come on, Lluís," said the professor scolding him. "Don't play with

us.”

Medina laughed. “All right,” he admitted, “There isn’t the slightest proof, but I can’t rule out the possibility that Jaffuda Cresques was referring to the treasure of the Order of the Temple in that line.”

A wave of suppressed excitement swept through the three of us. It took us a few seconds to take in this admission by one of the world’s greatest experts on the subject.

Finally, Cassandra said, surprised by this realization, “So, we were right. The will is the key to the wretched treasure.”

“Ms. Brooks, you’re being hasty. Although the remaining lines do hint at a trip and a destination, they are only that: a hint. I’m sorry for you, guys,” he added sadly, “but the truth is that’s a dead end. It’s an old joker’s last attempt to have some fun. It drove me crazy for months and the only conclusion I came to is that, no matter how suggestive it may be, it doesn’t mean anything.”

I was taken aback by this uncompromising statement. “What you mean is that you haven’t been able to solve it yourself.”

“Look Ulysses,” he said condescendingly. “If neither I nor anybody in my team has been able to decipher it, it simply can’t be done.”

“It’s a little arrogant on your part to say that, isn’t it?” I could not help myself.

“It’s not arrogance, young man. It’s certainty.”

“Do you know what I think about certainties?” I was furious. I couldn’t stand those apostles of absolute truth. They were devoted to the noble task, according to them, of frustrating any initiative or proposal that did not fit within their dogmatic precepts, or even worse, came up against their huge ego.

“Ulysses, please.” The professor intervened. “Lluís is helping us.”

“Maybe. But it seems to me he’d rather make it perfectly clear that what he says is gospel truth and that we’re a bunch of ignorant novices blundering around in the dark.”

“Well, Ulysses ... he may be right. This clue might not take us anywhere.”

“But it’s the only one we have! If we don’t make anything of this, it’s the end of our search! And personally I don’t intend to quit.”

“Young man ... the fact that you may wish it to be so, doesn’t make it true. That only happens in bad films.”

“True. Although in bad films, just like in real life, there are always a few mean little characters who think they have a monopoly of the truth and enjoy putting a spoke in other people’s wheels.”

“Enough!” said the professor. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. Ulysses, you’d better calm down.”

I was about to retort when I saw Cassandra staring at me, quite taken aback by my exaggerated reaction. I became aware of how I must appear to her and kept myself under control. I moved away in silence, waiting for my temper to cool.

The professor apologized to his friend on my behalf. Pretending nothing had happened he asked for the papers on Ramon Llull which Medina had promised him.

Trying not to listen, I concentrated on the wall in front of me. I let my eyes wander over the skin-bound tomes on the shelves and the reproduction of the Catalan Atlas on the wall. To myself, I cursed the man who was driving us crazy with his riddle.

In spite of my bad temper, I could not help but admire the painstaking, exquisite work in this map of the world. The coasts of Europe and North Africa were perfectly detailed, including the Canary Islands, which had been little more than a legend, not long before the making of this map. My gaze was drawn toward the north. I was trying to identify some small islands in the shape of a half moon or button. They must correspond to the Azores and Madeira, I thought, but their shape and location were only vaguely similar.

Medina was now explaining to the professor about a certain Book of Contemplation, by Ramon Llull, which dealt with the use of the compass and its benefits for navigation. Meanwhile I went on absent-mindedly looking at the wind rose floating in the middle of the Atlantic with its blue and golden arrows, indicating the winds in Catalan: *xaloc*, *tramontana*, *gregal*... and then as I twisted my head to read the name of the northeast wind, my blood suddenly drained away and my heart nearly jumped out of my mouth.

“Cassandra,” I called without taking my eyes off the map. “Could you come over here a minute?”

I heard her chair move and as Medina continued his dissertation on the life and works of Ramon Llull, I felt her by my side, staring at me.

“What is it?”

“Cassie, you know more than I do ... Could you read what it says here?” Without looking at her, I put my finger on the golden arrow that

pointed toward the edge of the map.

“Let me see ...” she murmured with little interest.

She frowned as she studied the word I was pointing at. After a few seconds of silent concentration, her eyes opened wide and she took a step back. She turned to me with stark excitement on her face.

“My goodness, Ulysses! It’s the master. You found him!”



Lluís Medina's breath was on the back of my neck, but I did not move. I could not care less whether he could see or not. It was a way of rubbing in the fact that in two minutes of observation I had managed more than he had in months of work.

"It's unbelievable..." he whispered behind me.

I gloated over my small triumph. "Well, there it is. The *Magistro*."

"Such a long time ... and there it was, right under my nose..."

"But I don't see what the word 'master' has to do with the wind rose," said Cassie. "What's it doing there?"

The professor scratched his chin and said, "It seems *Magistro* doesn't really mean master. In this case it refers to the Catalan name given to a strong northeasterly wind: the Mistral. After all, it turns out that Jaffuda did speak Latin better than we thought."

"Than *you* guys thought," I emphasized quietly.

"Please don't start," said the professor in my ear.

"So," continued Cassandra, "What we thought was the pupil fleeing from the master, really means fleeing from the *mistral*."

"That gives it a total new meaning," said the professor.

"Unbelievable." Medina seemed unable to say anything else.

I was beaming, thoroughly enjoying myself. I was more pleased about the kick to the arrogant scholar's pride than about my unexpected discovery. Then an image appeared before my eyes.

"The key is in the map."

"What are you saying?" Medina was still stunned.

"I'm saying that the key is in the map," I repeated, with a clearer idea of what I had just realized. "The lines in the will are the clues we must follow on the atlas by Abraham Cresques, the father of Jaffuda Cresques or Jaume Ribes, whatever you want to call him."

I put my finger on the wind rose on the map and looked at the professor who was staring with his mouth open.

"Are you saying that the Catalan Atlas is something like ... a treasure map?" he asked skeptically, without taking his eyes off the spot my finger

was on.

“Exactly. But without the *like*. It *is* a treasure map, Doc.”

We swept everything off Medina’s desk and took down the atlas from the wall. We smoothed it out on the desk and pored over it.

We were studying the southern edge. The Atlantic, the north of Africa and Western Europe were in the left half. Painted in bright red and yellow stripes, the island of Majorca floated in the blue Mediterranean.

“Let’s sum up,” said Medina in an attempt to recover his composure. “If we apply the phrase “the pupil fleeing from the mistral” to the atlas, and admit that the pupil was a student at Miramar Monastery, we can deduce that for some reason he fled in the direction this wind is blowing. So, he left the island in a southeasterly direction.”

“Do you have a ruler?” asked Cassandra.

Medina opened a drawer and gave her a small plastic one.

She put it on the map, placing one end on the island of Majorca. She moved it until it was parallel with the northeast-southeast line of the wind rose and came to land on the Maghreb coast.

We all got closer to see the place marked by the ruler.

I broke the silence. “What’s that there?”

“The coast of Algeria,” Medina said.

“I know that. What I’m asking is what’s shown on this atlas? I can’t see a thing from here.”

It was the professor who said ambiguously, “Well, it depends ...”

“Seriously? The line goes over a village or a city, doesn’t it?”

He looked at me over the rim of his glasses. “The fact is it goes over several. We may assume Majorca was his starting point, but we don’t know where to follow him next.”

“It’s true,” said Cassie. “Look. If we draw a line, it goes all the way to the desert in Libya where you can see this elephant and where the map ends.”

“And how the hell are we going to decide where we’re supposed to look in a line of thousands of miles long?”

The professor echoed my own doubts. “No idea, Ulysses. I guess we’ll just have to study all the places on that line, one by one.”

“Nothing could be that easy, boy. An X doesn’t always mark the spot,” Medina said scornfully.

My blood began to boil again. An insult was on the tip of my tongue

when Cassandra got there ahead of me.

“*Hijo de la gran chingada!* Son of a bitch! I got it!”

“What is it? Did you find the location?” I asked.

“No, not the location,” she said beaming. “But I know how to find it.”

“And how do you mean to do that ... Miss?” Medina could not hide his annoyance.

Her reply was acid: “Very easily, sir, by following the instructions in the will. Because, I’m really sure that an X does mark the spot.”

The archaeologist read aloud, “*Fugin l’alumne del magistro, arribá a la mes humild vila, e sota la yum dén petit Qresques, guardá el camí del Brau, a la negra Allexandría.*” She raised her eyes from the paper and without looking at any of us, asserted, “We know that the first sentence gives us a straight line that crosses half the map and several cities on its way. Now we have to decipher the sentence that will give us another straight line intersecting it with the first one. That way, we shall have an X on the map which, I bet my ponytail on it, will indicate one of the cities or fortresses that appear on the map.” She smiled.

There was a long silence in which we could hear our brains working, taking in the possibility Cassandra had just offered us.

“Could be ...” the professor finally said. “But if we aren’t as lucky guessing the rest of the riddle, it’s going to be pretty difficult.” He looked at me askance.

“Oh, come on! I can’t believe we’ve come so far in half an hour and yet I still have to put up with defeatist comments like that!”

“Listen, son ...” Medina just had to give his opinion.

“I’m not your son,” I said, annoyed.

He was silent for a moment, then cleared his throat. “Eduardo is only trying to be realistic. One lucky strike doesn’t make you a researcher, nor is it going to solve this enigma. From now on we must look very carefully at all the bibliography we have on Jaffuda Cresques and then leave things in the hands of the experts.”

“You mean the same experts who confused *Master* with *Mistral*?”

“Ulysses, just stop it. Forgive us, Lluís, we’re all rather excited.”

He rose to his full height. “History isn’t an exact science,” he said in self-defense. “It’s based on learning from our mistakes. That’s how you advance.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you for over half an hour!” I snapped. “But you’re so conceited that you can’t abide with someone who hasn’t got a little plate with his name on the door proving you wrong.”

“That’s enough, you two! You’ve been behaving like two *pendejos*, morons, all morning. Will you stop playing at whose ego is bigger and concentrate once and for all on the matter in hand?”

Both Lluís Medina and I lifted a finger to protest. But Cassandra gave us each such a fiery look from her five foot five that we didn’t find the courage to say a single word more.

The professor looked on, amused and surprised by how the small archaeologist had controlled these two cocks of the walk, twice her size with a single gesture. He took advantage of the tense silence to turn the conversation back.

“Let’s see. The next line says *arribá a la més humild vila*; he arrived at the humblest village. Does that give you any idea?”

My imagination was still too busily occupied in whichever part of the brain governs bad temper. Medina looked as though he was in the same place.

Cassandra tried to make her voice sound cool. “Could it be any of the cities under the line of the mistral?”

“That’s a good idea, my dear. But that would give us a dozen of places. And we’d not only have to decide which one was the least important in the fourteenth century, we’d also have to work out what kind of humbleness he was referring to. It could be material, moral or religious.” The professor shrugged. “The fact is, it just looks too complex for a riddle someone wanted people to understand hundreds of years in the future.”

“I should think it’d have to be something simpler,” I suggested, still angry. I thought I heard Medina sigh but I ignored him. “I’d say that riddle and map are parts of the same puzzle with a gap of nearly a hundred years in between. Here we have both pieces, now we have to figure out how to put them together.”

The professor read the next line: “*E sota la yum dén petit Qresques* or under the light of little Cresques, he watched the Bull’s path in black Alexandria.”

Medina had calmed down by now. “I guess it would be too much to hope for that our line passed right over the real Alexandria.”

“Not even close,” said Cassie.

“Couldn’t it be that the northeast-southeast line is there to mislead us, and the real destination *is* Alexandria?”

The professor shook his head. “Hardly. I don’t think he’d go to such trouble to hide his destination, only to reveal it in the last line. Besides, I really don’t think the heart of Islam would be a safe place for a Franciscan monk, no matter how well he spoke Arabic.”

“Then we still have to decipher the second and fourth lines.”

I went over the whole map looking for a little Cresques but all I saw were kings, elephants, and camels. Not a cartographer in sight.

“Does anybody see anything that might be taken for a cartographer, or a young apprentice?”

Cassie shook her head. “Nothing, nothing, *nada*.”

There followed several minutes of silence. Medina had picked up a magnifying glass. Cassie and I pored over the map, searching even the remotest island in the Indian Ocean. The professor had moved to the window and was deep in thought. He suddenly turned to us, beaming.

“You know, you won’t find what you’re looking for, no matter how hard you look.”

“Why do you say that?” Medina said.

“Because there isn’t any boy represented here. Jaffuda Cresques isn’t in that atlas.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Simply because I just found out what we really have to look for.”

“And are you going to tell us what it is? Or will I have to give you sodium pentothal to make you spill it?” Medina said impatiently.

“Not necessary, Lluís. The answer is right outside.”

We all hurried to the window, trying to find the answer in the carefully tended little garden with a weeping willow beyond the glass. Further away there was the parking lot, further still, a shopping center and a basketball court.

“You mean the answer to our enigma lies in a supermarket?”

“It’s not there you have to look, you idiot. It’s above, in the sky.”

We looked up, but all we could see was a sun too bright to look at.

“You don’t mean...” began Cassandra, astonished.

“Exactly,” the professor beamed. “The sun.” He pointed at the map. “Without a shadow of a doubt, that’s what we have to look for in this atlas.”

“Would it be too much to ask you to tell us how you’ve reached such a

conclusion?”

“By all means, old friend. It’ll be my pleasure.”

The professor settled himself in Medina’s chair and proceeded to wipe his glasses in the studied manner I knew he used when he wanted to appear mysterious.

“As you know, Abraham Cresques and his son Jaffuda were Jewish, so apart from Catalan and Castilian they also spoke Hebrew. What you may not know is that the Hebrew alphabet lacks vowels. There are only consonants and according to their arrangements, these form pronounceable words. Is this clear so far?”

“As crystal, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Patience, Ulysses. I’ll explain.” But instead he made another theatrical pause to put his glasses on.

“As I was saying, the Hebrew alphabet has only consonants. But there is another feature that makes it unique, and it is that each consonant in that alphabet corresponds to a particular number.”

Cassie voiced our puzzlement. “A number?”

“That’s right, my dear, a number.” He was obviously enjoying himself.

“Okay, Eduardo. I know that too. Where’s all this leading to?”

“To the fact that if we add the numeric values of the surname Qresques, omitting the vowels, we get “Q” which equals one hundred. “R” which equals two hundred. “S” equals three hundred, “Q”, one hundred and “S” again, three hundred. The total is one thousand.”

“So?” I was lost.

“The number one thousand represents “sun” in Hebrew.”

“Of course! So ... under the light of little Cresques means under the light of a small sun!” Cassandra ran back to the atlas. Before anybody else had time to reach the table, she turned to us and beamed.

“I found it! The little sun is here on the atlas!”

Once more we gathered around the table, staring at the map.

“I don’t see any other,” said Cassandra.

“Well, something’s missing,” said Medina.

“Nothing’s missing. *We’re missing* something!” I said angrily.

All my attention was caught by the figure of a black king drawn on the south border of the map. Sitting on his throne, with his crown and staff, he was holding a golden sphere in his right hand. This could clearly be

interpreted as a small sun. The figure was located in the region identified as Guinea on the atlas, on the shore of a river that must be the Niger and surrounded by a constellation of cities illustrated as Moorish fortresses.

What did not fit the picture was that this king was exactly south of the island of Majorca, very far from the diagonal penciled over the protective plastic cover of the facsimile Catalan Atlas.

"Maybe ... this is just another reference point. If we find a new position on the other side of the *mistral* line, we could trace another one crossing the first and then ... *voilà!* We'd have an X on the map."

"It's a good theory, Ulysses," said the professor. "But I'm afraid we can't make anything much of the remaining verse lines."

He reached for the paper with the riddle on it ... "'Arrived at the humblest village" and "watched the Bull's path, in black Alexandria". That's what's left."

"It's not much," Cassie said.

"It isn't," the professor concurred.

"But it has to be there," I insisted. "The Bull's path refers to the fact that he hid the map or the clues to find the *T-aurus*. Black Alexandria seems to indicate where he must have done it, the place that should be marked with an X. So, the humblest village must be the answer."

"And how do you propose we find this place?" asked Medina, maliciously. "If I remember correctly, there isn't any "pauperland" or "humbleburg" on that atlas."

"There isn't, or you just haven't found it?"

At that moment, Cassandra, who had been scrutinizing the map with her face barely an inch away from it, raised her head and said, thoughtfully, "Excuse me, gentlemen. When you finish your very interesting debate, could you tell me which city this is here, right below the little Cresques? Because, if my sight isn't playing tricks on me, I'd say it's the only one on the map which isn't represented by a castle or a fortress." Her finger was touching a spot at the feet of the black king. "In fact, I'd say the person who put it there did it so that it would show up as the *més humild vila*, the humblest village."

Sure enough, at the feet of the African king, and just below the “little sun” he held in his hands, a city was represented by a humble house with a tiled roof. The name was Tombuch.

“I hadn’t noticed it before, but it’s true,” said Medina. “There’s no other city shown in the same way. How could I have missed it?”

“You want me to tell you?”

The professor gave me his disapproving look. I gave him my saintly one in exchange.

Cassandra said, “Apart from the fact that it stands out like a Jamaican in a Mariachi band, all the other African cities look white and stylized, with walls and minarets pointing at the sky. On the other hand, this one is drawn like a simple gabled house, a very western design. And very out of place, considering it’s in Muslim territory.”

“It certainly is,” the professor said. “And it would fit pretty well as destination for our slippery Miramar pupil, except that it’s miles away from the line we drew to the southeast from this island where we are.”

“What a shame ...” she sighed.

We had all the pieces of the puzzle on the table, and as usual it was the last piece that refused to fit. Thinking about this, I recalled many long Sunday afternoons during my childhood facing the endless puzzles with historical subjects that my father used to give me for birthdays and Christmas. Looking back, it seems clear enough that he always forgot presents, and that only at the last minute would he remember he had to buy something, puzzles being a last resort.

One I remembered had been missing a piece which we never managed to find. Another was made up of five thousand tiny pieces representing Bosch’s Hell. Two of them were practically identical. After almost a dozen Sundays, I still had one last empty space and a piece that did not fit.

The memories were very intense. Remembering the bewilderment of that time, a thought came to me out of my childhood. I voiced it before I realized what I was saying.

“We’ve put a piece in the wrong place.”



“What do you mean?”

I could not quite grasp the cloudy idea in my mind, so I tried to concentrate by looking at those emerald eyes.

“We’ve put a piece in the wrong place in the puzzle,” I repeated.

“What the hell are you talking about?” asked Medina angrily.

I ran my eyes over the whole atlas, looking for something without really knowing what it was. The piece seemed to fit in but no, it was in the wrong place. The humble village, the little sun, Majorca, the *Mistral* ... and suddenly, as my gaze moved out over the Atlantic, it all became clear. Now I knew exactly which piece was wrong.

“We’re stupid,” was all I managed to say.

Three amazed pairs of eyes stared at me.

“Wait a minute,” objected Medina, who was clearly offended by my comment. “Speak for yourself, young man.”

“This time I agree with Lluís,” said the professor.

Cassie silenced both scholars with a wave of her hand. “What do you mean, Ulysses?”

“Just what I said. There’s one piece in the wrong place. We’ve overlooked an error, and that means we can’t finish the puzzle.”

Medina shifted in his seat. “Well, if the great conclusion is that we’ve made a mistake somewhere, you could have spared us the divine revelation act. I could’ve told you myself.”

“Sure ... But I’d like to hear whether you know where we’ve gone wrong and what the solution is.”

Medina remained silent, trying to conceal the fact that he did not know the answer. Finally the professor asked the question we all had in mind.

“And you, Ulysses? Do you know?”

“I’d say I do.”

I waited a few seconds, savoring the deliberate mystification, until Lluís Medina, Professor of Medieval History at the University of Palma de Majorca, could bear it no longer and burst out, “Well? Are you going to tell us?”

In reply to which, I made him an exaggerated bow. “Oh, come on, Mr. Medina. Why would you care about the opinion of a layman like me?”

And with that, I turned and left the office.

“You’re a mean bastard,” said Cassandra. “The poor man isn’t going to sleep

all night.”

We were sitting by the entrance to the University, waiting for the professor to come out. He had stayed behind, probably to make excuses for my behavior.

“The fact is,” she said after some thought, “that this Medina has turned out to be a jerk.”

At that moment the professor came out, shaking his head gravely.

“Ulysses, this time you’ve gone too far. It’s true he is a little pedantic, but you are certainly no shining example of diplomacy. I had to make excuses for both of us and convince him that you just have a lousy sense of humor.”

Then, he looked at me and couldn’t keep a straight face.

“Truth is you’ve been a tad cruel, but he had it coming. You should’ve seen him, with his enormous bare head, red as a tomato, smoke coming out of his ears! Oh, yes, it was good. What I wasn’t aware of is how good an actor you are. Even I believed you.”

“But it’s true,” I said and waited for the effect of my words to show on their faces. “I actually know now where the pupil from Miramar fled to with the secret of the Templars.”

“You’re not kidding? Because if you are, I swear you’ll have to go fetch your teeth all the way back from Tijuana!”

“And I’ll contribute to that,” said the professor.

I tried not to beam. “I really mean it.”

The archaeologist threatened me with her fist. “Don’t push your luck ...”

It looked as though I was not going to convince them so easily, and I turned back to the building. “Okay, then. Come with me.”

The professor was shocked. “You’re not going back to Lluís’s office, are you?”

“No, Doc. I just want to show you something.”

We walked down several corridors until we reached the library, where we found, as expected, a smaller copy of the same Catalan Atlas that hung in Medina’s office, only this one was in the form of a book.

I opened it at the page which showed the Atlantic Ocean and Western Europe. Using a folded piece of paper and a pencil I had borrowed from the librarian, I traced the same line we had drawn on the other atlas. It started on the island of Majorca and trailed away somewhere in the Libyan desert.

“If someone sees you doing that, they’ll kick us out,” said Cassandra.

“Easy, we’re nearly done.”

The professor breathed down my neck, “Right. I see the line. Now, tell me what I *don’t* see.”

“Patience, my young Padawan.”

“Stop trying to be funny and get to the point.”

“If you’ll stop interrupting ... I’ll explain. As you saw before, two of the verses point to the city of Tombuch, but the one that mentions the Mistral points to the north of Africa: somewhere between Libya and Algeria, right?”

“We know that,” said Cassie. “But where’s the mistake? Were we wrong when we decided *Magistro* meant *Mistral*?”

“Nope. That’s correct. Where we went wrong was at the starting point of the line we’ve drawn.”

The professor intervened. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure “the pupil” left from Majorca. But, anyway, even if he’d started from anywhere else in Spain or Europe, the result would still be the same. The northeast-southeast line will never go anywhere near Tombuch.”

“Unless ... you stop thinking like a historian, and start to think like a cartographer.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, a cartographer doesn’t consider his place of birth or where he lives when he traces the starting point of a course.” I put my finger on the left of the map. “He considers this.”

“The wind rose?” asked the professor, perplexed.

“It’s obvious. Just where the word *Magistro* is written, and the best place to use as a reference when setting a course. If you’d done more sailing, you’d know that on a nautical chart a wind rose is more than just decoration.”

To prove my theory, I took the folded paper once more and marked the course of the *Mistral*. This time though, I started from the wind rose. My guess was confirmed when the line went straight to the feet of the African king holding the sphere in his right hand. Just where Abraham Cresques had drawn the “humble village” which represented the city of Tombuch.

The professor and Cassandra stifled cries of excitement. Cassie grabbed my neck and kissed me on the cheek. “Genius! You did it!”

“I have to admit I’m surprised,” said the professor, appreciatively.

“It was really just luck. I knew we were missing something. Then when I saw the wind rose pointed directly to Tombuch, I knew.”

“Come on, son. No need to be shy. Your father would be very proud of you.”

The reference to my father made me grimace. My moment of triumph was suddenly overshadowed by painful memories from the recent past.

The professor interrupted the dark reverie he had inadvertently cast me into. “So, what do we do now?”

“What sort of a question is that? We go there, of course.”

He smiled in disbelief. “You don’t know what you’re saying. We suspect that someone, we don’t know who, hid something, we don’t know what, in a place we don’t know. All this, seven hundred years ago ... And you intend to go look for it? Just like that?”

“Why not?”

“You’re crazy as a loon. Even if our guess is correct and the clue to the treasure leads to Tombuch, that was centuries ago.” He raised voice and hands in desperation. “It can’t possibly still be there! And it’s even less possible that you can find it. Don’t you see?”

“What I see is that unless you lower your voice, the three of us are going to be thrown out of the library.” The librarian was glaring at us already.

The professor gave up trying to convince an idiot.

Cassie took my hand and said, “I’ll come with you. If you want me to, that is.”

“I was just going to ask.”

“Look at you two! Have you gone out of your mind? You’re like a couple of newlyweds planning a trip to Cancún. Aren’t you listening? There’ll be nothing there. It’s impossible!”

“As impossible as finding a Templar bell in a Caribbean reef? Or deciphering a seven-hundred-year-old riddle?”

The professor fell silent. His lips moved as he tried to shape a reply he never got the chance to voice.

“What we don’t know is whether that city of Tombuch still exists. Or where its ruins might be,” Cassandra said.

This time it was the professor and I looking at her in disbelief.

“What do you mean we don’t know whether it exists? In this whole farrago, this is the one thing we do know for sure. What the hell do they teach at American universities?”

At Cassie’s surprise I said, “Don’t be harsh, Doc. Remember she’s a marine archaeologist. She doesn’t need to know anything about a city in the

middle of the Mali desert.”

“Do you know it too?” she asked, taken aback.

“Yes ... I do. And as a matter of fact, so do you. Only, you may know it better as Timbuktu.”

“Feel like a walk in the city?” I asked her the morning after we returned to Barcelona, poking my head in the door of what was for now “her” room.

“What time is it?” she asked sleepily.

“Almost ten o’clock.”

“Jesus, Ulysses! How do you dare wake me up so early? Even God rested on Sunday.”

“Come on, lazy bones. I’m going to treat you to *chocolate con churros*. She peeped from under the sheets, suspiciously.

“You’re taking advantage of the fact we didn’t have any dinner last night so as to get me out of bed.”

“True. And using Spanish doughnuts drizzled with chocolate as bait has never failed.”

“Oh ... all right. Give me ten minutes and I’ll get up.”

Ten minutes later, which seemed to me more like forty, she made her way to the bathroom in her flowered dress, with her hair uncombed.

“Cassie, I’m starving.”

“Ten minutes and I’ll be ready.”

“Okay, but not a minute longer.”

Wishful thinking! Around twelve, we took the elevator down.

“Where are you taking me?”

“For now, just to keep my promise, we’ll grab some *churros* at this bar nearby that makes damn good ones. Afterward we can go for a walk downtown. Does it please milady?

“The *churros* part does. But I don’t feel like taking a tour of the city.”

“Easy, girl. The place where I plan to take you won’t have a single tourist.”

A couple of cups of thick chocolate later, we took the subway to the San Antonio Market.

“Wow, Ulysses. What’s all this?” she exclaimed as soon as we came out.

“It’s a second-hand book and magazine market.”

“How nice! Can we look around?”

“Of course, if you want to. But let me warn you there are so many people you can hardly walk.”

“Then, better not. I don’t enjoy crowds.”

“Neither do I. And anyway, it wasn’t there I really wanted to bring you.”

She took my arm. “Very well, my cicerone. Guide me.”

We went down *calle Hospital*, one of my favorites. Gradually the skin of the people we met on the way darkened. At the same time the names of shops, butchers or hairdressers began to turn unintelligible.

“Where are all these people from?” she asked.

“Moroccan, Pakistanis, Lebanese ... a bit from everywhere.”

“It’s funny. In downtown LA almost all businesses have signs in Spanish. And here, in the center of a Spanish city, a lot of them are in Arabic.”

“Huh, now that you mention it, I seem to remember that in the center of the Arab cities I’ve been to, plenty of them had signs in English, French, and even Spanish.”

“Interesting.”

“Very. Although there are always people who are afraid of the new and the different and see anyone who doesn’t speak and think exactly like them as a threat.”

“What do you mean?”

I was unsure about the wisdom of going deeper into this subject. “In my opinion, like in other parts of this old narcissist Europe of ours, here too there are people who point their finger and talk about “us” and “them,” arguing that you can’t live in a “civilized” place like this unless you accept all the local customs. And give up your own identity in the process.”

“You’re talking about racism?”

“It’s more subtle than that, more debated. But when you judge people in terms of the place they were born, the language they speak, or their culture, instead of by the way they act, then if that’s not racism it comes pretty close. You’re the perfect example: a wonderful example of mixed-blood.”

“Gee, thanks!”

“No, I’m serious. Imagine that your father hadn’t married your mom just because they spoke a different language and had different customs. What would you think of him?”

“I wouldn’t be here to think anything! But he would’ve been a

complete moron, *un mero pendejo*. Hey, you're another example of mixed-blood."

"Yep, that's what I mean. We're all mixed, in blood as well as culture, even though people try to tell us otherwise. In my humble opinion and after several years traveling around the world, anybody who hides behind a flag or a language, or pretends their history is untainted, is either a moron or someone with an agenda. The first can be cured by reading and traveling. To the second nobody pays attention once they see through them. But for the time being, however much we think of ourselves as cultivated cosmopolitans, free of overt prejudice, we go on being tribal and territorial animals. It's good for us if we realize that. Because, when we try to justify our primitive instinct with what we think of as rational arguments, we start down a road that leads eventually to ethnic cleansing and refugee camps. And then, we all tear our clothes, or run to light candles on the sidewalk pretending we were just passing by. Or else, we raise our eyebrows and say, "who would have imagined it?" and at the same time, we agree with the person next to us about how mean people are."

She looked around her. "I hear you," she said. "But I don't feel a bad vibe here."

"Luckily, I still think we're a long way from that. But there are people who see mixed-blood and diversity as a problem, and if they pull hard on the rope, it may end up breaking. And then, who knows what could happen? Although I could also be wrong and everything might carry on like this for a long time, we may even learn from our mistakes and other people's. Because I do believe either the future will be mixed or it just won't come about."

We continued our conversation as we browsed in the street market of *La Rambla del Raval*, then ended up having mint tea at a café that looked just like the ones in Morocco, right down to the customers. They were all men with moustaches, who wanted Cassie to try the whole range of small over-sweetened Arab cakes that I liked so much.

We went on to *Rambla de Canaletes*, following *carrer de la Boquería* and peeping into the hidden synagogue in the Jewish quarter. After wandering down some more of the narrow streets of the medieval part of town, we crossed *Via Laietana* to reach another of my favorite parts. I call it "Little Havana," but it has nothing to do with its namesake in Miami. In fact, there aren't many Cubans there, but there are Dominicans, Colombians, and other Latin American nationalities. With *merengue* and *cumbia* coming out of



loudspeakers in the windows, mulattos, and singing accents, a stroll in those streets turns into a surprising experience in the very heart of a European city.

We had some amazing *dürum* on the green of *Port Vell* in the mid-afternoon and then we lay there in the thin autumnal sunshine.

“In spite of what you say, I think you live in a lovely city. And, deep down, you love it here.”

“I guess that’s true. Although I was born and raised in LA until I was fifteen, I’ve lived here since then, and that means a great deal. But the fact that I’ve spent so much time away has changed my perspective on almost everything. The result is that when I come back to Barcelona there are too many things I miss.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re alone.”

“Do you really think that having a partner would fix things? Imagine her face when I told her I was leaving to work in Indonesia and not to expect me for dinner.”

“Then you should find someone who wouldn’t mind that.”

I sat up to look at her.

“That’s difficult. It would have to be someone with a compatible lifestyle. Someone who’d accept freedom for the other person just as she demanded it for herself. Also, someone I’d give up certain things for with no regrets. Someone like...”

I stopped talking so as to take pleasure in her features, which the twilight emphasized. She turned to me questioningly. “Someone like...?”

I did not hear her, trapped as I was in the reflection in her eyes.

“Ulysses? Are you all right?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, sorry.”

Cassie smiled. “You stopped in mid-sentence, you dope!”

“Mm ... yeah. Would you like a coffee? I know a place you’re going to love.”

“You’re changing the subject,” she said half closing her eyes. “But I’ll take up your offer.”

We walked slowly, stopping to listen to the street musicians who flooded the squares and corners of that part of town with their notes. In the café on *calle de Sant Domènec del Call*, another of my favorites, we sat on tiny stools at a table barely a foot high.

After I told Cassandra that the Turkish coffee they brewed was even thicker than usual and had cardamom added to the mixture, she decided to

have an aromatic wild berries tea.

And there we were, holding our smoking cups, letting the twilight darken.

I tried to put what I felt into words. “When I look at you, I feel like a rabbit that’s been blinded by the lights of a truck. I’m hypnotized, paralyzed and I can’t move away. Even though I know what’s coming.”

“So ... you’re under my control?” she asked maliciously.

“I’d say so, yes.” I sighed. “And the truth is it’s a little scary.”

She raised her right hand and said teasingly, “Don’t worry. I promise not to make you jump on one leg while you bark.”

“Sure. I wouldn’t put it past you to try. But that’s not what’s worrying me.”

She took my hand, now serious. “Tell me, Ulysses. What’s up?”

I took a deep breath and felt my heart in my throat. “You’re what’s up,” I said. “Ever since that first time we talked on the deck of the *Midas* I can’t stop thinking of you. The more time we spend together and the more I know you, the more I like you. You can’t imagine how much. I think ... I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“And that scares you?”

“It scares me if you don’t feel the same. But it also scares me if you do.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Cassie, my experiences up to now have never ended well, and I wouldn’t want the same thing to happen with you. I know it sounds lame, but I always remember a verse by Neruda that says: “*es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido*” (love is so short, and so long is forgetting). I think ... I’d spend the rest of my life forgetting you.”

Cassandra was quiet. Perhaps she was looking for the right words or simply to understand. She took both my hands. “Ulysses, I can only say that I am attracted to you too. Unfortunately, I can’t read the future and neither can you so we don’t know what it would bring us if we were together. Now, if you don’t mind my honesty, I think everything you’ve said is total bullshit. But, hey, it’s up to you, man. I’m not going to tell you what to do.”

Three days had gone by since we had returned to Barcelona, and apart from that Sunday, we had devoted the rest of the time to preparing for the trip to Mali. We had both tacitly agreed to leave aside the conversation we had had

in the café.

We had divided the research between us. Cassandra was compiling all possible information about libraries or archives that might have existed in Timbuktu at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Professor Castillo was examining any possible relation there might have been between the faraway desert city and the Knights of the Temple. And I was responsible for organizing the trip and learning everything I could about the land we were going to be traveling through.

The three of us barely slept, partly because of the amount of work, and partly because we were so excited. By the soft light of my dining room lamp the rings under our eyes stood out clearly.

“How’s yours going?” asked Cassie, leaning on the table. She was wearing one of my t-shirts, which was too big, but made her look sexy. Her hair was in two long ponytails.

I glanced at my crotch and smiled, mischievously. “Very well, thank you. I think it’s going well ...”

She put on an air of righteous indignation. “Ugh! You ass!”

“Mm ... an ass? Oh no. Not really.”

There was no way she could keep a straight face, and the result was that we both ended up laughing out loud. The professor looked on, shaking his head and wondering what on earth he was doing in the company of two teenagers.

When there was peace and quiet around the table once again the professor repeated Cassie’s question but more precisely.

Still looking at Cassie out of the corner of my eye, I said, “Well, everything’s ready. I’ve contacted the Mali embassy in London and they’ve assured me that we can get provisional visas at the airport in Bamako. We had our shots against tetanus, hepatitis and yellow fever yesterday. And accommodation is booked as well as a vehicle and a guide in Timbuktu. Mind you, personally, I don’t like the idea of the guide.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t like guides.”

“Well,” said the professor, “we’ll decide when we get there if it’s strictly necessary to get one. The idea of taking anybody else doesn’t appeal to me either.”

“Well, the fact is we can’t choose. As foreigners in Mali, we’re obliged to hire a guide wherever we go. So we may as well get used to the idea.”

“Then, let’s not beat about the bush,” said the professor dismissing the point. “Is there anything else?”

“Nothing really important. We’ll spend one night in Bamako and at first light the following day, *Inshallah*, we’ll take an Air Mali flight to Timbuktu.”

“*Inshallah*?” both the professor and Cassie said, puzzled.

I translated, “Allah willing. I spent some months working in the Red Sea and something rubbed off.”

“The Red Sea, huh?” the professor mused. “Cool ... well ... pay attention now because I’m going to tell you what I’ve discovered in all these hours I’ve spent staying awake.”

He bent over the table with a mysterious air and a touch of self-satisfaction in his smile. He gave us an evaluating look.

“Remember the poem about the pupil who fled from the *Mistral* in the direction of Timbuktu?”

Cassie’s reply was prompt. “How could we forget?”

“Well, there’s documented proof that in 1346, one Jaume Ferrer set off from the island of Majorca in a southerly direction. He crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, then sailed along the African coast as far as what we know today as Senegal.”

“Do you think he was “the pupil” from the riddle?” I asked.

“Do you want my honest opinion? No, I don’t. Jaume Ferrer was a navigator, not a monk. Besides, he doesn’t fit the profile of someone who’d spent half his life learning languages and cartography.”

“Then, how does he fit into all this?”

“I would say that he was the one who took the man we’re looking for on to his ship, as either a crew member or a passenger.”

Playing the part of the skeptical scientist, Cassandra asked, “How did you reach that conclusion? Did you find a letter from Jaume Ferrer explaining his trip and who went with him? Or a list of crew and passengers on that trip?”

“Neither the one nor the other. Partly, because Jaume Ferrer’s expedition never made it back from Africa.” He seemed amused.

Cassie frowned, surprised by the professor’s nonchalance.

“Then explain yourself because you lost me.”

As a reply, Professor Castillo took a folder from the table, opened it and handed us the blown-up photocopy of a section of the Catalan Atlas. On

it were shown the Canary Islands and the African coast of Mauritania. He looked at us, surprised that we didn't make anything of the engraving even though we were looking at it attentively. He put his finger on an image of a ship with a Latin sail, drawn right under the Canaries. Four heads poked out of the ship, looking in the same direction the ship was sailing in: east.

"You don't mean to say that this is the ship that..."

"Read," he said pointing at a brief inscription beside the drawing.

*"Partich l'uxer d'en Jaume Ferrer per anar al riu del or al gorn de sen Lorens qui és a X de Agost qui fo en l'any MCCCXLVI."*

Neither of us understood a word but we knew that the professor was dying to translate and we told him to go ahead.

He smiled, pleased, as always, to be the center of attention.

"Of course, my young friends. A rough translation would be: Jaume Ferrer's usher departed to go to the river of gold on the tenth of August of 1346, the day of St. Lawrence."

"What's an usher?"

"Some sort of assistant," said Cassie.

"That's right, my dear, and although we don't know his name, we do know he arrived on the African coast beyond the cape of Bojador, sailing with Jaume Ferrer. And also that he left by camel toward what was then known as the River of Gold. We know it today as the Senegal River. Now, if you go upriver, you reach the Niger itself, the most important waterway of western Africa. And it runs past the legendary city of Timbuktu."

*"Órale!* The pieces finally fit!"

The professor was evidently in a good mood. "Funny you should say that, because that's exactly what's happening." He took out another blown-up photocopy of the same atlas and placed it beside the first one, overlapping at the edges so that they matched exactly. "Take a look at this."

In this second copy we could see the image of the king holding the little sun in his hands and the city of Tombuch at his feet on the shore of the Niger. Further to the left, a figure in Arab clothing riding a horse, or rather a camel, was seen joining both copies at the same level and equidistant from both Jaume Ferrer's ship and the black king. Knowing what we knew, it seemed plain that this was a medieval vignette of a camel rider first leaving a ship on the coast, then following the course of the Niger River, to the city of Timbuktu.

"It's amazing," I said. "Looking at it like this, it's pretty plain. If our

friend Cresques had painted a neon sign with arrows pointing toward Timbuktu, he couldn't have been clearer."

The professor nodded firmly. "True. But there's something else that confirms it. While I was searching among various dusty dossiers I found references to Timbuktu as the Mecca of the Sahara, the Rome of Sudan, the most mysterious city, the African Athens. I must admit that, at first, I was a bit mystified at not finding any mention of black Alexandria. I looked everywhere, but there was nothing. Finally I decided to face the problem from a different angle. Instead of compiling data from people talking about Timbuktu, I started to look for information about the city itself in the hope of coming across something significant."

"And did you find any?"

"Almost at once. It turns out that in the Middle Ages, Timbuktu was the most important center of all commercial, religious and cultural activity in western Africa. This was after the ascent to the throne of Musse Melly, in 1317, the black king who appears on the atlas. Our man is heading directly toward him. The rich merchants and sultans who settled there vied to hire the best masters and build the biggest library of all Islam. They managed to bring together thousands of books from all over the world. That's why it could've been known as "black Alexandria" in the fourteenth century, firstly because of the mythical library, and secondly because Timbuktu is at the heart of the black continent."

Pleased with his own presentation, the professor sat back in his chair and beamed at us. He was obviously waiting for our congratulations for a job well done. Instead, Cassandra answered him with the expression of a cat which is about to jump on a canary.

"If you think that's interesting, just wait till you hear what I've found out."

"Go ahead, my dear," said the professor, unable to hide his disappointment at her lack of enthusiasm.

"Okay ... You see, I've also found out that Timbuktu became a sort of African Florence in the fourteenth century. In fact, I have an account here by a fellow countryman of yours ..." She fumbled among the papers in front of her on the table, excitedly. "Here it is! In 1506, a man from Granada, Hassan Ben Mohamed, better known as Juan León de Médicis or "Leon The African", arrived in Timbuktu. When he got to the city he said, "... many books are sold that are brought from Barbary and much more benefit is made

from them than from the sales of other merchandises. Because in Timbuktu there are many Cadis, Imams, and other scholars all well paid by the king and who very much honor men of words.” She looked up from the papers. “What do you think?” she asked excitedly.

“I think ...” I began.

But she interrupted me. “And that’s nothing! The most interesting thing is that one of the families that managed to hoard the biggest amount of books and documents was the Kati clan. And why was that special?” she answered herself breathlessly, “because the Kati family emigrated from their birth city of Toledo, together with their patriarch Ali Ben Ziyab Al Kutu, fleeing from the religious persecution suffered in Castile in the fifteenth century. They settled in Timbuktu and became one of the leading families there. Anyway, another man from Granada, Yuder Pasha, conquered Timbuktu at the head of a Moroccan army one hundred years later. The Kati had to escape, carrying their immense library with them: nearly a thousand books. Since then, until less than a year ago, the Kati library has changed hands, over the generations, accumulating several thousand more documents along the way. Nowadays, they’re all fully classified in the recently built Andalusí Library of Timbuktu.”

“Excuse me, did you say *andalusí*?” I asked.

“Yep, the new library has been paid by the state of Andalucia.”

“That’s weird. Frankly, I never imagined they would finance cultural work in African countries. And by the way, Cassie, here we call them Autonomous Communities and not States.”

The professor intervened. “Hang on. Something here doesn’t fit. I don’t mean to underestimate your efforts but, even though several families may have owned libraries in Timbuktu, we can’t be certain, as you seem to be implying, that this document with the key to the whereabouts of the Templar treasure which we supposed reached Mali, is actually at this particular library.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it a certainty,” she admitted, “but a serious probability at least.”

“And that’s because ...?”

Cassie was slightly taken aback. “Because I’m taking it for granted that the document we’re talking about was written in Catalan or Castilian.”

“So?”

Cassandra was silent for a few seconds, going over her theory, trying to

find what was making the professor so skeptical about it. Finally, she exclaimed, "Of course! How stupid of me! I forgot to explain that the Kati family was especially interested in the writings that came from their beloved Iberia. And any document related to it that passed through Timbuktu must've ended up in their archives sooner or later. Including, I hope, whatever our mysterious camel rider took with him."

I got up and stretched as I tried to make some overall sense of the mass of papers and photocopies that covered the whole table. "Well, I don't know about you, but it's becoming clearer and clearer to me that the monk fled to Timbuktu. If there's a clue, an account or a map that leads to the Templar treasure, that's where it has to be."

"I agree," said Cassandra. "All the data point that way and as we say in my country: If he's got balls and is a jerk, it's because he's male."

"There's only one small detail left. We don't know whether that document has been eaten by moths in these last six hundred years. Or, come to that, if there was ever anything for moths to eat in the first place."

"Come on, Doc. Don't be a bird of bad omen. No matter how few chances there are, we have to try. Or do you have a better idea?"

The professor scratched his head. "No ... the truth is I don't."

"Then, are you prepared to go on with us?"

"Well, yes ..." He hesitated looking at me over the rim of his glasses. "What else? If I left you alone and something happened to you, I'd feel guilty."

"Okay! Everything's settled then. I suggest we have a good dinner and go to bed early, because tomorrow we have a very long day."

"Tomorrow?" Cassie asked. "What are we doing tomorrow?"

"Oops! Sorry. I thought I'd told you. Tomorrow at noon we leave on an Air France flight to Dakar where we'll connect with the one that'll take us to Bamako. This time tomorrow, we'll be in Mali."

How I enjoyed seeing the professor's bewildered face.



The first thing we saw of Mali as we got off the plane at Bamako's International Airport was a fiery sun disappearing from the world in the dusty mist of the Harmattan. The next thing was a dilapidated arrivals terminal the size of a big house, where a group of soldiers kept all the passengers crowded together.

The inside of the terminal turned out to be even more derelict than the outside. Even at that hour of the evening a suffocating heat made us sweat profusely as we stood in a tight line before the only immigration desk. The professor looked around warily while Cassie watched over our luggage. Meanwhile I tried to make myself understood as I explained to the inscrutable customs officer the reason why we did not have visas: we had been assured at the embassy in London that we could get provisional ones on arrival.

Almost an hour later, and the poorer by fifteen thousand central African francs, we left the oppressive airport and headed for the first taxi we saw outside. Immediately, a horde of taxi drivers surrounded us and we were unable to move. Each of them was trying to convince us that his was the best, fastest and most comfortable vehicle and that he was the most honest driver on the face of the Earth. To save time I chose the best groomed driver. Putting my hand on his shoulder I told him to take us to the Hotel de L'Amitié. As expected, he pushed all competition out of our way and led us to his car, a 504 Peugeot from my kindergarten days. He had trouble starting it and this gave a chance for the other drivers to try and lure us to their own taxis.

We were exhausted, both by the flight and by the very long stop in Dakar, but mostly because of the bothersome visa procedure at the passport control office. Still, we were in Mali, one step closer at last to solving the mystery of the Templar treasure. I was smiling happily as I leaned out of the car window and let my lungs fill with the warm African air.

We drove the nearly ten miles or so to the city surprisingly quickly, and before we could realize, we found ourselves immersed in the whirlpool which could be any African city at sundown. The hotel where I had booked our

accommodation, for better or worse, was right in the center of the commercial area of Bamako. What with the stalls and the street vendors, not to mention the human tide milling around under the light of the few lampposts, we were barely able to make progress.

“What’s the matter with you two? You haven’t said a word since we got off the plane,” I asked.

“What can I say? I feel as if I’d arrived on another planet! I’ve never been in a place like this before.”

“I thought DF was chaotic!” Cassie said almost to herself. “And the heat ... I do hope they have cold beer at the hotel.”

“So do I,” I said, aware of the impression this first contact with Africa was having on them. “And I hope they don’t follow the Koran too strictly.”

A few minutes later, the taxi made it to the door of our hotel. “Wow,” said Cassie, awed by the exuberant entrance. “This is much better.”

“It’s the best in town,” I said as the taxi stopped and the Mali version of a bellboy ran to help us with our bags. “I thought that since we’re staying in Bamako only one night, we might as well have a good rest.”

The professor put his hand on my shoulder and said with a grin, “See? It’s good to think once in a while. Why don’t you do it more often?”

“Gee, Doc. I see you’ve got over the shock already. Here, give us a hand with the bags.”

We put everything on a cart and the bellboy followed us to the weathered-looking reception desk.

I tried my best French accent. “*Bonsoir. J’ai une réservation au nom d’Ulysses Vidal pour trois personnes.*”

The receptionist checked a list and gave us one key each. “*Oui, monsieur,*” he said. “*Combien des temps pensez-vous y rester, monsieur?*”

“*Cette nuit.*”

“*D’accord. Bonne nuit, monsieur.*”

“*Bonne nuit.*”

I took my key and turned around to see Cassandra staring at me with renewed interest.

“I didn’t know you spoke French.”

“I don’t. I just get by. I was working in Martinique for a while and ... you know. It rubs off.”

We took the luggage to our rooms and agreed to meet in half an hour for dinner after freshening up.

The room, like the rest of the hotel, had an air of decadence, partly due to a lack of maintenance which meant that the air conditioning was not working. Fortunately, the shower did work. After spending quite a while under it, I got dressed in a crumpled cotton shirt and clean trousers, and went to knock on the professor's door. He came out wearing shorts and a flashy Hawaiian shirt. I was so shocked that I almost burst out laughing.

"Now, what is it, Ulysses? In Florida you teased me for wearing corduroy jeans and a sweater, and now you laugh because I'm wearing shorts in the middle of the Sahara? Is there any item of clothing that "His Highness" will deem suitable?"

"Please forgive me, Doc. I'm not laughing at you. It's just that I'd never seen you like this before. I was shocked, that's all."

"Well, you might as well get used to it. With this heat, I'm going to be wearing these every day."

"Let's see if you do ... But now, let's go get Cassandra. I'm starving."

At the end of the corridor was another old door. Behind it, a voice begged us to wait a second, and a moment later the door opened and she came out.

She looked dazzling. She was wearing a simple green dress that matched her eyes and her hair was tied up in a high ponytail that left her tempting neck bare. I thought she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever laid my eyes on.

"Hi, there," she said, well aware of the impact she was having on me. "Shall we go have dinner?"

I stammered like an idiot. "Uh ... ahem ... yes, yes, sure, dinner."

The professor looked at her from head to toe admiringly and unashamedly. "Wow, you do look stunning. If I'd known you twenty years ago ..."

Cassandra batted her eyelashes. "Thank you. But I'm not sure my parents would've approved if a gentleman had invited me out when I was still in kindergarten."

"Particularly not with a shirt like that."

"You're both so funny," he grumbled, turning and heading for the dining hall. "So, funny, ha!"

The hotel restaurant turned out to be more select than we had anticipated. The other guests were African and European business men together with some

wealthy Malian couples, so we stood out like three flies in the soup. Also memorable was the look of incredulity that the maître gave the professor when he saw him arrive in that shirt covered with palm trees. Nor was he the only one. From staff members to guests, everyone looked at him in amused disapproval. Even the waiters giggled when they had their backs to us. The professor was left in such a state of bewilderment that he nearly took on the whole restaurant.

“Unbelievable! That’s way out of line. Why can’t I dress as I please? Haven’t they ever seen a flowery shirt?”

“Professor, I don’t think the shirt is the only problem.”

“Really? It’s not my glasses, is it? Or the fact that I’m short?”

“No, nothing like that. In fact, it’s the shorts you’re wearing.”

“My shorts?”

“You see, Doc ... in this part of Africa, only children, beggars and fools wear shorts.”

The professor fell silent, chewing on my words. He looked down and did not say another word all night.

We had a copious dinner, but the professor left us before dessert. I paid the bill and we were already on the stairs to our rooms when I grabbed Cassie’s arm and nodded toward the door.

“Why don’t we walk off the meal?”

“Now? Outside?”

“Sure. It’d be very boring to walk inside.”

“But, I’m really tired ...”

“Don’t worry, it’ll only be a stroll around the block. Or are you scared?”

This got to her. “Me, scared? Are you kidding?”

The very fact of crossing the hotel door meant passing from light into darkness, from the relative cool to the suffocating heat, and from the smell of jasmine air-freshener to the stink of garbage and frying from the nearby street vendors.

“Jesus! What a change!”

“Welcome to Africa.”

“Don’t be a jerk. This is only a dark stinking street in a decaying city.”

“Congratulations. You’ve just managed to describe present day Africa.”

We were walking in the heart of darkness of Bamako, faintly illuminated by oil lamps. There were vendors of chicken wings, street barbers, mechanics who used the sidewalk to strip Chinese motorcycles, and garbage rotting everywhere. The mass of chaotic humanity, visible only because of the ladies' flashy dresses and the white of their eyes when they turned to look at us, flooded our senses and we were overwhelmed by an excess of sensations.

"It seems that everybody is out on the streets ..."

"It's the heat. You just can't go out during the day."

"Have you been here before?"

"Not here, no, but all African cities look alike." I turned to her and asked with a hint of sarcasm, "Don't you like it?"

"Are you kidding? This is totally awesome. On the plane I was thinking about never-ending savannahs with zebras, giraffes and the blasted Kilimanjaro in the background."

"That's Africa for tourists, safaris for bwanas. This is the real Africa, Cassie. The Africa of the Africans."

Almost an hour later, Cassie and I decided to go back to the hotel and retire for the night. We said goodnight in the corridor, and I could not help staring at her as she fumbled with her door. She must have felt my eyes on her neck because she half turned. In the semi-darkness, I saw or sensed a suggestive gleam in her eyes. We both remained silent, trying to guess one another's thoughts. Finally I came out of the spell enough to utter what every cell in my body was prompting me to say.

"Care to come in?"

She did not respond for what seemed an eternity, then closed the door she had just opened.

We leaned on the balcony rail outside my room, looking at the dark shadow of the Niger River. The yellow lights on the fishermen's canoes were like a constellation of fireflies floating downstream. Further away, villages like Badalabougou or Sogoniko were revealed by the soft lights of oil lamps in the windows of their adobe houses. Silence was king, apart from the odd rumor of a solitary vehicle in the otherwise deserted streets and the distant sound of drums from some celebration.

The night was warm but a shiver ran through my body when I felt the touch of her arm through my shirt. She must have felt it too, because she

turned her eyes away from the horizon and looked straight into my own. I saw her beautiful face, softly lit by the radiance from beyond the river.

“Cassandra, I’ve been thinking about everything I said in Barcelona. You were right, I think ...”

She put a finger on my lips. “Be quiet,” she whispered. She tiptoed up to put her arm around my neck and kissed me.

I held her by the waist and drew her to me, feeling her firm breasts under the light dress and the warmth of her lips as they gently opened to mine. Then passion took over. We let ourselves drift while we searched avidly under our clothes and our hands ventured wherever there was skin to caress.

Before we knew how it had happened, we found ourselves lying on the floor of the terrace, naked. We smiled in the shadows. She began to moan with pleasure as I kissed her whole body slowly, savouring her neck, her shoulders, her back, and then her breasts, gently nibbling on her nipples, surrendering to the promise of her belly, rolling down to the warm moistness of her thighs. Our bodies discovered how to fit together as if, in another life, we had been part of the same being.

Under the warm cloak of the African night we discovered how much we loved each other.

At the ungodly hour of five in the morning, my wrist watch alarm rang. For a few seconds I was unable to recognize where I was, why I was there, or whose arm was lying on my chest. I blinked several times, but it was a while before I remembered I was in a hotel room in Bamako and that I had just spent one of the most wonderful nights of my life.

I sat up in bed, afraid of falling asleep again. I guessed it was less than an hour since we had drifted off, exhausted. In less than two hours we had to catch a flight to Timbuktu.

“Cassie,” I whispered, “wake up. We have to get going or we’ll miss the flight.”

She put her head under the pillow. “I don’t want to. You go ... I’ll catch up.”

I looked at her bare back and the way it extended into her perfectly rounded buttocks. For a moment I played with the idea of not catching that untimely plane and staying in the hotel with her, not exactly to sleep. But time was ticking by and, no matter how tempting it was at that time in the morning, we couldn’t afford a whole day in Bamako.

“Ms. Brooks,” I said finally, raising my voice a little. “Cassandra Brooks. Will you please get up right this minute or I’ll give you what for!”

She raised her buttocks provokingly.

I sprang on her. “Just you wait!” I said and began tickling her until her cries for mercy threatened to wake half the hotel.

Inevitably, we ended up making love without another thought about the flight to Timbuktu, or the Templar treasure itself for that matter.

“Ulysses! Ulysses!” came a voice accompanied by heavy banging on my door. “Are you awake?”

“Yes! What’s up, Doc?”

“Nothing, nothing. I just wanted to know whether you were all ready. Reception says the taxi we ordered yesterday is at the front door.”

“Yeah ... okay ...” I jumped out of bed. “I’ll be ready in five minutes.”

“Very well, I’ll be at the reception desk. Oh, and by the way, I’ve been knocking on Cassandra’s door and gotten no reply. I’ll try again, in case she’s

still sleeping.”

She looked at me from the bed, with eyes wide open, and gestured me to get the professor away from her door.

“Don’t worry, Doc. She’s probably in the shower. Cassie is a very responsible woman.” I glanced down at her. “I’m sure she’s been awake for quite a while.”

“All right, but before you come down, give her a nudge, just in case.”

“Don’t worry, Doc.” I turned to her with a mischievous grin. “I will straight away ...”

We showered, dressed and gathered our belongings together in record time. Even so, the taxi driver had been waiting for over twenty minutes. We had to pay extra for the delay and for making him speed to the airport. The professor had been unable to hide his surprise at seeing us arrive downstairs, with hair still wet and clothes hanging out of our bags.

“For heaven’s sake! You overslept. Both of you! I can’t believe it!”

“Yeah ... well, you know,” I muttered as I passed him on my way to the taxi.

“And look at your eyes!” he said when he saw me closely. “You too, Cassandra?” he added when he saw her coming out of the hotel in the same state. “You look as if you hadn’t slept all night. What on earth have you been ...?”

He stopped in mid-sentence. He looked, first at one and then the other, taken aback. Suddenly he understood the reason for our delay and disarray.

“Oops! Of course ...” he mumbled, blushing. “Please, forget I said anything.”

The first rays of the sun shone directly on my face through the rusty window. I looked down from six thousand feet, awed by the immensity of the *Sahel*, which faded away in the dusty horizon. There was no sign of mound, hill or mountain breaking its monotony, even though the real desert did not begin until a couple of thousand miles to the north. This desolate plain, sparsely punctuated by acacia trees, shrubs and what looked like elongated shadows of men in the middle of nowhere, evoked a sense of abandonment, a solitude so deep it was hard to imagine. I tightened my hold on Cassie’s hand, but when I turned to comment on the effects the wasteland had on me, I saw she was sleeping. I did not have the heart to wake her.

The plane was a twenty-seater Russian Air Mali turbo-prop which



rattled audibly and lurched frequently. According to the pilot who spoke French with a heavy Russian accent, this was due to the currents converging at that hour of the morning over dry areas of land like the one we were flying over.

The six-hundred-mile trip from Bamako to Timbuktu should have only lasted three hours at the most. This time it took over nine hours because of the unexpected stops we made at Ségou and Mopti, to pick up and drop off passengers. Fortunately, this was not my first trip in the African continent, so I took all those drawbacks for granted. In the western world I would have been annoyed. In contrast, every time the plane landed, the professor went up to the pilot and in his fluent English, garnished with rich Spanish swear words, let him know what he thought of his apparent inability to tell the difference between the plane and a delivery truck.

We landed on Timbuktu's air strip well after four in the afternoon. We were worn out by the uncomfortable seats, and all we could think of was a bath and several pints of cold beer.

The Azalaï Hotel seemed like a Shangri-la in the desert, with its rooms like small gardens full of well-tended plants, just a few feet away from the nearest of the dunes that surrounded the city. It was hard to tear ourselves away from it after freshening up. We hit the street at the time of day when the sunrays were falling obliquely on the adobe walls and the heat was not an impediment for walking in the sandy streets of this ancient metropolis on the edge of the Sahara. We decided to make the most of our time, in spite of the lateness of the hour, to register at the commissariat (as was mandatory for all foreigners), hire an official guide (also mandatory, but whom we soon got rid of), and visit the unusual Djingarebier Mosque in the south of town.

Ever since leaving the hotel, we had been surrounded by a cloud of kids tugging at our sleeves with cries of "*cadeau, cadeau!*"

"What the hell is *cadeau*?" asked Cassie as she tried to stop one of the smallest kids from putting his hand in her pockets.

"It means gift, in French."

"Well, it seems to be every kid in Timbuktu's birthday!"

"Wait a minute," said the professor. "I'll see if I have some change, then maybe they'll leave us alone."

"Don't you dare put your hand in your pocket, Doc! If they see the least possibility of getting something, you won't get rid of them. Not even with hot water."

“But, the poor things, they’re in rags ... Why can’t I give them a couple of francs?”

“You may gain peace of mind, but you wouldn’t be doing them any favor. At the most you’d get their parents to send them out begging instead of going to school. If you really want to help, join an NGO.”

“Jesus! Ulysses! Calm down!”

“The problem is, professor, I’ve seen too many places where well-intentioned tourists have corrupted kids and their families. I’ve seen shepherds and craftsmen turned into professional beggars.”

“Okay. Understood. You may be right. I’d never thought about it like that.”

“Forget it. Simply ignore them. It’s the only way they’ll get tired and leave us alone.” I looked at the minaret standing out beyond the adobe roofs. “Now, let’s see this famous mosque before it gets dark.”

Gradually we left the tumultuous company behind, until at last we were able to enjoy the unusual pleasure of walking in silence along the sandy arteries of this city anchored in time, exactly the way it must have been hundreds of years ago. Houses of wood, straw and mud flanked the streets which wound at impossible angles, turning left and right upon themselves, so that all plans, guides and sense of direction were soon made useless. The sight of the minarets was the only thing which allowed us to approach our destination. At the turn of one final corner, it appeared in front of us in all its splendor.

The mosque was built entirely of adobe, supported by a wooden frame. It resembled a pyramid with its tip cut off, and finished off with strange minarets which bristled with irregular wooden rungs. It seemed to absorb the light of the evening, its color changing from the yellow of the desert sand to a soft orange.

“It’s beautiful,” said Cassie putting her hands behind her neck.

“Do you think we can get in?” asked the professor. “I’d love to see the inside.”

“I don’t think they’d mind,” I said. “But it’s too late today. Maybe we’ll have time tomorrow.”

“Did you know it was built by order of the same king who appears on the Catalan atlas?” asked the professor.

“The one who is holding the little sun in his hand, just beside the symbol of this city?” asked Cassandra.

“The same one. I think it was finished in the year 1325. But there’s another funny coincidence. The architect was a Spaniard. In fact, it was an *andalusí* named Es Saheli.

“Another Spaniard?” I asked in disbelief. “It seems to me one too many passing through here to be a coincidence. If I remember correctly there’s the Kati family which became the most influential in the kingdom, then Yuder Pasha, who conquered the city and ordered the Katis into exile. And if that weren’t enough, now there’s this Es Sahel who built this mosque.”

“And don’t forget our mysterious cartographer,” said Cassandra.

“That’s true. I’d say they’re too many for coincidence.” I looked up to see the sun going down behind one of the minarets. “I’d love to know what on earth made them all cross thousands of miles of the worst land on the planet to arrive at this little city in the middle of nowhere.”

Soon afterward, given the total absence of street lights, we decided to go back to the hotel before it was completely dark. We turned our backs on the muezzin’s hypnotic chanting, who was beginning his call to prayer at that moment.

Only a couple of shadows wrapped in their *tagelmoust* could be seen in the streets in the deepening darkness. Occasionally, a pair of fiery eyes surrounded by blue cloth stood out watching these (as they must have regarded us) annoying foreign intruders. The echo of our voices followed us in the silence of the streets of Timbuktu. We were reminded that, although still in the same country, we were no longer walking around a noisy African metropolis on the shores of the Niger but a city that belonged to the desert, to its silence and to its dwellers: the Tuareg.

Cassie held on to my arm. “Those people give me the creeps!”

“They’ve always been feared in this land. That’s because they’re bandits, slavers, and merciless warriors.”

“Wow, Ulysses. Thanks! Now I feel so much safer.”

“Don’t be like that, boy,” said the professor. “Don’t just tell her the bad things. If you want the girl to get close to you, say something nice but don’t scare her. Or me, for that matter.”

“Are you scared, Doc?”

“Intimidated would be the right term.”

“You don’t have to worry. Although I’ve only dealt with the Tuareg once during a trip I took some years ago, I know for a fact they’re peaceful

people. Their time of pillaging is long since over. Now they live off their goat herds and the occasional caravans they organize through the desert. In fact, although there are Tuareg bandits running around the Sahara, their main cultural feature nowadays is an overwhelming hospitality. And being nomads, they have a deep respect for travelers ... even ones wearing shorts.”

“Gee, son. More than an hour without mentioning the subject! I was beginning to get worried.”

“No way! I can keep it running for a couple of years at least.”

“Come on, Ulysses. Don’t be a jerk,” said Cassie tightening her grip on my arm. “Let’s hurry. I’m really looking forward to getting back to the hotel *today*.”

“By the look on your faces, I gather your night was more interesting than mine,” said the professor, at breakfast.

I sat down in front of a platter with bread rolls and a jar of marmalade. “Oh, you bet!”

“Yes, very interesting,” agreed Cassie, “particularly when you started snoring like a damn bear.”

“Bears don’t snore!”

She gave me a warning look.

“It must’ve been the mattress,” I said apologetically, “or the pillow.”

Cassandra aimed a butter-covered knife at me. “It better be, man.”

“Huh! How amusing. And you’ve only been in it for one day!”

“Are you having fun?” Cassie casually waved the knife in front of the professor’s face.

“Who, me? Never! It would never occur to me to make fun of something as serious as this.”

“Cut the crap, Doc,” I warned him, one eye on the buttered knife. “You don’t know how dangerous this girl is with butter ...”

It took her a few seconds to react, but then she lunged at me, grabbing my neck and biting my ear.

“You ...! The butter thing was your idea!”

At nine in the morning, with the day already threatening to be intensely hot, we arrived at the Kati Library. This was a two-story building painted in soft earth colors that matched its surroundings. It was protected by a small white masonry wall and the gate in this was open. I walked up to the wooden door of the house and knocked twice.

A man in his forties, with dark skin and a puzzled face, opened the door.

“As *Salaam alaykum*,” I greeted him.

“*Wa alaykum as-salaam*,” he answered.

“Do you speak English?” I said, dreading a complicated conversation in French.

“¿*Sois españoles?*” the man asked. “Are you Spanish?”

For a second I was speechless at encountering someone from Mali with an Andalusian accent.

“Yes ..., *digo, sí*,” I finally replied. “Well, almost. I am from the United States and she is from Mexico.”

“Pleased to meet you, *Señorita*. And your name is?”

“Cassandra Brooks. But you can call me Cassie.”

“My name is Daniel Ibrahim Ben Ahmed Al Quti. But you can call me ... any time you want.”

“My name is Ulysses Vidal, and this is Professor Eduardo Castillo,” I said not altogether pleased at this blatant flirting.

He took his eyes away reluctantly from Cassie’s and turned to me with a trace of irritation. He inclined his head.

“Pleased to meet you all.” With a gesture he indicated the inside of the house. “Allow me to invite you to tea.”

We followed him into a living room decorated in the Bedouin style, with overlapping carpets covering the floor and a multitude of richly adorned cushions surrounding an extremely low round table.

“Please, make yourselves comfortable. Consider yourselves at home.”

“You’re very kind,” I said. “I’ve never been in such a welcoming library before.”

“Well, the fact is this is my home too.”

At that moment a woman came into the room. She was wearing a black *chaddor* which only let us see her equally black and submissive eyes. Daniel looked at her and whispered something which sent her back to wherever she had come from.

“Tell me, gentlemen. To what do I owe the honor of your visit? Has the University of Granada sent you to check on the state of the manuscripts?”

The professor started to explain, but I interrupted him quickly.

“We work for the Spanish Ministry of Culture. Professor Castillo has been sent to study certain documents. The young lady and I are his assistants.”

Without looking at them, I could sense my friends’ surprise at hearing me utter such a lie. I hoped they had some experience at playing poker.

He looked at us closely. “The Ministry? Sure ...”

“Exactly. The same one that sponsored the construction of this library.”

“Of course,” he said, “and we are all extremely grateful for it. Particularly to the undersecretary Ramos Espinosa, without whom, none of

this would exist. By the way, do you know if the undersecretary's wife overcame her heart problems?"

"I understand she did," I replied. The woman returned at this moment with a smoking teapot and some glasses on a tray. "I'll express your concern to Mr. Espinosa."

"Very kind on your part and I am at your service for whatever you should need." Without losing his smile, he added: "But, allow me to remind you that the present undersecretary at your country's Ministry of Culture is a woman and she is single."

There I was, looking for the most fabulous treasure in history in this obscure corner of the world, and on the point of blowing it for being such a smartass.

A palpable tension filled the hall. Only the rustle of the woman's clothing as she served the mint tea broke the uncomfortable silence.

Without any change in the kindness of his voice, Daniel finally spoke.

"Do you really believe that because I am black and live in the middle of the desert, I am a fool?"

I looked uneasily at my friends and realized I had put my big foot in it, right up to the hip. I had to find a way of rescuing the situation. I looked him in the eye.

"I offer you my sincerest apologies. It didn't mean to ..."

"Lie?"

"There's no possible excuse. I can only ask your forgiveness. We have a powerful reason to wish to see your files. I thought wrongly that investing ourselves with an official aura would make it easier."

Daniel took a long sip from his glass of tea and seemed to ponder for a few seconds.

"Very well," he said at last. "Apologies accepted."

We all sighed with relief.

"And now, following the rules of hospitality in my culture, I invite you to savor this delicious tea my dear wife has prepared for us."

"Thank you. You are most understanding," said the professor.

"But, as soon as you finish it," continued our host, now very seriously, "I beg you to leave my house and never come back."

The three of us remained silent while Daniel, leaning back impassively on a couple of enormous cushions, finished his tea. The situation was as ridiculous

as it was worrisome. Having access to the Kati library files was essential for our plans, and I had dragged Cassie and the professor to a dead end in the stupidest possible way. But I had not traveled all the way to Timbuktu just to drink mint tea and then give up.

“I totally understand your anger,” I said, “and I apologize again. But it’s very important that we have access to your files. And after all, this is a library, isn’t it?”

“It is. But I also live here, and my family’s surname gives its name to the center. So in more ways than one, this is my home, and those who come to it with lies on their lips are not welcome.”

“We could pay you,” was all I could think of to say.

He frowned. “First you lie to me and now you insult me. What other offense do you have up your sleeve?”

Cassie intervened at this point. “It was never our intention to insult you. We made a mistake and we’ve apologized. Now you must understand we’ve come all the way here just to examine your files and you’d be doing us a great favor if you gave us permission.”

His features softened, either as a consequence of her arguments or because her emerald eyes had him in their spell.

“Well ... it may have been a misunderstanding,” he said without taking his eyes off hers. “You do seem like nice people.”

Aware of the effect she was having on Daniel, Cassandra smiled and said, “You can be sure of that. And we’d be much obliged if you could help us.”

A fatuous smile which revealed two gold teeth appeared on our host’s face.

“How can I refuse a beautiful woman?”

Cassie gave him her most seductive smile, and his last defenses crumbled.

“So, tell me what I can do for you and I shall try my humble best to make it happen.”

While I kept to one side, trying not to remind Daniel of my presence, the professor explained what we were looking for. Needless to say, he omitted any reference to the Templar treasure and gave the impression our interest was purely academic. Meanwhile, Cassandra maintained her spell over our host with constant questions. He showed us upstairs, where the files were



kept.

“Where did you learn to speak Spanish so well?”

“In Spain. My parents sent me there to study with a scholarship awarded to my family by the Al-Andalus Foundation in Granada.”

“By the way,” Cassie went on, “now that you mention your family, you said before that the library belonged to them. But I understood your surname isn’t Kati.”

“That is correct,” he said proudly. “My surname is Al Quti. The name Kati is just a corruption of the original.”

Cassie regarded him with admiration. “Then ... you must be a descendant of Alí ben Ziyab who came here with all his family five hundred years ago.”

“You’re not only pretty but smart. Are you married?”

Cassie glanced at me, amused by the unexpected question. “Not for now, but you never know ...”

“That is true, you never know.” Our host said with a wink.

Beyond a solid iron door we found ourselves in a spacious hall, painted sky-blue, which occupied the whole upper story. The walls were covered with dozens of wooden shelves with grills, and behind these we could see hundreds of haphazardly piled dossiers, documents and files full of yellowed scrolls.

“Is this the library?” I asked, unable to hide my disappointment.

Daniel, aware of my presence after all, made a face before answering.

“What were you expecting? Computers and background music?”

I was getting tired of apologizing to this man. “No, it’s not that. But there are thousands of papers and scrolls here. It would take us years to go over them all.”

“Well, that depends on how fluent you are in Old Arabic.”

The professor leaned heavily on the table in the center of the hall.

“The fact is, we believe the document we’re looking for is written in either Castilian, Portuguese or Catalan.”

Daniel Ben Ibrahim Al Quti looked confused.

“I thought you knew. There are many documents in this library related to our beloved Iberian Peninsula. But all of them, without exception, whether translated or original, are written in Arabic.”

The unexpected revelation hit us like a hammer. We had crossed half Africa

in search of an improbability, just to come face to face with an impossibility. With sinking hearts we sat around the table, trying to get over the blow and thinking of any possibility we could have overlooked.

“Wait a minute!” cried the professor. “Maybe our friend decided to write in Arabic! It would’ve been just another way of throwing off his pursuers.”

He looked at Daniel, then at me and Cassie. Finally, with our unspoken consent, he put his cards on the table.

“You see, what we’re looking for is a document, maybe in code, by a man who arrived in Timbuktu from Majorca toward the middle of the fourteenth century.”

He took the photocopies, including the ones of the Catalan Atlas, out of his bag, and arranged them on the table.

“We don’t know the name of this man. But we suspect he spoke Arabic, and he may have pretended to be a Moor from Al-Andalus.”

Daniel looked at the professor, well aware we were feeding him the information drop by drop.

“You want my help. But first you lie to me, and now you hide facts from me. I do not know what has brought you here, but I am sure it is not academic curiosity.” His gaze had turned severe. “Either you tell me everything, or our collaboration is over. And not even you,” he said with a glance at Cassandra, “will convince me otherwise.”

“All right,” I said. “We believe that man knew the location of an ancient Christian relic. He had to flee in order to keep his secret, and hid the key to this location in some document that we think is in this library.”

“What relic are you referring to?”

“We have no idea,” I lied.

Daniel kept quiet for more than a minute, pondering. I was sure he was about to show us the way out.

He finally raised his head. “I am sorry to have to tell you this, but I have personally compiled each and every one of the documents you see here. I can assure you there is not one that makes reference to anything of what you have just told me.”

Overwhelmed by disappointment, we had no other option but to accept that the only possibility of continuing the search had vanished under our noses. We rose from the table with a sense of defeat, ignoring the thousands of

useless scrolls piled around us. All we could do was shake hands with Daniel, and thank him for the tea and hospitality. The professor was picking up his photocopies and drawings from the table, when Daniel's attention was caught by one of them.

"I have seen this one before."

"What did you say?" asked the professor.

Daniel pointed at one of the drawings. "I said I have seen that one before."

The three of us stared in amazement at the image he was pointing at.

"Where did you see it?" I asked. "Here, in Mali?"

"Yes. At a small village downriver that I visited a few months ago in search of some scrolls. This same figure was being carved by a local craftsman. He said, if I am not mistaken, that it symbolized the African natives and the Tuareg, riding together on the back of Islam. I remember I was caught by its originality. This was a metaphor I had never come across before, much less one that referred to the unity of the country."

I was listening to Daniel's voice, but at the same time I was concentrating on the engraving. It showed two men riding on the same horse. It was the same image that appeared on the seal we had found among the coral: the image which, for hundreds of years, had been the symbol of the Templars.

About six hours after our tea at the Kati Library (or rather the Al Quti), we were heading downstream on the placid Niger, toward a fishing hamlet. All we knew of it was its name: Batanga. Thanks to Daniel's invaluable help, we had found ourselves a *pinasse* in no time and for only a fraction of what we would have expected to pay for the two-day excursion. The boat in which we huddled between our luggage and our supplies could best be described as a canoe on steroids. It was about forty feet long and so narrow that two people could barely sit side by side in it. The crew consisted of the skipper, who managed the noisy stern engine, and his assistant-cook-crewman, who watched from the prow for hidden sandbanks and took care of everything else.

The three of us were sitting amidships, surrounded by sacks of rice, piles of pineapples and huge bunches of bananas from the Ivory Coast. Obviously, the skipper turned a profit by carrying goods he could sell later in Bourem, beyond Batanga. That way he would be compensated for the bargain fare we had paid for his services. We sat warily contemplating the very short gap between the edge of the canoe and the water surface. We knew that hippopotamus and crocodiles infested the murky waters of that wide, shallow river.

We calculated we would arrive at our destination around noon the following day. Once there we would look for the craftsman Daniel had told us about. While we were looking for transportation on the docks of Korioumé, he had also told us that there were hundreds of scrolls still out there in the various villages and hamlets. They were zealously protected by the descendants of the Kati clan, who had fled to Timbuktu over the last few centuries. They had taken a part of their legendary library with them, to protect it from the greedy hands of Andalusian, Maghrebi and French conquerors.

"This is incredible!" shouted Cassie over the noise of the engine. Who'd have thought a month ago, that I'd be traveling in a wooden canoe, sitting on a sack of rice?"

"Are you sorry you came?" I shouted back.

“No way! These past weeks are turning out to be the most exciting ones I’ve ever had! I never felt so alive before!”

“Well, that’s good! Because I don’t suppose this’ll be your last chance to “feel alive” in Mali!”

Before sundown, the skipper tied up on the north shore of the river. He did not speak any French, so he indicated with gestures that we should help him unload part of the supplies and the camping gear. This consisted of a Berber *haima* for all five of us, together with some straw mats for the ground. We volunteered to set up the tent, and we managed to do this in double the time it would have taken the assistant by himself. On the other hand, this gave him time to catch a couple of perch. As a result, our dinner that evening consisted of delicious grilled fish, washed down with the fresh beer we had carried on ice.

The skipper, serious and circumspect during the journey, turned out to be a real chatterbox. He was happy to skip the precepts of Islam and fall on the beer enthusiastically. With a wealth of gestures he gave us to understand that his name was Mohamed, that he lived off fishing and trade and that the canoe was his home, not to mention his means of transport and his livelihood. After dinner, when we put the teapot over the fire, we asked him about his assistant. His name, he said casually, was also Mohamed.

“Is he your son?” asked Cassie, using her hands to make herself understood.

Mohamed stood up, evidently offended by the innocent question. He spat on the ground and looked with utmost disdain at his namesake, who was picking up the plastic dishes to rinse in the river.

“*Enbeh Bozo!*” he said haughtily, pointing at himself. And then pointing at his assistant he said disdainfully, “*Bella.*” He spat again, theatrically, and joined his hands at the wrists, as if he were handcuffed.

“What does he mean? That his friend is a criminal?” asked Cassandra.

I smiled ruefully and said, “*Friend* wouldn’t be the word I’d use in this case.”

“What our man here wants to explain is that they belong to different ethnic groups,” said the professor. “He is a Bozo and comes from a trading and fishing tribe, whereas our silent sailor belongs to the Bella who, if I read my travel guide correctly, have traditionally been kept as slaves in this part of Africa, particularly by the Tuareg.” At Cassie’s questioning look, he

explained, “You see ... while you were holding hands in the canoe, I was learning things from the Mali guidebook.”

“The Tuareg kept slaves?” asked Cassandra, outraged.

The professor said with a tinge of sadness, “My dear, they still do.”

“That’s not possible! Slavery was abolished more than a hundred years ago!”

“I’m sorry to have to break this to you,” I said, “but the professor is right. Slavery is still a common practice in many places of Africa. Not only here, in Mali, but in other parts of the Sahel like Sudan or Somalia. Armed bands attack whole villages. They kidnap women and children in order to sell them later as if they were cattle.”

Cassie’s indignation was growing by the minute. She raised her arms to the sky.

“And why doesn’t anybody do anything about it? Where are the UN or UNICEF and all the *chingada* of organizations that are supposed to protect human rights? Am I the only one who thinks it’s monstrous?”

“Of course not, Cassie! But Africa is the place no one wants to look into. It’s like a black hole in the maps. We know there are rhinoceros here on the verge of extinction, and gorillas in the mist. But we don’t know, and we don’t want to know, about the horrible human drama that goes on here every day.”

“I’d never have imagined ...” she whispered sadly.

“Nobody does,” I said. “Maybe that’s why it’s so real.”

She turned to look at the Bella, who was busy rinsing dishes on the river bank.

“So you think he ...?”

“Probably.”

“But he could escape. Why doesn’t he?”

I shrugged. “Perhaps he has nowhere to go. And perhaps *this* is his best option.”

Cassie turned to me in fury. “How can being a slave be his best option? It’s a tragic life, with no expectations!”

“Expectations? Honey, let me remind you that we’re in Africa. Expectations here mean having something to eat for dinner.”

“You’re being cynical.”

“Not cynical. I wish that was all.”

After this conversation we did not feel like talking any more. We soon

retired to our worn-out mats, daubed our arms, legs and faces with mosquito repellent and left the fire going to keep away the hyenas. There were a lot in the area and we could hear them laughing in the distance.

Whether it was anxiety about sleeping outdoors in the wild or the painful feelings the conversation had stirred in her, Cassie clung to me like a little girl to her teddy bear. An unexpected feeling of tenderness welled up in me. Listening to her breathing softly on my chest, I knew I was falling in love with this girl as I had never fallen in love before.

*“Inisoh gohmá! Inisoh gohmá!”* Someone was shaking me and yelling into my ear.

I opened my eyes and saw yellow teeth and a pair of eyes outlined against a background of darkness. I recognized the skipper.

“What’s up, man?” I mumbled.

*“Inisoh gohmá!”* he repeated.

“For goodness’ sake, I don’t understand a word you’re saying. Unless you draw me a picture...”

Cassie said sleepily beside me, “I think it must mean “good morning” or something like that.”

“But it’s still night!”

By now the professor had woken up too. “You’ll have to tell him because the assistant’s already taking out the tent pickets.”

We had no choice but to wake up fully, gather our belongings together and help dismantle our camp as the first rays of dawn climbed the horizon. Half an hour later we were on the river again. A giant orange sun rose straight ahead of us like an incandescent star above Bethlehem guiding us along the calm waters of the Niger.

We were now traveling along a sparsely inhabited part of the river. There was hardly a hut to be glimpsed among the riverside vegetation, and the only movement we saw was when flocks of water fowl took to the air ahead of us, frightened by the noise of our passage. In spite of the swaying of the unstable canoe, I felt an inner peace I had not experienced in a long time. It might have been only the hypnotic effect created by the monotony of the landscape and the tiny waves of the river breaking against our boat, but for all my hunger, discomfort and sleepiness, I found I was enjoying the unusual quietness as if it were a delicacy.

We made good speed for several hours, until Mohamed rubbed his

hand across his belly as an indication of hunger and decided to take the *pinasse* to shore. We grounded the boat on a little beach clear of rushes, and he left after gesturing to us to wait for him there. With nothing special to do, we strolled along the beach to stretch our legs. The skipper seemed to be taking his time to return, so we decided to combat the stifling heat with a dip in the river. Without taking our clothes off (after all, they could certainly do with a wash) we rid ourselves of anything that had to be kept dry.

Cassie pushed past me, laughing as she skipped down to the water, so that I tripped and fell. She was in to her thighs when suddenly, the second Mohamed leapt forward out of nowhere to grab her arm and pull her out. She was terrified, but then she followed his pointing finger and saw what looked like a drifting tree trunk, which was heading straight toward her.

“Cassie!” I yelled. “Get out of the water right away! It’s a crocodile!”

She had grasped what was happening and had already started to back up slowly, without taking her eyes off the huge creature. But then she saw that it was coming faster and faster. With the Bella still holding her, she decided to make a run for it as fast as her legs would go.

If I had had a stopwatch at hand, I could have proved that she broke the water speed record. She ran like the wind and swished past the professor, who was sitting on a rock at a very safe distance from the shore. I thought he was more than a little amused by the incident.

The skipper finally strolled casually back about an hour later without giving any reason for his absence. But from the malicious look Cassie’s savior gave him, I guessed the skipper’s visit to the hamlet (which must have been no more than a few hundred feet away from us) had been more of a “booty call”. Meanwhile we had prepared a lunch of white rice, banana and pineapple. By noon we had eaten and were on the river once again, heading toward Batanga, a couple of hours away. There we hoped to find the definitive key that would lead us to the elusive treasure of the Knights of the Temple.



At mid-afternoon we said goodbye to the two Mohameds, or “the M&Ms” as we had come to call them, on the derelict docks of Batanga. We shook hands with both, and they wished us a good trip with words we did not understand. As an extra, Cassandra planted a big kiss on the Bella’s cheek to thank him for saving her from the crocodile. This made the man very happy, and his boss very envious, and this pleased us in turn.

As we had agreed at the beginning of the trip, they would continue downriver to the busy town of Gao. By the time they came upriver again, in about a week, if we had not made our way back to civilization, they would stop to pick us up and take us back to Timbuktu.

We waved at them as they drifted away. Only then did we realize we were in the middle of nowhere, with no food or water. We could only say “good morning” in the local language and our provisional visas were about to expire.

I was thinking that things might have been worse when I turned around and looked more closely at the place where we had landed. A bunch of adobe huts set under the shade of a few acacias were what Daniel had wishfully called a village.

I tried to see the positive side. “At least, it should be easy to find our craftsman ...”

At that moment, a group of children came running out of one of the huts. They stopped short when they saw us: with our backpacks on the ground, dirty, looking like white ghosts surfaced from the depths of the Niger. They looked at us wide-eyed, and ran back to their huts as if they had seen the devil.

“... or maybe not.” I finished.

We walked to the small esplanade, around which stood the huts. We expected someone to come out, to greet us. The place looked abandoned, but we had no doubt that dozens of eyes were watching us from behind the cracks of the wooden doors.

“Well?” said the professor. “Now what do we do?”

“I say we go up to one of the huts and knock on the door.”

Cassandra grabbed my arm. "I think the best thing would be to sit under that acacia, over there, and wait for them to make the first move. It's obvious they're afraid of us, so the best thing we can do is show them they have nothing to fear. You know: "Let the children come to me."

Just as she had predicted, after we sat under the tree, curiosity got the better of them. First the young ones and then the adults came out timidly, puzzled by the unusual sight of three white people sitting under the acacia in the middle of their village. The youngest began to sit down around us, laughing among themselves, thrilled by the novelty. Older men and women came nearer, trying not to show they were as curious as their children. Finally, an old man with white hair and many wrinkles, dressed in a colorful *bou-bou*, made his way to us through the small throng. With a dignified air, he welcomed us with what sounded like kind words. We replied with grateful bows and handshakes, as our knowledge of the Bambara language was limited. The old man who seemed to be the chief of the village beamed toothlessly and pointed his finger at us.

"*Ibeh boh ming?*" he said politely.

We looked blankly at each other, not understanding a word.

"*Ibeh boh ming?*" he repeated. Then, pointing at himself he said, "*Enbeh boj Mali*."

*Ibeh boh ming?*"

"I think he's asking where we're from," said the professor. He took a step forward and signaled at the three of us. "Spain, *Enbeh boj España*."

The old man seemed to recognize the name. "*Isbania!*" he said, joyfully.

"Okay. Isbania, why not," he agreed.

"*En toh goh Modibo*," he said pointing at himself, happy to make himself understood. "*I toh goh?*"

Cassie was paying close attention. "I'd say he just told us his name and is asking for ours."

The professor nodded in agreement. He pointed at his own chest and said, "Eduardo". Then he pointed at us. "Cassandra and Ulysses."

Mr. Modibo frowned in concentration and tried to repeat his previous feat with similar results. "*Duado ... Gaandra ... Yulise*."

We had no choice but to congratulate him on his gift of languages. Once the introductions had been made, the whole village showed us to what had to be the Common House. This was a big hut with no walls and a palm

roof. As if by magic, they produced pineapples, bananas, platters of fish, rice and millet mixed with peanut butter. We started to gobble it all down, to the crowd's delight.

We were quite hungry and only the professor looked up from his bowl to speak.

"I'd say food isn't going to be a problem while we're here."

"Yeah," said Cassie. "I never imagined people would be so welcoming."

"Sorry to have to say this, but do you realize we're probably eating several days' worth of their dinners?" I said, arching my eyebrows at our numerous hosts.

"Oh my God, you're right! Maybe it'd be better to refuse politely, tell them we're not hungry, then eat our own stuff later on."

"Don't you dare! That would be a terrible insult to them. You'd be implying that their food isn't good enough for you."

"Well then ..."

I smacked my lips and bowed my head as a sign of respect toward those present.

"Just eat, keep quiet and smile."

With a touch of remorse, but well satisfied, we thanked them all for the feast with handshakes and wordless smiles. The empty bowls disappeared as fast as they had appeared, and we were invited to sit on narrow wooden benches in the center of the Common House.

The sun was beginning its journey down to the horizon. The shadows lengthened on the dry ground and a light breeze coming from the south brought to us the scent of the river. It was something we had grown accustomed to in the last few days. Meanwhile, Modibo was busy organizing everyone in the village in single file, according to age. He placed himself at the front of the line, as if they were a group of children waiting to see Santa Claus.

We watched the scene, in puzzlement, waiting expectantly for something to happen. Nobody said anything. The whole village was waiting in a line in front of us, and yet we had no idea what was going on.

Finally, the professor, as self-appointed interpreter, decided to open his mouth. He looked at Modibo and said, "Yes?"

Automatically, Modibo stepped forward. He passed his hand repeatedly

over his forehead and stomach and started on a heartfelt monologue we did not understand a word of. When he had finished he sat down in front of us, with his hands on his lap expectantly. We were even more bewildered than before, if possible.

“*Híjole!*” cried Cassie. “Now I get it! They think we’re doctors! All these people are waiting to be seen.”

We tried to explain as well as we could that we were not from *Médécins sans Frontières*, and that we had no medicines to give them. But when we saw the disappointment in their eyes we decided to use our limited medical knowledge to do whatever we could for them. The whole village, without exception, paraded before us for over two hours. They explained, in Bambara but with a luxury of detail, the various maladies they suffered from. All we could offer was a couple of paracetamol pills, and in a few cases antibiotics or antihistamine creams. We were aware that it might not be very wise to do this, but after all, these people had welcomed us with open arms. We could not refuse them, even though almost all their symptoms showed that they were suffering from malaria, and the medicines we gave them would be useless.

It was already night by the time Modibo led us, exhausted, to one of the adobe huts. They had apparently made this ready for us so we could sleep under a roof. Inside we found three cots with straw mattresses. We hung our mosquito nets over these, and immediately collapsed without stopping to worry about fleas, bedbugs, and other blood-suckers that obviously used the straw as a social center.

With my eyes fixed on a huge hairy tarantula that was clinging to the roof, I drifted to sleep. I was almost out when I heard Cassandra say, almost inaudibly, “Do you realize that with all this fuss, we haven’t even thought about asking whether anybody here was the craftsman we’re looking for?”

The first thing I realized when I opened my eyes the next morning was that the disgusting spider had decided to switch hiding places, so that now it was inside my mosquito net. I had no idea how it could have gotten there but the ghastly insect was now inches away from my face. I had to make an effort to keep my cool (I suffer from arachnophobia. Nobody is perfect) and leave my cot calmly, so that it would not take me for an enormous moth that had fallen into its web and bite me. My movements awoke the other two, and after I had introduced them to my night guest they frantically searched their clothes and

bags for similar visitors. Cassandra nearly jumped out of the hut when she discovered a small bright black snake curled up in one of her boots.

“Do you think it was poisonous?” she asked when she had recovered.

The professor shrugged. “No idea, my dear. But it sure looked small.”

I was still looking at the hole in the wall it had disappeared through. “I may be wrong but I’d say it was a baby African cobra. I’ve seen the adults and they looked very similar.”

The professor was investigating various red spots on his arms that had not been there the night before. “I don’t know about you, but what between the local fauna, the fleas and the risk of catching malaria, I’d say we should look for that craftsman and get the hell out of here,” he said.

“I agree,” said Cassie. “I don’t like the idea of snakes in my boots one little bit.”

“Then that’s settled. Let’s find the fellow and find out what he’s been using as a model. Then we can get back to Timbuktu and our comfortable hotel by the desert.”

When I said these words I never imagined how far from my wishes our immediate future would turn out to be.

We came out of the hut, to find Modibo waiting to take us to the Common House. There we discovered they had, once again, prepared a luxurious breakfast for us. We ate everything they had so generously offered us, then did our best to explain to our host the real reason for our visit.

We mimed, drew on the dirt, and tried every possible way of representing a craftsman at work. But our efforts were defeated by the language barrier, until Cassandra remembered our meeting with Daniel in Timbuktu.

“Professor, don’t you have the engraving of the two men on horseback?”

“Of course! Why didn’t I think of it myself?”

He ran to the hut to get his portfolio, then took out the engraving and showed it to Modibo. The old man took it in his hands and studied it carefully. Suddenly a look of understanding appeared on his face. He nodded several times while he looked at the drawing, to convey the fact that he understood what we wanted. He got up and invited us to follow him with a wave of his hand.

We were thrilled. It seemed our search was coming to an end. We

followed Modibo a few hundred yards away from the village and came to another adobe hut surrounded by smoothed-off pieces of wood, masks and stylized carvings. We had no doubt we had found our mysterious artist.

Modibo knocked softly on the door of the hut and waited for its dweller to come out.

A moment later, a small man with white hair appeared, rubbing his eyes against the morning light. He seemed very old. He exchanged greetings with our guide and came toward us with a wide toothless smile.

The chief made the introductions. (As he did this our names sounded further and further from the original). Then, we were invited to sit on some tiny wooden stools in the hut's shade, and the artist introduced himself as Diam Tendé. Luckily he had spent part of his youth working in Bamako and knew some French, which made our job a lot easier.

While I broke the ice by chatting with Mr. Tendé, I could sense the professor growing impatient. He looked as though he was ready to get up any minute and search the hut himself, even though we had no real idea what we were looking for. Afraid he would do just that, I asked him for the drawing with the Templar symbol. When I handed it to the artist he recognized it immediately.

*"C'est mon cadeau!"* he exclaimed.

"What did he say?" asked the professor.

"If I'm not mistaken, he said this is his gift."

"What gift?"

*"Quel cadeau, monsieur?"*

The man looked at us with pride, surprised that his fame as a craftsman had crossed frontiers.

*"C'est le cadeau pour ma petite fille! Le cadeau pour son mariage!"*

"His granddaughter's wedding present!" I felt a sudden unease.

*"Où est-ce que je peux trouver votre petite-fille?"* I asked trying to find out where she could be.

Diam Tendé looked toward the north, and pointed vaguely at the horizon.

*"Elle est la femme d'un Tuareg,"* he said in an untroubled voice, as if having married a Tuareg meant that the whole Sahara desert was now her home.

The others were quick to share my disappointment when I translated my conversation with the old man.

“Well,” said the professor as he doodled on the ground with a stick, “nobody can say we didn’t try. Although it’s ironic, isn’t it, to think that this man has given his granddaughter the greatest wedding dowry in history without realizing it.”

“Damn it! Now that it seemed within reach ... Shit!”

“Maybe it’s for the best,” said Cassandra, soothingly. “Maybe someone up there doesn’t want us to find the treasure. Maybe it’s best to let it be.”

“Maybe you’re right.” I stroke her hair. “And who knows, maybe I’ve found an even greater treasure for myself.”

“Jesus, Ulysses!” said the professor, “I never imagined you being so corny!”

Cassie stuck her tongue out at him.

I got up from my stool. “Anyway ... maybe we should say goodbye to our friends, thank them for everything and try to get back to Timbuktu today, if possible. I don’t know about you, guys, but I’m dying for a cold foamy beer.”

“... and a good shower!” said Cassie.

I was saying goodbye to the artist and shaking his calloused hands, when he asked me suddenly curious, “*Pourquoi desirez-vous connaître ma petite fille?*” (Why do you want to meet my granddaughter?)

Amused by the misunderstanding, I explained we were not interested in his granddaughter but in his wedding gift to her.

“*La caisse?*” he asked again.

“*Oui, monsieur ... la caisse,*” I said, surprised to find out we had been looking for some sort of box.

The old man smiled as if I had just told him a joke.

“*Mais la caisse n’est pas avec ma petite fille!*” (The box is not with my granddaughter.)

“*Pardon?*” I said, convinced I had not understood properly.

“*Monsieur,*” he said as if it was obvious. “*Le cadeau est chez les parents du mari, à la ville de Trabichat ... C’est la tradition.*”

My head spun as I tried to assimilate what I had just heard. It was hard to believe how things could change in a matter of seconds.

“Ulysses?” said Cassie when she saw my face. “What’s wrong?”

I hugged her and kissed her, without thinking.

“You’re not going to believe this,” I said. “It turns out this has all been a misunderstanding! He thought we were looking for his granddaughter. But

the present he gave her as dowry, the one with the Templar engraving on it, is apparently a box or trunk. And it's at her in-laws' house, somewhere called Trabichat!"



We spent the next half hour reassuring Mr. Tendé about our honest intentions. In order to get him to tell us how to find the family that kept such a valuable wedding gift, we had to promise him that we would only study it and in no way try to take it from them.

Getting to Trabichat turned out to be something of a problem; there were only two alternatives. The most comfortable was to wait for a *pinasse* with enough space to carry us downriver to Gao. There we would have to find a vehicle to take us to the distant city of Tassilit, half way to our destination. The drawback was that it would take us over a week, including the days we would have to spend at the village waiting for transportation, not to mention the nights of dealing with tarantulas and cobras.

The other option was to get to a nearby well, a few miles away to the north. There, according to Modibo, a small Tuareg caravan had recently arrived. All we had to do was convince them to let us travel with them on their route to Tassilit so that we would duly arrive in Trabichat on camelback in two or three days at the most. Easy as pie! But for one small detail: we would be traveling through the worst desert in the world, and our camel riding skills were nil.

We said a final goodbye to Diam Tendé and went back to the village, discussing which course to follow.

"To be honest," said the professor, "I don't like the idea of traveling through the desert. I don't even go to the beach in Barcelona so as not to get all sandy. I don't do well in temperatures that go above one hundred and twenty and from what you've told us, Ulysses, I don't trust the Tuareg."

Cassie looked up to the sky as she rebraided her hair. She took a deep breath.

"The heat doesn't bother me, and I'd love to travel through the desert riding a camel, sleeping under the stars, and as a bonus not finding snakes in my boots!" she said making a face.

"There are scorpions in the desert ..." said the professor.

"Don't be a wet blanket, Doc!" Then she turned to me. "And what do you have to say?"

“I vote for the Tuareg.”

“*Órale!* Two against one!”

“But the professor is right.”

“What do you mean?”

I was looking at the ground, trying to find a way to say what I had in mind without appearing sexist.

“I think it would be an unnecessary risk for the three of us to go. The desert isn’t the romantic place you imagine.” I held her by the waist as I looked into her green eyes. “It’s not only the heat that’s dangerous, and the lack of water, there are also bandits and traffickers. It would make more sense for you and Doc to go back to Timbuktu and wait for me there while I try to get to Trabichat. I’ll take a digital camera and I swear I’ll take more pictures of this box than I would of a playmate. Then I’ll head back to Gao by road. From there I can take a *pinasse* back to Timbuktu.

“Are you suggesting that we stay in the comfort of our hotel while you risk your life in the desert traveling with strangers?” I sensed a hint of anger in her voice.

“That’s the general idea, yes.”

She took my arm off her and stood in front of me, arms akimbo.

“I see ... The girl and the old man run into hiding while our hero faces death by himself, of course!”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Oh, yes, you did! You dumbass!”

“Cassie, honey ... I only want you to be safe.”

I tried to put my hand on her shoulder but she flung it away.

“Don’t you mess with me! I haven’t got this far just to turn around because you’ve suddenly suffered an attack of male chauvinism!”

It was very hot and I had no arguments left against such a strongwilled woman.

“Okay, whatever. It was just a suggestion.”

“Before you ever make another suggestion as stupid as that, I *suggest* you think twice.”

I did not want to prolong an argument I knew I would always end up losing. I sighed and looked at the professor. I had seriously expected a little help from him.

“What about you, professor? What do you plan on doing?”

He was staring at his shoes, thinking, a few feet away.

“I don’t like the idea of traveling through the desert at all, but like Cassie, I’d give anything for the opportunity to study that box which is supposed to have the seal of the Knights of the Temple on. And if we go, it’s either the three of us, or none.

So the decision was made: we would all go. We gathered our bags together and Modibo introduced us to a young boy who would take us to the well where the “blue men” had camped. Things were not looking so bad after all. We had located what we had come for, even though we were still not sure what it was. On top of that, we had not got sick yet, and there were small white clouds gathering in the sky to give the promise of relief from the stifling heat. Still, I had this nagging feeling at the back of my head, ever since we had decided to venture into the Sahara.

Unfortunately, it would turn out to be more than just a hunch.

Even though we were at the village less than twenty-four hours, the villagers said goodbye as if we had been there for months. We had to hug each and every one of them. It was hard to make them understand we could not stay for a farewell feast, or for the essential ritual of protection for the trip, which really would have come in handy.

We left the place with a gang of kids leading the way. I felt rather ridiculous carrying a backpack, dressed up as an explorer, with my ultra breathable clothes and my Gore-Tex boots, while the children ran barefoot and half naked by our side.

After a couple of miles, which seemed an eternity under a sun that refused to hide behind the clouds, our guide stopped and pointed at a wavering spot floating over a mirage.

“Tuareg” was all he said. He shook our hands and turned around to retrace his steps.

We were alone.

Almost without our noticing, the ground we were walking on had turned from unwelcoming savannah into a barren land in the grip of a centuries-old drought. There were no acacias, and only a few dry shrubs dotted a monochrome landscape of light browns and a horizon flattened by a scorching sky. This was very far from the lively savannah the National Geographic documentaries liked to show, with its gnus, zebras and lions skipping right and left all over. This place was dead, totally and utterly dead. If death had a poster hanging in its home, it would be a picture of the land we

were walking on.

“Well?” said the professor dropping his bag on the ground.

“That must be the Tuareg camp over there,” I said.

Cassie was wiping the sweat off her face with a bandanna. She had also dropped her bag on the ground and was sitting on it. “Have you thought about the possibility,” she said with a touch of amusement in her voice, “that they might not agree to take us with them?”

“A little too late for that, don’t you think?” The professor was in no mood for jokes.

“I’m only teasing. I’m sure they’ll help.”

“Well,” I said as I set off again. “There’s only one way to find out.”

As we got closer we saw that the dark spot was really a typical *haima*. We could make out the still shapes of about fifty camels the same color as the sand, resting around it. One black, static figure stood in front of the tent. It took us about twenty minutes, and several stops to drink from our ever-dwindling canteens, to arrive.

We finally found ourselves facing a man with his head wrapped in a black *tagelmoust*, in a way that all we could see was his small eyes watching us warily. His left hand rested casually on his belt near a dagger, while in his right he held an old *espingarda*, the long Moorish musket. Even though it looked more dangerous for the shooter than for the victim, it was still a naked threat for him to be wielding it with visitors approaching.

There was nobody else in sight, but I was positive there were more camel drivers inside the tent, sheltering from the heat. A single man could never have managed a caravan like this.

“As *Salaam alaykum*,” I said when we reached him.

“*Wa alaykum as-salaam*,” he replied gravely after a long pause.

“*Parlez-vous française?*” I asked without much hope.

The Tuareg did not flinch or say another word.

“English? *Español?*”

Only silence.

Cassie sighed impatiently. “That’s great!”

It was a difficult moment. I had the feeling that if I did not get across the linguistic barrier quickly, our silent friend could send us packing with a kick in the butt.

“Me Ulysses,” I said experimentally, touching my chest as we had done

the day before with Modibo. I pointed at the professor and Cassie, and said their names.

The Tuareg looked from one to the other, resting his eyes on the Mexican girl until to my great relief he offered me his hand in a clearly welcoming gesture.

“Ibrahim,” was all he said.

He invited us into the dark interior of the *haima*, where five more men with equally unsettling looks offered us a seat and a glass of tea.

With some mime, a map of the area and considerable patience, we managed to make them understand what we wanted. After thinking in silence for a while, Ibrahim said three words.

“*Trois cent mille.*”

“What did he say?” said the professor, wondering whether he had understood correctly.

“Three hundred thousand,” I translated.

“You may not speak French, Doc. But you do know your numbers!” said Cassie.

“I bet those blokes speak it better than we do.”

The professor took his hat off. “I don’t care if they speak Korean, three hundred thousand CAF francs? My foot!”

“Don’t worry, Doc. This is just the beginning of the negotiations. They ask for three hundred and I offer fifty, then we meet half way. That’s haggling for you. In Africa you have to haggle for everything.”

It was by no means the first time I had to do it in unfavorable conditions, and I knew there would be a heated argument before I reached a reasonable price. I had very few cards in my favor and we did not even have enough water to get back to the village. So I could barely hide my surprise when, against all the odds, I secured a favorable deal.

“Done! They’ll take us to Tabrichat for eighty thousand CAF francs.”

“Awesome! That’s a really good price!” said Cassie.

“When do we leave?” said the professor, patting my back.

“At first light tomorrow. It’ll take us three or four days to reach Trabichat.”

The professor rubbed his hands. “Wonderful! I’m dying to get my hands on that mysterious box.”

I could not help feeling distrustful about our hosts, who were eying us

stealthily, like a fox looking at a hen.

Cassie grabbed my arm, surprised by my serious expression.

“What is it?” she asked in a low voice.

“Nothing ... I think. It’s just that I got a price I wasn’t expecting.”

She arched her brows. “Is that a problem?”

“No. The problem is how easily I got it. These people spend their life haggling and trading. They’re very good at it, and given our situation, they could’ve gotten a lot more out of us. It’s all been too easy.”

I looked around at the Tuareg. They were whispering in a close circle, counting every cent of the money I had advanced them.

“Too easy.”

I spent the night with one eye open. I was more worried about what our guides might do than about the hyenas sniffing around our camp, so when dawn came I had dark circles under my eyes. I was trying as hard as I could to stay awake as I rode, but the steady swaying of the camel only added to my drowsiness.

We were riding across a plain with the sun on our right. Ibrahim and his friends had improvised saddles for us from sacks of salt. I understood this was the goods they were carrying from the interior of the Sahara to the native villages along the Niger. They had sold their merchandise and now they were returning to their base camp with the profit either in money or other goods. They would make a detour to leave us at our destination.

Of course the landscape was still dry and totally flat, with no trees or bushes anywhere in sight. It had not rained there in many years, and I would have been surprised to find a living creature in a place so scorched by the sun and the dreadful wind of the desert. At that early morning hour my face felt as if I had opened the door of a gigantic furnace.

“Hello, stranger!” The familiar voice brought me out of my daze. “Do you come here often?”

I turned around as much as I could on my saddle. Cassandra had a dark blue scarf wrapped around her head like the Tuareg. Her eyes shone brightly.

“Wow! I see you’re adapting fast.”

“Ibrahim gave it to me. And I love it! It makes me feel like a nineteenth-century explorer.”

“I don’t want to ruin your experience, but does the explorer know that scarf is dyed with indigo? That means that as soon as you start sweating your skin and hair will turn an interesting navy blue.”

Cassandra was silent for a minute. She held the reins with her right hand while rubbing a corner of the scarf with her left one. The tips of her fingers turned blue.

She raised her head, and I thought she was going to burst out against me for not having warned her beforehand about the side effects of using a Tuareg turban. But with eyes wide open and a crazy expression on her face,

she raised her fist, jabbed her finger at the sky and yelled, "I'm Cassandra Brooks! Queen of the Desert!" And she kicked her camel and galloped away, yelling like Buffalo Bill.

"What's gotten into her?"

"The heat, I guess, Doc," I said as she disappeared in a cloud of dust. "It must be the heat."

By noon nobody felt like teasing.

Our guides, apparently indifferent to the heat that by now barely allowed breathing, walked beside their camels. We formed a long line, like a strange cinnamon-colored caterpillar with fifty humps. We were at the head of the caravan with two of the camel drivers. The others were spaced along the formation to prevent any mishap among the camels.

Compared with the horses I had ridden on occasion, camels were much less graceful. Apart from the inconvenience of having a hump in the middle of their back, it did not seem as if God had created them thinking that humans would want to ride them some day. They were uncomfortable, more stubborn than mules and much smellier (mine at least). They also had a terrible temper which they often showed. The one the professor was riding had already tried to bite him a couple of times.

"Damned animal!" he said when it happened again. "You do that once more and I'll cut off your hump! See if I don't!"

He was riding beside me now, looking tired. Beads of sweat slid down his glasses. On his camel he looked like a snowman slowly melting.

"Ulysses," he whispered. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Shoot."

He leaned forward so Cassie could not hear.

"What would stop these men killing us and taking all our money instead of keeping their side of the bargain?"

"Nothing. If they wanted to kill us, nothing would stop them."

"Wow! It's really comforting talking to you."

"Don't worry, Doc. I promised they'd get half the money when we arrived at Trabichat. That a friend coming from Gao would be waiting for us there."

"You lied to them?"

"I'll go to confession when we get back home. For now, what matters is



that they don't try anything for fear of not getting their money."

The professor made a face, not wholly convinced.

"Well, I hope they're honest enough!"

I patted his camel's neck. "Or greedy enough!"

At sundown, as is usual in the desert, a fierce wind came in from the north. It was loaded with sand that whipped straight into our faces. It went into our eyes even with sunglasses on, and also into our noses, mouths and ears. It dried up mucous membranes, chapped our lips and forced us to chew on sand.

With less than two hours left of daylight, we stopped at the foot of the first dunes we found on our way. We were exhausted, but protected from the wind by the dune we helped set up camp. This consisted of a *haima*, with a camping gas stove to heat the inevitable tea. For dinner, the Tuareg offered us part of their supply of dates which we gladly accepted. With it came a bowl of camel milk which we declined for fear of the possible consequences of an upset stomach. They savored it with obvious delight.

Once we had finished, stuffed with juicy dates, and with the sun disappearing over the horizon, Cassie and I climbed to the top of the dune. The wind was still blowing strongly, but we wanted to enjoy the sunset over the infinite plain of the Sahara. Huffing and puffing we got to the top and sat there, overwhelmed by the landscape.

The countless grains of sand suspended in the air formed an intangible layer over the surface of the desert. The sun rays pierced this layer, lengthening the shadows of the dunes that stretched to our right, coloring them red until only their summit ridges were lit. We might have been looking at an ocean of blood.

"It's incredibly beautiful," she whispered. "Just seeing this makes it worth all the effort of coming here."

"You never forget something like this," I said. "Moments like this make life worth living."

She turned away from the view to look at me.

"Is that why you chose this type of life?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the fact that you're always on the move, not staying more than six months in any one place. Don't you ever miss having a home? A family? A wife?"

“Of course I do. It’s in our genes. Search for a fertile female, find a safe big cave where you can raise a brood to perpetuate your DNA, then get old enjoying your grandchildren, and, hopefully, the recognition of your peers. We’ve been like this for hundreds of thousands of years. I’m no exception.

“You speak as if you were talking about cave dwellers.”

“Well, that’s what we are. The fact that we have cell phones and computers doesn’t make us more intelligent. Our individual behavior is exactly the same as then. Don’t let yourself be fooled by appearances. Maybe one thousand or thirty thousand years ago, someone sat here on a dune like this one and had the same conversation you and I are having now.”

“Then, the reason you live the way you do is just to go against your genes?”

“No. I told you that’s inevitable. I just try to keep a certain distance between my life and the influence of society, because it wants to improve the species and never stops subconsciously suggesting how we should behave as to manage that. And I also try not to borrow attitudes from other people, even when it’s a question of imitating relatives, friends, teachers ... The thing is, I try to be very skeptical about anything apart from the conclusions I make out of my own experience. I just let myself go with the flow of events and try to adapt to them as best I can. I’m only trying to be happy and keep my sanity. I want to be in control of my instincts, and not the other way around.”

“Now it seems as though you’re talking about animals! What’s wrong with instincts? Should we get rid of them?”

“No, not at all! Maybe I’m not making myself clear. Human instincts show themselves as feelings, and they’re essential for our survival, even though they sometimes drive us to do stupid things. Without our instincts to survive or reproduce or get recognition from the tribe, to name just a few, we’d lack motivation to do anything. We wouldn’t even get out of bed! Well, I have those feelings and I don’t want to be deprived of them. What I do want is not to be a slave to them. I want to keep my fears and my desires under control, so they don’t cloud my judgment.”

“You know, Ulysses, I have a feeling that could turn you into a pretty sad person. You might not cry with the pains but at the same time you might not enjoy the happiness.”

“Cassie, it’s not a question of locking the door to my heart and throwing the key away. I can open that door whenever I want, and enjoy the good moments life has to offer. What I mean is to be able to close it

whenever I feel it's convenient."

I fell silent, searching around for a good example to give her.

"For example, is there anything you absolutely love to eat?"

"Mm ... I love chocolate."

"Good. Now, when you go by a shop that sells chocolate, do you go in and buy as much as you can?"

"Of course not."

"Why is that?"

"Well ... I control myself."

"There you go. You and everybody do it, although at a subconscious level. If things were different, we'd act like animals. I just take it one step further. I try to be aware of my actions and of why I do them. That way I can understand myself and others better. At the same time it means I can control unwanted and unpleasant states of mind like depression or anxiety or discouragement."

"Put like this ... it doesn't sound so bad."

"It's good for me. That's all I can say. It gives me peace. At the same time it makes me live more intensely. I can savor the present without fear of what tomorrow may bring."

"So, you're not thinking about the future? Don't you want some sort of security?"

"Security? Honey, I hate to break it to you but security doesn't exist. We only hide behind an illusion of security so that fear and worry don't drive us crazy. Nobody in this world knows for sure what's going to happen the next day. You may be the richest person in the whole world and fall down the stairs. You may have the safest job, and then your company might close because it's transferring operations to China. Or your husband might leave you for another woman on your anniversary."

"*La Chucha!* Jesus Christ. Ulysses, you are a pessimist!"

"On the contrary! I assume I don't have control of my life. Most people realize this when it's already too late, usually after the first stroke. For good or ill, I realized it a long time ago. Since then I've reached the conclusion that the only way to live fully is to overcome fear in any of its forms. Particularly fear of the future." I leaned back on my elbows in the sand. "I'm not a fortune teller, so I have no idea what's going to happen. That's why I'm happy to concentrate on the here and now and enjoy moments like this. It's something which will never happen again the same way. Every moment we

let slip will never come back. And I don't wish to waste even one instant speculating on what some other similar moment would be like, when it might never happen."

"And what drove you to this conclusion that apparently the rest of humanity finds so difficult to reach?" she asked puzzled, and a little ironic.

"Oh, it would take too long to explain. And besides, I don't think it's that important."

Cassandra kept silent but arched one eyebrow.

"Ugh! All right ..." I tried to put my thoughts in order before I went on. "Several years ago I was living with this woman I was very much in love with. I was happily working as a professional diver: one day I'd be cleaning the hull of a ship at one end of Spain, the next I'd be building a dock. The thing is that Monica, the woman I was living with, told me one September evening that we simply could not go on like that. Either I changed my job or she would leave. She said she didn't want to spend half her life alone, worried about me having an accident some day."

"So? What did you do?"

"I quit my job."

"A declaration of love on your part."

"Perhaps, but she left anyway a few months later."

"Why would she do that?"

"Because relationships are complicated and, as I told you before, security is just an illusion."

"*Hijole*. I'm sorry."

"Wait, wait. That's not the end of the story. Shortly before Monica left, I lost the "safe" job her father had given me at his office. Then I had a bike accident and broke my hip, collar bone and several ribs. But the worst came after that: my father had another accident, a fatal car accident when he was on his way to study the altar piece of some church in the Pyrenees on the professor's behalf. My mother fell into a deep depression and told me never to see him again. You see, she blamed the professor for my father's death. So, you can imagine the picture. My whole world fell in on me and dragged me down into the bottomless pit of depression. Something I only managed to come out of after I'd spent time looking deeply into myself. And that led me to know myself better than I would if all those misfortunes had never happened. I know it might sound cynical, but that was the most important moment of my life."

“Do you mean to say if it hadn’t been for everything that happened to you, you’d be a worse person?”

“No, not at all. Exceptions apart, nobody’s better or worse: only different. If someone is lucky in their life, is happy with a partner, two blond kids and an SUV, good for them! Everyone follows their own path, then they make their own choices according to the things that happen to them. I went through what I went through and then, after reaching my own conclusions, I decided to be responsible and follow my own path. Without looking either backward or forward, without letting anyone tell me where to go, without trying to persuade anyone else to follow me.”

She thought for a moment. “I see what you mean. I’d even go as far as sharing the same view, for the most part. But I’m afraid that attitude is likely to leave you with a pretty solitary life.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s the price you have to pay. I accept it. But then, sometimes paths cross.” I looked into her eyes. “Almost always like ships in the fog, without seeing each other. But sometimes, their courses may run so parallel that the path may seem like one for a precious while ... and that is enough for me.”

Cassandra looked away from the point where the horizon vanished in the fiery sky and took my hand.

“Well, in that case, I’m happy I bumped into you in the fog.”

I smiled. “Me too, Cassie. It’s a real pleasure.”

“The pleasure has been all mine,” she said mischievously. “Although I’m pretty sure you bring all your women here to seduce them.”

“Absolutely, without exception. Even the ones with blue faces.”

She looked surprised, “Blue face? What do you ... Oh!”

She realized and covered her face with her hands in embarrassment.

“Is it very noticeable?”

“Well ... not really.”

“Seriously?”

“Not seriously.”

She bit her lip. “What can I do now?”

“Nothing,” I said drawing her to me. “The fact is I’ve never been with a woman your color. The thought is rather exciting.”

The night was cold as nights in the desert are. And although the wind dropped as soon as the sun set, we were forced to huddle in our cloth sacks

and sleep with all our clothes on.

Just as a few nights before, a hand shook me awake. I opened my eyes to see only a pallid light.

“*Sabáhal-jir, sabaáhal-jir,*” a hoarse voice repeated.

“Okay, okay ... *Sabáhal-jir* ... whatever.”

Cassie blinked twice, half asleep.

“What’s up? What’s he saying?”

“Nothing, just good morning.”

The professor yawned out loud.

“What’s up with these people? Can’t they ever wait till dawn to wake us up?”

“It’s because of the heat, Doc. This is the best time for traveling in the desert.”

“Well, right now, it’s really cold,” said Cassie, getting out of her sleeping bag.

I patted her knee. “You’ll miss this cold in a few hours.”

“Maybe. But right now I’m freezing and I don’t feel like catching pneumonia.”

“Then, let’s help them get all this together and we’ll be on our way. Then we’ll get warm.”

We were now passing through a sea of dunes. Some of them were at least a hundred feet high. We zigzagged among them when we did not go around them altogether. Mostly, camel drivers preferred to follow the ridges of the undulating mountains of sand, but sometimes we were obliged to go down a slope and then climb up the side of a huge dune. This made me realize that camels are not very good at going up and down slopes, and that without the drivers whipping their backsides, our humpbacked mounts would never have taken a step that was not on flat land.

We walked like this for hours on end, up one dune, down another. It was never-ending, monotonous. The romanticism of the trip was vanishing fast as I wondered whether my system could cope with all the sand I was swallowing.

Driven more by boredom than by curiosity, I took to checking a small compass I always carried on trips. I calculated the approximate course we were following, and wrote it down in the notebook I carried in front of me, tied to the saddle.

The sun reached its zenith and then slowly went down toward evening. The professor and Cassie's faces reflected the harshness of the journey. They were both leaning back against their saddles, paying little attention to the landscape and letting themselves be driven by the current of the camel river. We were no longer at the head of the caravan, but had dropped to the middle, too tired to emulate Lawrence of Arabia at the vanguard of his troops. If we went on like this, tomorrow we'd be at the tail end if not totally separated from the rest of the caravan.

All we could do was try to hold on to our camels and keep hydrated by drinking frequently. We consumed three times more water than our guides who looked as cool as if they were just taking a stroll in the park, with no sign of weariness or weakness.

Finally the evening came. We crossed a dry ravine that ran from south to north, then dismounted again and set up the camp. This involved feeding and watering the camels, tying their front legs together so they could not go very far, putting up the *haima*, and finally dividing the dates and the camel milk.

Before it was too dark, I took Cassie and the professor by the arm and gestured to them to follow me outside the tent.

"I'm not up for walking!" said the professor. "Unless you've found a pool just behind the tent, I'm not going out."

Cassie complained too. "Ulysses, really. I'm just so tired. It was beautiful yesterday, but today, I couldn't get even halfway up the dune."

I pushed them up and out more forcefully. "I don't want you to come and watch the sunset. It's something else, more important."

"It better be," said the professor as he got up stiffly. "I can't even stand."

We walked round to the other side of the dune, where the Tuareg would not see us. I invited them to sit on the soft sand.

"I don't know if you noticed, but I've been checking our course all day."

"Yeah," said Cassie, "I saw you writing something down but I didn't think much of it."

I took the compass and notebook out of my pocket and put them on the ground.

"According to my calculations, today we've been heading roughly north-northwest."

“Excuse me for interrupting,” said the professor. “But, how can you be so sure with all the turns we’ve taken?”

“Easy. I checked at intervals of fifteen minutes, and I can assure you that what I got is pretty accurate.”

Cassandra passed her hand through her coarse and now blue hair.

“Okay. So, the course we’ve been following is north-northwest. What do you mean?”

I took out a map of Mali from an inside pocket and spread it out on the sand. I pointed at a spot on the shore of the Niger River.

“What I mean is, we started in Batanga and our destination is up here, to the right, north-east, in the valley of Tilemsi.”

Cassandra guessed my meaning and gave me a startled look. “So?”

“So ... we should be following one course but, we’re going on a different one.”

The professor took off his hat and scratched his head. “Do you mean to say they’re not taking us where they said they would? That they’re kidnapping us?”

“Even at the risk of sounding like a paranoid grandma ... that’s exactly what I think.”

He arched his eyebrows, worried. “Could it be a mistake? Could it be they misunderstood the place we asked them to take us to?”

I shook my head. “I pointed at the exact spot on the map and besides, I’m positive they know where Trabichat is.”

Cassie shifted. “Could they be taking an easier route, for some reason?”

“I don’t think so. If they were, we’d be on a parallel course, not a completely divergent one like this. Besides, can you think of a worse route than today’s?”

The question floated in the air and the silence which followed was answer enough.

Cassie was thoughtful for a minute. “What doesn’t fit,” she said at last, “is the fact they haven’t tied us up from the beginning, then looked for the nearest phone and asked for ransom. You have to admit it’s not exactly the usual thing to take captives on a desert tour.”

“Maybe because they think that as long as we don’t know we’re captives, we won’t try to escape!” said the professor.

“But they must realize we’d finally get on to it! Besides, what’s the point in taking us so deep into the desert? When are they planning on asking



for ransom?”

“At worst,” I said, “that’s not what they’re planning.”

“What are you suggesting?”

I hunched over the map again and pointed at a dot in the middle of a yellow sea. It was nearly five hundred miles from where we were sitting and had the mysterious name of Taoudenni.

“If we continue on this north-northwesterly course, this is the first place we’ll get to.”

“But that’s a week away from here!” she said in alarm. “Why take us so far?”

“Salt mines. They’re the biggest in the region, and one of the most dreadful places on Earth. I once read that no one survives working in those mines for more than a few months.” I nodded toward the camp. “I think that’s where they come from.”

“Salt mines?” she asked. “What does that have to do with us?”

I looked up to find the sunset reflecting in her eyes.

“The only people who work there, extracting salt, are captives and slaves of the Tuareg. I’m beginning to suspect ... that’s what’s in store for us.”

Cassandra and professor Castillo stared at the enormous yellow surface of the map spread out on the sand. No human settlement was shown on the Malian desert.

Finally, breaking the ominous silence, Cassie said, "What shall we do?"

"Escape," I said.

"Escape?" said the professor, skeptically. "Where? How?" He waved toward the dunes around us.

I bent over the map and pointed at a spot I had underlined.

"We'll go to Trabichat. By camel, naturally."

"Whoa ... whoa ... wait a minute," he interrupted me. "To go anywhere, we have to know where it is first, so unless you're carrying a GPS in your underwear, that's out, isn't it?"

"True. I have no idea where we are."

"Then, how are we supposed to get to a village surrounded by thousands of miles of desert, if we don't know where we're starting from?" said Cassie.

I just shrugged. "To tell you the truth, if we find Trabichat it'll be by sheer luck."

The professor leaned back, took a small bag of weed out of his pocket and started to roll a joint.

"Ulysses, this plan of yours is brilliant. To run away from a band of armed Tuareg and steal some camels which we can barely ride, then head to an unknown place we'll only be able to find by sheer luck ... Awesome! How come I didn't think of that?"

"You have a better idea?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. We can go back to the camp and try to find out why we're not heading to Trabichat."

I sighed.

"Professor, if you do that, most likely five minutes later we'll all have our hands tied up behind our backs."

"Or maybe not."

I crossed my arms and looked at him defiantly.

“Want to risk it?”

Half an hour later we went back to the camp, pretending we were still ignorant of their plans. We even took some group photos with our silent captors, hoping they’d keep believing we were as foolish as we must have appeared.

As we had done the night before, we retired early. After so many days of rough travel, there was no need to feign exhaustion. We settled in the furthest corner of the *haima* and pretended to be deeply asleep, until the snores of the Tuareg convinced us they were genuinely so. Now at last we were able to start following the plan we had sketched a few hours before.

Cassandra got up quietly and left the tent. She sashayed past the man who was always on night watch, apparently on her way to relieve herself behind a dune. The sentinel, entranced by the swaying of her hips, stood up. He was clearly wondering whether the beautiful foreigner was inviting him to follow, and whether he should let himself get carried away by nature or remain at his post. He must have been debating with himself when he suddenly turned round to meet my fist coming out of the dark and heading straight for his nose.

I had meant to come from behind and gag him before he could make a sound, but when he turned I was less than six feet away. I had no choice but to lunge at him and pray that with all the commotion he had no chance to cry for help.

Unfortunately, my boxing experience was limited to a few “westerns”, so I did not hit him hard enough to leave him unconscious. In spite of that, he fell backwards, possibly with a broken nose, and that gave me the chance to attack for a second time before he could realize what was up.

I threw myself at the Tuareg whose silhouette I could barely make out in the moonless night. I covered his mouth with my left hand to stop him from making any noise, jammed my knee into his stomach to pin him down, and felt under his tunic for the knife I had seen all of them carry in their sashes. But the sentinel had recovered enough from the attack and was trying to get rid of my hand. If he managed this it would mean the end of us all.

I was still fumbling in the folds of his tunic, puzzled at not finding the curved dagger I was sure he had on him, when the Tuareg moved almost imperceptibly. I realized my mistake, and I swerved to my right. I was just in time to see the cold flash of metal in his right hand tracing an arc that would

have driven the dagger right into my back.

Fortunately, my swift change of position prevented the steel from finding its way through my ribs as it passed inches away from my left side. The Tuareg was not so lucky. Once he had launched his arm with all his strength behind it, he could not stop his own momentum, so that the dagger intended for me, ended up deeply driven into its owner's chest.

Stunned by the tragic end of the fight, I knelt beside the wounded man. He was gurgling because the dagger had punctured his lung, trying to call out to his friends, but no other sound came out of him. The man was going to drown in his own blood, and any help would simply have prolonged his agony. So I did what I thought was right, covering his mouth with one hand and his nose with the other. At first he resisted, trying to struggle free, but then whether because life was seeping away or because he understood that I was trying to shorten his suffering, he just held on to my wrist with all his strength until he lost consciousness.

At that moment Cassandra appeared. At first, because of the darkness, she thought the sentinel was unconscious, but when she crouched beside me and saw the handle sticking out of the man's chest she could barely choke back a cry. Even without seeing her I knew she was horrified.

Although I was certain that the man I had just killed had meant to kidnap us, sell us as slaves or force us to work in the salt mines, where we would have died shortly, I could not help feeling guilty. I kept thinking that if I had been more efficient the man would still be alive. Fortunately, the pressure of the moment forced me to forget and concentrate on our immediate future. I grabbed Cassie's hand and ran to meet the professor at the point we had agreed beforehand. He appeared a moment later, carrying our three backpacks, and quietly we went to where the camels were resting not far from the *haima*. We grabbed three saddles and, less quickly than we would have liked, managed to fix them on our animals.

"And the water?" I whispered.

He shrugged. "It's in the tent, beside the Tuareg."

I was getting angry at how things were turning out, and I could not help raising my voice a little.

"Wasn't there even one goatskin you could grab? We won't get very far without water, will we?"

"Do you want me to go back inside and ask for it politely?"

“Don’t get mad, Doc. But it is a problem.”

Cassie put her hand in her bag and, like a magician, pulled out one full dirty goatskin. “Would this be any help?” she said.

We both gaped at her. “How did you ...?”

“I figured this might happen, so I hid one of the skins among my clothes before the Tuareg went to sleep.” Even in the dark we could sense her pushing her hair back in a vain little movement. “It’s not much, but at least we’ll have enough for tomorrow.”

I took the skin and fastened it to my saddle. “Thank goodness one of us is thinking.”

We led the camels by the reins as I set our course to the north by my compass. Then we began to walk in the dark, praying that none of the beasts would start to bellow. After about fifteen minutes, when it seemed to us that we had moved far enough away, we mounted and trotted away into the cold darkness of the desert night.

After a whole day riding under the sun, tired, dehydrated and with our behinds almost raw, it was torture to get back on the camels without any chance to rest. But it was even harder to know that we were facing one of the most inhospitable places on Earth with no preparation, fleeing from men who would hunt us as soon as the sun rose. We kept to a light trot, aware that if we pushed the pace too hard the camels would not hold up. They had also had a full day’s journey, after all. Even though they were adapted to the harshness of the environment, there were limits to their resistance that we did not wish to test.

Maybe because of the tense situation, I didn’t feel the cold like I had the night before. I concentrated instead on the little hands of the compass, knowing they could mean the difference between safety and a horrible death. Every five minutes I checked with a small flashlight that we were following the right course, but gradually I began to use some of the thousands of stars as reference. The moonless night allowed us to see the dark silhouette of the dunes in contrast with the star-studded sky.

Since we had begun our escape, about half an hour before, none of us had said a word. We were terrified of the dark night, the dangers of the desert and most of all, the five Tuareg. The moment they discovered we were gone and their friend murdered, they would hunt us down like dogs.

“How long do you think it will take them to realize?” said Cassandra at

my back.

“I trust it’ll be several hours at least before they change the watch. But it’ll take them longer to find where we buried their friend. Anyway, until dawn they won’t be able to find our tracks and work out which way we’ve gone.”

Cassie’s tone became more serious. “You’re making a lot of assumptions, Ulysses. If they realize sooner and they happen to be carrying a flashlight, they could be at our heels already.”

“That’s something we can’t do anything about. Anyway, we must hope for the best. Should they be waiting for us behind the next dune ... well, at least we’ll have done our best.”

She caught up with me. “Small consolation,” she said.

I was trying to put a hopeful face on things, so I ignored her pessimism.

“Don’t worry,” I said cheerfully. “They might even decide not to follow us.”

“After stealing three camels, and killing one of their own? Seriously?”

“Think about it. They have a huge caravan to lead north. They can’t follow us with it because the pace would be too slow. And they wouldn’t risk leaving fifty camels in the desert, so they’d have no choice but to split up.”

“So?”

I checked the compass again. “Well, there are only five of them now. At least two have to stay with the caravan, so at the most that leaves three to follow us. There are three of us too, so that makes it even.”

“Even? They’re a band of Tuareg armed to their teeth! In a terrain they know like the backs of their hands!”

“I know that. But right now they’ll be asking themselves how dangerous we might be and whether we’re armed or not. They’ve underestimated us once already, and they might decide not to risk it in case it happens again. And in any case, not being able to decide might make them waste precious time.”

She sighed. “For our sake, I hope you’re right.”

“You can bet on it. We’ll get out of this, you’ll see. I have a plan.”

Shortly after, we found ourselves in the same dry ravine we had crossed the day before.

“Doc, Cassie, as soon as we enter the gully we’ll make a hundred and eighty degree turn and head north.”

“What? Does this mean we’ve been going south all this time? And now we’re turning *north*?” asked the professor.

“That’s the plan.”

“Have you lost your mind? Hadn’t we decided to go east?”

“And that’s where we’re going. I just wanted to take a little detour.”

Cassie laughed quietly. “Excuse me, Ulysses. But if your intention was to put them off our track, let me remind you that we’ve been leaving a very clear one on the sand. I don’t think our friends will have any trouble following it, no matter how many turns we take.”

I couldn’t help smiling. “You said it, Cassie: on the sand. You may not have noticed when we crossed here today, but I did: the bottom of the gully is made up of hardened soil. The camels left no footprints on it.”

“Anyway, I don’t understand why you’ve led us south and yet now you want us to go north when our destination is east!”

I clicked my tongue in frustration; we were wasting too much time on explanations.

“Look, my idea is to go on for about an hour on this dry ravine, then leave it and head east.”

“Wouldn’t we have saved ourselves some precious time if we’d gone that way from the start?” asked the professor.

“Well,” I said patiently, “it’s a decoy. If the Tuareg decide to follow us they’ll go by our tracks. They’ll think we’re heading south, retracing the way we came. They’ll get to the ravine and assume we’re still going in the same direction. By the time they realize their mistake they’ll have wasted a lot of time.”

“You know,” said Cassie, “that’s not a bad plan at all.”

The professor was not totally convinced. “Hmm, who knows? It might work after all.”

I kicked my camel and forced him on down the slight slope of the gully. When I looked back from the dry bed at my friends, I was barely able to make them out a few feet higher up.

“Not *might* work, Doc. It *will* work!”

We went on toward the north for several miles. When I was sure we had passed the level of the camp site, we left the ravine and headed east, just as I had planned. I was hoping our captors were following our imaginary track toward the Niger.

We traveled all night at a good pace, winding in and out of the dunes, trying not to lose our reference on the compass, heading east all the time. We were forced to dismount a couple of times to drag our stubborn mounts up a dune that was too wide to go around. In the end, we spent as much time on the camels as pulling their reins or nudging them on.

At about six in the morning, after nearly twenty-four hours of riding, we were exhausted. The blurry light of dawn appeared in front of us, and we still had a long hellish day ahead before we could even think of rest or shelter.

Every muscle in my body was either sore or cramped, or else both at once. Seeing Cassie by the light of dawn I could tell she was in the same state, or worse. But it was the professor I was really worried about. Even though he was in excellent shape, his age and sedentary lifestyle were taking its toll with each step he took. I was beginning to fear for his capacity to take another day on camel back with little water and no food.

I rode up to check on him. "How are you holding up, Doc?"

He could barely manage to sit up in his saddle as he peered at me over the rim of his glasses. His hair was stuck to his forehead and there were blue circles under his weary eyes. He was having trouble breathing.

"What do you think?"

"I think you're doing great!"

"Yeah, sure. I was just thinking of leaving the camel right here and finishing the journey hopping between the dunes."

"Gee! I thought I was the only one to think of that!"

The professor nodded and gestured ahead.

"Knock yourself out, Ulysses! You go ahead ... and I'll follow you presently."

"Well, well ... You can't be that bad if your funny bone is still



working.”

He tried a smile. “You bet that’ll be the last thing to go.”

The heat increased gradually through the day, robbing us of our last resources of strength. Our spirits were sinking lower and lower, just as the landscape was changing from sand and dunes to a parched barren plain. A cloud of dust veiled the horizon in every direction. The desert faded into the blue sky as if they were one and the same. The merciless sun pressed us down on our saddles. At the same time the tiresome, nerve-rackingly slow ambling of the camels seemed to take us farther away from a destination that seemed harder to reach with every step.

Every once in a while, almost without being aware of what I was doing, I looked back, afraid of seeing the sinister figures of the Tuareg on the horizon, determined to hunt us down. I tried to cheer myself and the other two up by imagining they might have decided to let us go, or else they had definitely lost our track. But deep inside, I was certain that sooner or later they would find our prints. The moment they did this our chances of survival would shrink almost to zero.

Cassie had caught up with me without my noticing. “Can I ask you a question?”

“It depends. Do I get a prize if I get it right?”

Her face showed the effects of exhaustion and the heat, which by now must have reached around 120°F ... in a non-existent shade.

She gave me a weak smile. Just keeping a conversation going was hard.

“What you said last night, about finding Trabichat by sheer luck. That was a joke, wasn’t it?”

The urgency in her voice worried me a little, but then I remembered I still hadn’t fully explained my escape plan. I turned toward her. “The fact is, I really don’t think we can find it. But that was never my idea.”

The professor had come up too when he heard Cassie’s question. “But you ...”

“I said we’d go there, not that we’d find it.”

“Really, Ulysses, you’ve got to be kidding me!” Now he was upset. “This is no time for riddles.”

I took the map out of my pocket. “That wasn’t my intention. See?” I drew a wide circle on it with my finger. “This is where we are, roughly. If we go on toward the east, sooner or later we’ll reach this road here, between Gao and Tessalit, near the border with Algeria.”

“A road?” said Cassie. “Here?”

“It’s probably no more than a dirt road and not much used, but it’s the only one that runs from south to north and passes through Trabichat, which is where we’re heading for.”

She suddenly understood. “So, what you want is to reach that road and wait for someone to pick us up?”

“That’s right.”

The professor tried to clear his throat, but it turned into a fit of coughing. He managed to say, “I hate to be a bird of ill omen, but what happens if nobody comes by before our water runs out? Or worse, if our turbaned friends find us?”

“In that case,” I said uneasily, “we’d be in trouble, serious trouble.”

By noon, when the sun was at its highest, we had no choice but to stop and improvise some kind of cover using our clothes and the camels to lean on. We tried to regain strength, but mostly we needed the professor to recover. He was so exhausted and obviously dehydrated that he had barely been able to dismount.

The three of us sat huddled under the scant shade of our pants and shirts, leaning against the camels, overwhelmed by fatigue. I watched my friends warily, noting that their faces were very red and that their chapped lips were beginning to peel. I must have looked just as bad myself. It surprised me that we could still blink. We were aware of the risk that stopping like this meant. Apart from raising the odds of our pursuers closing in, it was a question of time, and even more of water consumed, which might mean the difference between life and death.

I was lost in my thoughts, aware of the irony of the fact that I had always made a living in water and yet now I faced the prospect of dying in the desert for lack of it. Suddenly I felt Cassie’s hand on my arm.

“How much water do we have left?” she asked faintly.

“Not much, barely one quart.”

She winced. “Damn! That means I can forget about having a shower, right?”

“I’m afraid so. But if you’re thirsty, remember I packed a cooler with beer and sandwiches.”

“Coronitas?”

“Sorry. Heineken.”

“I’ll pass. I’m afraid I don’t dig European beer.”

“Okay. We’ll stop at the next gas station and I’ll buy you a crate of your favorite!”

Weakly she tapped me on the shoulder and jabbed her finger at me. “I’ll hold you to that.”

I looked at the professor who was half lying with his back to us.

“What do you think?” I asked Cassie, worried.

“Not good.”

“I think we should save what water is left for him. I don’t want him to pass out.”

“I agree. He seems a little worse than us. And after all, one quart for three people is not much.”

After using our last drop of water on the professor, we fell into a slumber that lasted several hours. I was woken by someone shaking me vigorously, dragging me out of a refreshing dream in which I was white-water rafting down a river in the jungle.

“Ulysses, wake up!”

“Uh ... what? Are we there already?”

“Wake up, Ulysses!” Her familiar voice insisted, more urgently.

“What’s up?” The professor sounded alarmed.

“It’s the Tuareg! They’re coming!”

I came out of my stupor at once. A surge of adrenalin had me up and out of our shelter. It took me a couple of seconds to find my bearings and get used to the bright light of the afternoon. Shading my eyes with my hand I could clearly make out three dark dots in the horizon that had not been there when we had stopped to rest.

“I went out to pee and saw them, the bastards!” said Cassie at my side.

“They’re still a few miles away.”

“Do you think they’ve seen us?”

“Most likely before we saw them.”

“So?”

I held her by the shoulders trying to appear surer than I actually felt.

“Don’t worry. They’re still quite a long way away. But we should get going all the same.”

The professor had recovered enough to ride again, but just in case, I secured him to the saddle with his own belt. We took down our meager shelter and in

two minutes we were galloping as fast as our tired camels could go. In spite of all the kicking and slapping, our beasts could do no more than trot. The poor animals were frothing at the bits and huffing. It was not enough. Looking back, we could see that the three dots on the horizon were growing larger and larger.

“We’re not going to make it,” muttered the professor between his teeth as he made an effort to keep his balance in the saddle.

I gave him a sidelong glance, more worried about him staying on his camel than about the pessimism in his voice.

“If we can keep our distance until night falls,” I said, more to convince myself than to reply to him, “we might be able to lose them in the dark.”

Cassandra was riding beside me with her blue hair blowing in the wind. She looked at the sun, then at me, and shook her head in denial.

“We have to at least try,” I urged her, guessing what she was thinking. “I don’t want to make it easy for them, do you? The bastards!”

At last, our camels slowed down. No matter how often we kicked and slapped their rumps, they had no energy left. Eventually, to our great despair, they stopped altogether.

“Well,” I grunted, “we’ll have to walk.”

“Walk?” said the professor. “But we can hardly stand!”

I jumped off my camel, which had slumped to its knees. “Leave the bags and get off! We have no time to lose!”

“It’s useless,” moaned Cassandra. “They’ll catch us anyway, here or a mile further.”

I stood in front of her and said angrily, “No, it’s not useless! I’m not giving up and neither are you! While there’s life there’s hope. Right now we have nothing better to do than stay alive, so come on!” I turned to the professor and grabbed his arm. “Leave everything and come on!”

The Tuareg were getting closer. We could see their figures with sickening clarity, with the sun reflecting off their naked weapons. They were keeping up a slow but steady rhythm and they would be upon us in a matter of moments. Meanwhile, we were finding it hard to breathe in the intense heat. Our brains felt as though they were melting, so we could not think clearly about our impending doom.

Trying to ignore our approaching pursuers, we made slow progress across the fine sand. Cassie and I were supporting the professor, who could

barely drag one foot after the other and was on the point of collapse.

“Leave me here and go on yourselves.” He gasped. “I ... I can’t take one more step.”

“Stop the drama, Doc, and move those legs. We’re dragging you and you’re a dead weight!”

“That’s just what I am, dead ...”

“Come on, Doc!” said Cassie. “We still have a treasure to find!”

That seemed to put some life into his limbs. With a great effort he managed to stand on his own legs.

“You’re right, my dear! But damn it, there’s never a cab when you need one, is there?”

Like one of those jokes life likes to throw at us once in a while, we heard the distant but distinct sound of a car horn in the desert air.

The god of that desolate land must have been laughing his head off.

“What on earth is *that*?” said Cassie, peering at the horizon with her eyes half closed.

I looked in the same direction. Like a hallucination, I saw a dark square shape coming from the south. On the top, what looked like a multicolored balloon made it double its size. It was followed by a growing cloud of dust and it was heading straight for us through the plain.

“It looks like some kind of vehicle,” ventured the professor as he wiped the sweat out of his eyes.

As if to prove him right, we heard two horn blasts, much louder than before.

“It’s a truck,” I said, stunned by this unexpected turn of events. “And I’d say we’ve been spotted.”

Gathering our remaining strength, we began to jump up and down, waving our arms and yelling as loud as our parched throats would allow. We were exultant, having just recovered the hope we had lost seconds before.

Then I turned back, uneasy because the Tuareg were much closer now. It was obvious they too had seen the truck and had launched into a gallop, in an effort to reach us before it did.

“Shit!” I muttered between my teeth.

But the other two could see the situation as clearly as I could. Discouragement hung over us again.

Cassie was looking to left and right. On the one side was hope in the shape of an extravagant vehicle, and on the other death dressed in blue on camel back.

“We’re not going to make it ...”

We could all see our only chance of salvation disappearing, like the castaway who sees his boat sailing away into the horizon. I felt a knot of anxiety and rage in my chest, born out of a sense of impotence.

“Come on! Let’s go! Run to the truck!” I yelled at last.

It took the professor and Cassie a few moments to react, still paralyzed by fear. Finally they moved, first hesitantly and then desperately as they tried to gain a few miles from death.

We kept stumbling; our legs could barely support us and each time we fell it was more difficult to get up as we pushed with our raw hands on the scorching ground. I was running blindly because of the sweat which blurred my vision, and it was only the dark shape of the truck that kept me focused in the right direction. But I could hear the deep purr of the engine, mixed with my own heavy breathing, to spur me on.

Suddenly a dry snort at my back made me turn around. The professor had fallen on his face like a broken puppet. Without a word, Cassie and I grabbed him by the armpits and managed to drag him forward like a sack of potatoes while his feet made grooves on the sand.

The truck was fast approaching but a look at our backs proved that the Tuareg were less than two hundred feet away, brandishing their weapons, ready to kill us as soon as they could reach us.

We had less than ten seconds left to live.

I was out of breath and my head was going to burst.

But we kept running.

Then, suddenly, the truck stopped about twelve feet away.

"This is it. It's over," I said to myself.

I left the professor to Cassie and turned to face our hunters, ready to die fighting with my bare fists. This way, at least Cassie and my father's old friend would have a few seconds of advantage. In a final moment of clarity I thought, "If we're going to kick the bucket, better do it in style and look nice in the photo."

The Tuareg were almost on top of us. It seemed they had put their old rifles away and were going to finish us off the traditional way, using the sharp sabers they were waving over their heads as they uttered furious cries. I could see the whites of their eyes, and the realization that I had no chance of survival made me feel suddenly at peace, which was something I would never have imagined at a moment like that. Because of this, I decided to throw myself at the first one of them in the hope that this suicidal attempt would put him off. I was about to jump when I heard a loud rattling at my back. The Tuareg was thrown off his saddle, and landed on his back on the sand.

I could not understand what was happening until a second burst of bullets caused a shower of sand to my left. I threw myself on the ground in time to avoid a third round. This hit another Tuareg in the shoulder.

Lying there, flat on the sand, I tried to puzzle out what had just happened. I saw the camels' legs coming to a halt a few feet from my head.

Then the fallen Tuareg, blood running down his arm, leapt back on his camel, turned around and raced away into the desert with his friends following closely behind.

I was in a state of stunned disbelief. I got up stiffly to my feet and watched the retreating figures while trying to figure out where the shots had come from and why I was still alive. I turned to look for Cassie and Professor Castillo, who, to my relief, were equally unscathed, if perplexed. They were staring at the unusual vehicle which had just saved our lives.

Like an extravagant spaceship from a clumsy planet, a Bedford truck, much older than I was, stood a dozen feet away with its engine running. It was painted olive green and was carrying what looked like a mountain of mattresses, water drums, sacks and people, all piled in the most unlikely manner on its back. This made it look much bigger, like a blowfish after an encounter with a barracuda, so incongruous in the landscape that I wondered whether what I was looking at was a mirage. The passengers, who were traveling on top of the cargo, as if they were riding a zeppelin, were staring back at us in the same awed silence. They must have been wondering what three ragged white people were doing in the middle of nowhere, fleeing a band of Tuareg.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, a thin man with mirror spectacles and jet black skin leaned out of the left side window of the cabin and gestured us toward the truck.

*“Allez messieurs, allez!”* he yelled. Still stunned we stood up and ran to him.

A few CAF francs provided seats inside the cabin for the professor and Cassie. She was looking after him, making sure he was slowly rehydrating. There was no room for me inside the truck, so I climbed awkwardly up the mountain of bundles and collapsed at the top. I gave in to weariness with the knowledge that it would still be three hours before we reached Trabichat. As the driver told me, this truck covered the route between Gao and Tessalit, for which he always carried the providential AK-47 on his lap.

I was only hoping it would all be worth it.

We were still carrying some money in our inner waistbands, so we treated the driver and the other passengers, who had literally saved our lives, to all the sodas they wanted when we got to Trabichat. At the café, we sat at a table aside, with the driver, and gulped down several servings of rice with



peanut sauce. His name was Buiko, and he told us all about the trouble in the area between politicians and Tuareg who wanted their independence from the rest of the country.

We found out this was not the first time that blue men with few scruples had kidnapped foreigners to make them work at the salt mines, although the victims were more usually from the shores of the Niger, as the “whites were all accounted for”. Even so, he assured us that the majority of Tuareg were honorable people and it was only a small minority of bandits who gave the community such a bad name. In fact, he confided, in all his years driving through the desert he had only had to use his Kalashnikov on a couple of occasions.

We told Buiko we were worried that, as they knew our destination, the kidnappers might decide to take their revenge and look for us in Trabichat. There was no need to worry, he said in answer to this, because there was an army garrison just outside the village and the Tuareg would not dare come near. Before we said goodbye we gave him a generous tip for his help, and with mutual wishes of divine protection, he went back to his overloaded vehicle. We were left in the semidarkness of the stuffy café, surrounded by empty soda bottles.

“It looks as if we made it safely ...” whispered the professor.

“So it seems,” I said as I finished another Pepsi.

An ironic smile appeared on Cassie’s face as she contemplated the marks on the table surface.

“When we tell people about this, no one will believe us.”

“Well, at least we’re alive to tell the story! By a hair’s breadth, maybe but we can still tell it!” said the professor.

Cassandra studied me with renewed admiration. “By the way, what you did back then was very brave.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know ... when you faced the Tuareg just before Buiko fired.”

“Umm, that ... well, I just thought my shoelace was undone.”

By the time the sun stopped torturing the streets of Trabichat, we felt partially recovered, thanks to the rice and sodas. We decided not to waste any more time and set about looking for Diam Tendé’s granddaughter’s in-laws and the mysterious box that had ended up as part of a wedding dowry.

Fortunately, Trabichat was a small village where everybody knew

everybody, so after overcoming their initial reserve, it was easy to locate the house we were looking for. It was on the outskirts of the village, and all we could see of it was a cracked adobe wall with a green metal door. I knocked twice, and a moment later a man opened it. His thin sallow face, lined with age, showed surprise. We told him our names, and before we could explain why we were calling, he invited us to step into his humble home. Soon we had glasses of hot tea in our hands.

We introduced ourselves as European researchers interested in Malian culture and doing some field work in collaboration with the University of Bamako. He looked first at the professor, who seemed to have come back from the dead, then at me in my torn and bloodied clothes, and finally at Cassie with her blue face and hair. He must have thought we were a group of lunatics. Despite that, he listened to our explanations. When we finally touched on the real motive for our visit, he got up without a word and left the room, looking very serious.

“What happened then?” asked Cassandra.

“No idea. My French isn’t much good, but I think I managed to explain myself all right.”

“Maybe he went for his gun,” said the professor.

“Don’t jinx it! One attempt to kill us a day is more than enough!”

“Stop being so childish, you two! Most likely he’s gone for the box.”

As soon as Cassie had said this, the man came back holding something in his hands the size of a phone directory, wrapped in white linen. He put it at our feet, sat down and indicated that we should uncover it.

We looked at each other, surprised at how easy it was turning out to be, and with the utmost respect I proceeded to unwrap the object which had nearly cost us our lives. I prayed it would be worth it.

Almost tenderly I removed the last fold of the linen, revealing a delicately carved ebony box that made Cassie gasp and left me speechless. The professor was the first one to find his voice.

“It’s ... exquisite.”

We remained silent a long while, staring in wonder at the longed for box. It was revealed as a solid block of wood, carved all over with African and Arab motifs except for the incongruous image that occupied the top surface: two men dressed like medieval soldiers riding the same horse. The symbol of the Templars.

Professor Castillo adjusted his glasses, and on receiving a look of

permission from the proud owner, reached a hand to touch the black surface with the tips of his fingers.

“Exquisite,” he repeated.

“You already said that,” I whispered, hypnotized by the intricate beauty of the object.

“Why is it all black?” asked Cassie. “Isn’t that odd?”

“Not at all. Black is the color of the Templar Order by definition. It represents wisdom and esoteric knowledge. In fact ...” he said, turning to me, “the majority of black virgins all over the world have a Templar origin, including the one in Montserrat.”

“Then, we can be sure this is Templar,” said Cassie.

“No doubt,” said the professor without raising his eyes. “It’s a unique piece and, luckily, the dryness of the desert has kept it in perfect condition. By the looks of it, it may seem it was carved only a few years ago.”

“And isn’t that more likely?” I said. I was skeptical about this spotless wooden carving that was supposed to be seven centuries old.

The professor looked at me out of the corner of his eye, annoyed. “Absolutely not! Nobody except an expert in the Order of the Temple could have forged something like this. And I really don’t think this is a fake.”

“All right, it’s authentic. Now then, what do you make of the drawings?”

“Well, at this moment, nothing of course. I’d have to take it with me and examine it at length, do a comparative study...”

“Wait a minute! Are you telling me you need to take it away?”

He looked at me over the rim of his glasses as if I had just asked him how babies are made.

“Obviously! This needs weeks of a thorough study if not months.”

I could not help smiling. I nodded toward our host who had begun to smoke a cigarette while he remained crouching in front of us.

“And have you thought how you’re going to convince our new friend to part with his son’s wedding gift? Apart from the fact that we gave our word to the previous owner that we wouldn’t do anything of the kind.”

The professor fell silent. Evidently he had not even thought about this.

“Perhaps we could buy it from him?” he suggested.

“We barely have enough left to last us a couple of days. And we still have to get back to Bamako. Remember, most of our cash was in our backpacks. We only have what we were carrying in case of an emergency

and our credit cards ... I didn't notice any sticker on the door here that said "*We take VISA.*"

"And if we tried to trade it for something?"

I was about to laugh when Cassie said, "I have one tampon and a piece of chewing gum!"

"Okay, okay ... forget I said anything."

We considered the problem in silence, trying to come up with a solution. At the same time the owner of the house was looking curiously at us, totally unaware of our absurd exchange.

The professor said, "We might ... ahem ... borrow it."

"No way!" said Cassie, "I'm not going to rob these people, and I'm not going to let anybody else do it either!"

"Besides," I added, "I don't think they'd be at all pleased and you've seen how they react."

"All right! All right! But now we've come so far, we can't just leave. Remember, it's not only this." He put his hand on the coffer. "Somewhere among these engravings may be the clue to the greatest treasure in history. And for this man, it's only a pretty wooden box."

Cassie bent closer to the box and touched its corners gently. She frowned and said, "Are you sure this is really only a block of wood?"

I looked at it more closely, intrigued by her tone.

"What are you suggesting?"

"Well, these people have referred to it as *the box*."

"That's only a name for it. If you're implying this is a kind of coffer, I'm sorry to say that I don't see a lock, or joints, or anything like that."

"Yes, that's true. But it doesn't make much sense that a Templar monk, or at least a craftsman following his orders, would carve such a big heavy piece to represent something that could have been done perfectly well on a tablet. Besides ..." She picked up the piece. "It doesn't feel as heavy as it should." She tapped it under the puzzled gaze of its owner. "It's hollow!"

The thin man made a move to take back his precious object, obviously uneasy about the way Cassie was handling it. Fortunately, I was able to convince him that the blue-haired woman was a little loose in the head and that she would not do it again.

"I've promised we won't touch *la caisse* again," I told them. "So keep your hands in your pockets or else this nice fellow will kick us out of his house."

“Okay!” said the professor impatiently. “You tell me how we’re going to find out how it opens without touching it! Most likely, the answer to the secret is there inside! We have to open it!”

“I agree with the professor. The problem is how we’re going to do it?”

I glanced aside at the man crouching and smoking the last of his cigarette. An idea began to take shape in my mind.

I turned to them again. “There we go. I’ve told him that according to our tradition we should make him a gift as a token of gratitude for his kindness in showing us *la caisse*, and he’s accepted.”

“Very well, now what on earth are you going to give him?” said the professor.

“I’m not giving him anything,” I said, beaming. “You are.”

“Me? What do you want me to give him? My passport?”

I always enjoyed teasing him.

“I was thinking about what you have in that little plastic bag you carry in your pants pocket.”

Cassie gave a start. “Do you really want to give this poor man marihuana? He probably doesn’t even know what it is!”

I turned to the professor, thoroughly amused. “I need you to roll the best joint you’ve ever made. And when I say “the best” I mean the strongest.” I winked at him.

They both understood what I had in mind and their reaction was the same.

“You’re a mean bastard,” said Cassie out of the corner of her mouth. Her smile was as Machiavellian as mine.

Twenty minutes later, our host was running around the house chasing pink elephants and laughing his head off in front of the mirror in his room.

“I feel ashamed,” said Cassie, as she watched him skipping up and down.

I took her by the waist and said, “Don’t worry. In a few hours the effect will be over. All he’ll have is a weird story to tell his wife.”

She shook her head. “I still feel bad about drugging the poor man to get what we want.”

“I’m not too happy either. Still, at least this way we’ll be able to check whether there’s something inside.” I was looking at the piece the professor was studying carefully. “We’ll close it again and leave everything as it was.

By the time the marihuana loses its effect on him, this man won't even be sure whether we were really here or just part of his dream."

"Well, anyway," she said as she leaned over to look at the piece, "the harm is already done."

We sat down on the floor around the mysterious box, running our fingers along its surface to find any irregularity or crack that might show us how to open it. The professor muttered, "It's weird that there doesn't seem to be a top or a moving part or anything like that."

"Well, there has to be. If there's an empty space inside it's because someone hollowed it out and closed it afterward. That means there must be some way of opening it again."

"You tell me. The theory is good, but I still can't find anything."

Trying to keep a straight face, Cassie said, "In movies, there's always a hidden spring that opens the coffer."

"Good idea! You look for the hidden spring. Ulysses can rub it and I can say *"Open Sesame!"* Then something's bound to happen!"

"Don't be an idiot!"

"Hey there, that's enough," I said. "We're all exhausted, so let's just give it a few more minutes. Then, if we can't find a way to open it, we'll hack it open with an ax."

"Over my dead body!" said the professor. "What we have here is a unique jewel! An irreplaceable piece of art of unfathomable historic value!"

"Well, then. Let's concentrate on the problem and find the solution."

Ignoring the owner's laughter as he sat in front of us, lost in his private dream, we turned the enigmatic coffer this way and that. Finally, when I was beginning to look around for some cutting instrument, Cassie put her hand on my arm.

"I think I've found it."

Professor Castillo and I bent expectantly over the point Cassandra had her finger on, which was the bas-relief of the two riders on the one mount.

"There's something that moves here."

Earlier, our host had brought a little spoon with the tea he had served us. When Cassie took her hand away, I carefully inserted it under the edge of the figure. This seemed to be stuck to the rest of the block with a hard black substance.

"It's as if the inside were sealed with some kind of black resin that's invisible when it's dry. That's why we didn't find any cracks. There aren't

any!”

The professor was trembling from excitement. He said, “Then, the bas-relief of the two monks on horseback is like a door that leads to the secret chamber. Very symbolic.”

Using the same spoon, I scraped away the remains of the resin and began to lever out the figure. This involved first separating it from its base and then pulling with both hands, as it was wedged like a cork in a bottle. Finally, with one last pull, I managed to separate the stubborn cover so that we could see inside.

We looked at each other nervously, trying to decide who would be the first to put their hand in and find out what we had uncovered. Whatever it was, it would mean the difference between success and utter failure in our quest. But none of us dared make the move to see what was hidden in the gloomy hole we had opened. It was as though we were at the edge of a well seven hundred years deep.

“Ay, *caramba!*” said Cassie at last. She plunged her hand into the opening. “Let’s see what the hell is in here!” She began to probe the inside of the box and then stopped, wide-eyed.

“What is it?” said the professor.

She looked at both of us, mouth agape.

“I ... I’m not sure ...”

Very slowly, as if this were the last trick of some Vegas magician, Cassie pulled her hand out of the box. She was holding what looked like a cylinder of discolored leather, a little more than a hand’s breadth, tied with a piece of the same material. She untied it carefully and unrolled the leather covering. Inside was a yellow scroll of parchment sealed with a thick blob of red wax. In the very center, concentrating all our attention was the familiar engraving of two knights riding a single horse, and surrounding them was the legend *Magister Mappamundorum*.

Under the pretext of having lost our passports along with the rest of our luggage, we got ourselves temporary visas at our respective consulates. As the originals had not been stamped, we thought it would be less trouble to have no passport at all rather than one without the correct stamp. It was harder to convince the Malian Immigration Officer that we had lost all our papers somewhere in the desert. Although we did not say a word about the Tuareg and their kidnapping attempt, so as to avoid embarrassing explanations, in the end we just had to “finance” a new watch for the Immigrations Officer in order to be able to leave the country that same day.

We had left Trabichat the evening before, crammed in the back of a truck full of goats. As a result, we arrived in Gao smelling pretty ripe, but at least we managed to book rooms at the only hotel that took credit cards.

In the wee hours of the following morning, rested to some extent after the chance to sleep in a real bed, we boarded an ancient *Antonov* propeller plane which finally left us at the Bamako International Airport.

After hours of dealing with paperwork, with neither luggage nor passports, worn out by our brief but intense stay in Mali, we climbed the stairs of the Air France Airbus that would take us back to Europe. We were still wearing the same ragged clothes we had come out of the desert in and the hostesses looked at us scandalized. When we entered the plane and left the asphyxiating African heat behind, we had to admit we were grateful to be returning to the aseptic western environment and the air conditioning we had sorely missed.

We slumped down on what seemed to us very comfortable tourist class seats, and by the time we took off, both Cassie and the professor were deeply asleep.

Knowing I would soon follow, I clasped in my arms the cloth bag inside which lay the clue to the elusive treasure of the Knights of the Temple: the object we had almost died to get hold of.

Sixteen hours and two connections later, we were saying goodbye to the professor at his apartment building and giving the cab driver directions to mine on Paris Street.



We got into the elevator and went up to top floor in silence. When we got there, I looked in vain for the spare key I bury in the soil of a battered ficus plant I keep beside my door for that sole purpose. I was beginning to panic when the door opened and the last person I wanted to see at that moment appeared.

“Ulysses!” The woman in the bright red coat nearly jumped out of her shoes.

“Hello, Mom,” I muttered resignedly.

She started fussing. “My God, Ulysses, where have you been? You look dreadful! Did you get run over by a garbage truck? What happened to you?”

“I’m all right, Mom ... I’ve just been away for a few days, that’s all.”

“You call that all right? You should see yourself! You had me so worried, Ulysses. I called all the numbers in your address book and nobody knew anything! And then, I saw all those papers and maps that suggested you’d gone to Africa ... I was really worried. Are you going to tell me where you’ve been?”

“I promise to call tomorrow and tell you all about it. But now, please let us come in.” I was too tired to explain anything right then.

Turning her sweetness on and ignoring my entreaties, she said, “Well, aren’t you going to introduce me to this quiet pretty young lady?”

It was like one of those nightmares you keep trying to wake up from.

I moved aside and said stoically, “This is Cassandra Brooks, Mom.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ma’am”, she said with a smile.

My mother stepped forward and kissed the girl on both cheeks. “Me too, my dear, so glad to finally meet a girlfriend of my son’s.”

“Mom, please, you can embarrass me some other time. Now, we’re exhausted and we just want to grab a bite and sleep till Christmas. And by the way ... what were you doing here?”

“I told you already. I was trying to find you. You left without a word and when I found out that Eduardo was missing as well, I decided to come and take a look. I was afraid you might be in trouble.” She glanced at Cassie and added, “But I see you’re not.”

“Did you search my apartment?”

She looked offended and pointed an accusing finger at me. “If you’d told me you were leaving I wouldn’t have had to.”

“Okay. It’s my fault then. But having spent the last few years coming

and going, I really didn't think you'd worry for just a few days."

"Well, I wasn't worried at first. In fact I probably wouldn't have noticed your absence if it hadn't been for that man's call."

"What man? What call?"

"Someone ... John Hunch-something or other," she said, frowning. "From a company called Something Explorations. I'd say American, by his accent."

"John Hutch ... from Hutch Marine Explorations?"

"That's the one! Do you know him?"

"Yeah, you could say that. Did you tell him we were in Mali?" I was feeling uneasy.

"Less than ten minutes ago," she said guiltily. From the look on her face she must have guessed she had not really done me a favor. "As soon as I worked out where you'd gone from all these notes, I called the number he gave me, from your own phone."

"Did he say why he wanted to talk to me?"

"The fact is, he said he was a little worried about you. He asked me to tell him where you were, just in case you needed any help."

Cassie and I exchanged looks.

"Doesn't feel right, does it?" I said.

"Do you think he's checking up on us?"

"Maybe he wouldn't have before. But now he knows the three of us have been to Mali he'll be suspicious. And with all that's at stake, I'm sure he'll look under every stone until he gets to us and finds out what we know." I sighed, worn out, and added almost to myself, "We'll have to move quickly."

As soon as we were alone, we collapsed on the couch. We undressed and while Cassie headed for the shower I ordered two pizzas.

Half an hour later we were sitting at the table, sweet and clean, gobbling down a couple of extra cheese supremes.

"Mmmm ... I was starving!" she said, chewing away.

"Didn't your mommy teach you not to speak with your mouth full?"

She gave me a mischievous look and licked a thread of mozzarella from the corner of her mouth.

"She also taught me how to defend myself from groping, and yet here I am ..."

I looked her over and smiled. “Is that an invitation?”

“It depends,” she said feigning indifference, “on how tired you are.”

I got up from my chair and stood behind her. With my arm around her shoulders I whispered in her ear. “Not enough ...”

She dropped the piece of pizza on the table and began to moan with pleasure as I ran my lips along her neck, nibbling her earlobe and holding her breasts tenderly in my hands. Still at her back, I unbuttoned the shirt she was wearing, letting it slip down her shoulders to the floor. I ran the tips of my fingers down her back and then my lips and my tongue, kissing, licking ...

She stood up and turned into me. The desire in her eyes aroused me. Without a word she grasped my hand and took her panties off. She led me slowly to the bedroom where we made love, tired as we were, until, exhausted and soaked with sweat, we fell asleep.

An insolent bell was ringing inside my head. It took me a few seconds to realize it was the phone, and that I was in my own bedroom and not in a *haima* in the middle of the Sahara Desert. With my eyes only half open, I groped around trying to remember where I had put the damned thing. When I finally found it and put it to my face, I tried to be coherent.

“Hello?” I managed to grunt.

“Ulysses, it’s me,” said the familiar voice of the professor from the other end of the line.

“Doc!” I grumbled, choking back the comments I would have loved to make.

“Can you be at my house in about an hour?”

Now I was angry. I could not understand his relaxed tone, when it was not even night yet. Unable to hide my annoyance I replied, “Can’t you wait until tomorrow? We just went to bed, I’ll call you first thing in the morning, I promise!”

“You just went to bed? What have you been doing? We got here yesterday evening!”

It took me a while to organize my brain and realize we had been sleeping for nearly twenty-four hours. As a famous comedian once said, “Too much sleep for a grown man”.

I excused myself for my grumpiness and told him about John Hutch’s call. We agreed to meet at his house a couple of hours later: time enough to shower, grab a bite and perhaps make love again to the woman who was

sharing my bed, lying sensually oblivious and with traces of indigo still visible in her hair and face.

We arrived punctually, and five minutes later we were sitting around a table full of maps, photocopies of manuscripts and reference books. Beside them was a transparent folder containing the parchment we had brought back from Mali.

“I see you haven’t wasted your time,” I observed admiringly.

The professor shrugged. “Well, I couldn’t sleep.”

“Have you found something?” asked Cassie.

“I’m on it,” he said indicating all the papers on the table with a wave of his hand. “So far, I’ve just authenticated the age of the parchment and done a rudimentary transcription.”

I looked at the manuscript with interest.

“So?”

“Well, to begin with, I’ve discovered that our parchment is really a stretched, treated and whitened section of hide from a ruminant.”

“A what?” I asked, confused.

He looked at me patiently. “I said that the document we brought from Mali is not written on paper from trees. It’s written on animal hide. Most likely a goat’s.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“No, Ulysses, really,” said Cassie. “In the Middle Ages it was quite normal to use treated leather if you wanted a document to last for a very long time.”

“That’s right, my dear.” As usual, the professor was anxious to continue with his explanation. “So this suggests that the manuscript was written before 1400, which is when the technique of writing on hide was lost, completely. Besides,” he added with obvious satisfaction, “the lexicon and grammar narrow down the period of time it was written to the years 1200 to 1350, approximately.”

“So, it fits into the period when, according to the Catalan Atlas, Abraham Cresques, our mystery man, arrived in Africa on Jaume Ferrer’s ship,” I said.

Professor Castillo nodded emphatically. He pointed at the parchment and said, “I have no doubts that what we have here is what Jaffuda Cresques calls “the way of the Brau” in his will. The way of the *T-aurus*: the gold of

the Templars.”

A silence fell as we finally realized that our efforts had borne fruit. Professor Castillo relished these moments, when he knew we were hanging on every word. He spun out the silence as long as he dared. When he saw our expressions begin to change from expectation to impatience, he picked up his notebook and went on as if he were in the classroom, instead of his own living room.

He adjusted his glasses before continuing. “After I’d transcribed the text, and translated it into Spanish, I ascertained that it was, just as I’d expected, a description of the place where the Temple Knights might have sought refuge when they were fleeing with the treasure of the Order from the arrest Pope Clement had ordered.”

Cassie leaned forward. “What do you mean by *might*? Aren’t you one hundred per cent sure?”

The professor, who had probably been expecting the question, said condescendingly, “You see, my dear, it was really a one-way trip. It seems no Templar Knight ever returned to reveal where the treasure was hidden.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“But then, how did the fellow who wrote the parchment know?”

“The fact is, I don’t think he knew at all.”

Cassie and I were flabbergasted, trying to take this in.

“Do you really believe our anonymous cartographer had no idea where all the riches of the order were taken?” I asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

For one moment the world crashed to the floor around me, then I looked at Cassie and back again at the professor.

“I think you’re hiding something.”

He chuckled with guilt.

“You have a twisted sense of humor,” complained Cassie. “You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“My most sincere apologies, Ms. Brooks, I only wanted to make the story more thrilling.”

“Apology accepted, Mr. Castillo,” she replied, dramatically. “But I’d appreciate less emotion and more precision.”

“Hear, hear!”

“All right,” he said, grudgingly. “If that’s how you want it, dry as the desert ...”

He sat down and invited us to do the same. This meant it was not going to be a short story.

“As I said before, the man who wrote this doesn’t say he knows the final location of the *T-aurus*. In fact, he doesn’t even mention it.”

“Hang on one minute, Doc. You’re driving me crazy! Just a moment ago, you said you were sure this described the way to the *T-aurus*. Now you say different?”

“I’ll explain if you let me finish. As you know, our man fled Majorca with Jaume Ferrer, to prevent this document from falling into the wrong hands. He sailed south, following the African coast to the mouth of the river Senegal. Then he went up river by camel until he reached the Niger River and after that the city of Timbuktu. As a cultivated man, he must have felt very comfortable there. He lived there many years, until he realized he would never be able to return. So he decided to hide the parchment he’d risked his life for, inside the ebony carving we found in Trabichat.” He paused, no doubt remembering all we had had to go through to get it.

“As I also said before, the manuscript is a detailed description of how to reach a place of the utmost importance for the Order. It seems that whoever wrote it didn’t know where the treasure finished up, so I can only think of one other possibility.”

“What other possibility?” Cassie asked, unable to contain herself.

“Well, I think I can say incontrovertibly that we have a description of the exact location of a Templar settlement unknown until now.”

I stared at the professor, trying to contain a wave of disappointment.

“And why is that interesting? According to what you told me, the Templar order covered all of Europe and had settlements from Lisbon to Jerusalem.”

I saw a cunning smile creeping over his face.

“Well, you see,” he said with a hint of animation, “the funny thing about this particular settlement is that, after examining this parchment, I’d say it wasn’t exactly in this neighborhood at all.”

Intrigued, I turned all my attention to the parchment.

This was a sheet of considerable thickness, the size of an A4. It had a peculiar feel, halfway between cured leather and paper. It was yellowish and had an ivory sheen, like a sheet of paper left in the sun for a long time. Upon it, someone, seven hundred years ago, had written a few lines, and traced a simple map that occupied most of the surface. It showed a bay, practically

shut off from the sea by a tongue of land. Beside this was the mouth of a large river which wound up to its source in a region of what looked like green mountains. Its course wound southwesterly along a plain dotted with old meanders which time had transformed into irregular marshes.

But what attracted my attention most was that in the mountainous area, right in the middle of a meander, so close that it nearly turned the place into an island, there was a drawing of a tiered pyramid painted a bright shade of red. On its top was an unmistakably Templar cross.

The evening had turned to dusk, and we were still sitting around the same table, under the yellow lights of the living room. The same chaos of documents was spread out before us and we still had not solved the riddle. One part of the world was drawn on the map we had in front of us, but which part?

The professor and I were eating noodles from the Chinese restaurant across the street while Cassie read aloud the transcription of the text that accompanied the map. It was the third time in a row she had done it.

She read, "Setting forth from the site of La Rochelle and navigating south, we shall arrive at the fortunate islands, where the ships may be repaired and the men may gather food for the long journey. From there, and always following the shadow of the mast at dawn, and by the grace of God, we shall reach the coasts of an unknown land in thirty or forty days. Once we have passed the small islands populated by savages, we will continue sailing, always bordering the coast to the north, as far as the City of Dawn, where we shall give presents to its powerful king in the name of The Order. Then, we shall continue bordering the coast for five or six days until we reach the sharks' lagoon. There we shall leave the ship in order to go up the turbulent river, and after fifteen more days on foot, through thick forests populated by strange animals, we shall reach the place the Lord has guided us to."

The text was not signed, nor did it have a date or indication of where it might have been written. This was very unusual in any document of the time, still more in one as relevant as the one we had in our hands.

"The fact is," said Cassie, looking up from the parchment, "whoever wrote this doesn't give us many clues. It's all very vague: wild islands, a lagoon, a river ... it could be anywhere between Venezuela and the United States!"

"Not quite as big an area as that," I said, pointing at the map with my chopsticks. "We found the ring and the bell of a Templar ship near Honduras, so I'd say we can narrow it down to six hundred to twelve hundred miles of the Central American coast, starting at Honduras and going north."

The professor raised a finger.



“We also have the reference to the City of Dawn. If we find out what that is, I believe we can find the rest easily enough.”

Cassie got up from her chair with a determined movement. “In that case, let’s get back to work. If it’s okay with you, I’ll go on the internet and try to find some reference to that mystery town. You could look for rivers and lagoons in the area that might match the search pattern.”

“Sir! Yes Sir!” I said standing to attention.

She poked her tongue out at me and went into the professor’s studio.

We were surprised by her determination, so we finished the rest of our dinner and started poring over a detailed world atlas from the National Geographic Society.

In little over half an hour we had located all the rivers and coastal lagoons between the Mosquito Coast and Texas. We had just finished when Cassie came out of the studio, looking pleased.

“So, what do you have?” she asked.

“We’ve found more than twenty coastal lagoons in the area,” said the professor, “but only seven of them are near anything that might be considered a turbulent river. Mind you, seven hundred years might have changed things dramatically, so that what counts as a navigable river today might have been just a brook then, or vice versa.”

“But is there anything that looks particularly promising?”

I put my finger on the map. “Well, we have the Rio Grande, that runs along the border between the United States and your Mexico *lindo*. Then there’s the Usumacinta, which ends in the south of Mexico although it begins in Guatemala. Then the Polochic River, which also begins and ends in Guatemala. And the Coco River, which serves as a natural border between Honduras and Nicaragua. I’d discard the Rio Grande because it’s a very well-known area and too deserted to match the mention of “thick forests populated by strange animals.” But the other three flow through tropical mountains, largely unexplored, and there could easily be a whole city lost in the jungle there.”

Cassie nodded and bent over the map tapping a finger over the places I had just mentioned. “They’re finding new remains of Mayan settlements in the jungle of Chiapas and the Guatemalan Petén all the time. In fact, every year they make so many new discoveries they have to update the list of archeological sites.”

She stopped at this point and looked at the two of us with a smile that

threatened to break her jaw.

She was obviously dying to be asked so I said, "What about you?"

She tried to shrug it off. "Not bad ... at first I got frustrated because I couldn't find any reference to a "City of Dawn," but then I realized that if this was a Templar name, it would have died out over time. That left only one other possibility."

The professor looked up with interest. "Which is ...?"

"The name is a translation from an indigenous one," she said.

"Very clever," said the professor. "But how did you know what language it was in? As far as I know, before the Spaniards arrived, there were dozens of different peoples, living together in what is now Mexico and Guatemala, and each one had their own language."

"Well, I did have some help. I made a quick call to a colleague at the University of Mexico D.F. who fed the Spanish name into the main computer there, and it translated it into all the indigenous languages spoken from Texas to Panama. He mailed me the list and here it is." She waved the sheet of paper I had seen her come out of the studio with.

"Wonderful!" said the professor.

"Now," she finished, "all we have to do is check these names against known locations on the Caribbean coast, and we'll have our City of Dawn."

We got to work with enthusiasm. We divided the list in three parts and each of us went through all the names on the Caribbean coast. We were looking for one that sounded like any of the translations of "City of Dawn."

In less than half an hour I shouted, "I found it!"

They both looked at the name I had my finger on.

"Tulum! Of course!" said Cassie slapping her forehead.

"You sound very sure about that," I said surprised.

"It's not exactly a city," she said excitedly, "but an unusual coastal Mayan castle from the Postclassic period. It was inhabited from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries, which matches the Templar period. Besides, it seems to have had some kind of dock for fishing boats, so it would've been the perfect place for the ships of The Order."

"If you believe that's the place, all we have to do is calculate the distance to the "Sharks' Lagoon." I turned to the professor. "Doc, how fast do you think those ships could sail?"

"That's hard to say. Information on medieval ships is very limited.

According to a recent study, the shape of the hulls ...”

I interrupted him. “Approximately, Doc. Approximately.”

He scratched his head, thoughtfully. “Between four and six knots, but it’s only an opinion.”

“That’s good enough for me.” I found a pencil and began to draw numbers on the margin of the map. “Let’s see ... one knot is about 1.15 miles per hour. Multiplied by four that’s 4.6 miles per hour. Twenty-four hours a day, that’s 110 miles a day, which multiplied by the five or six days mentioned in the text gives us between 550 and 660 miles. Does anybody have a ruler?”

“Excuse me, Ulysses,” said the professor,” but that’s the worst calculation I’ve ever heard in my life. You haven’t taken into account the winds or the currents, or ...”

“I know, Doc,” I said as I began measuring distances from Tulum with the ruler. “This is just to get an approximation and narrow the field.”

I traced several lines on the map, and turned the inches into miles. When I had a clearer idea I sat back in my chair.

“Well?” said Cassie.

“Very well.”

“Don’t mess around. I want to know what you’ve found!”

“Oh, that! Well, there are two big rivers that end near coastal lagoons the right distances away starting at Tulum: the Usumacinta River at five hundred and sixty miles and the Coco River, at six hundred and twenty.”

Seeing my smug expression, the professor ventured, “But you already know which, don’t you?”

“It was easy. The text indicates they were following a north course to Tulum, so it’s logical to assume they would carry on in the same direction. If you look closely at the map, you’ll see that one of the rivers is in the south and that you reach the other by following the coast northwards. So, it’s clear that our river is the Usumacinta.”

“It’s an enormous river,” said the professor.

“More than six hundred and twenty miles from the Sierra de Cuchumatanes to the Bay of Campeche,” confirmed Cassie. “Even knowing in which river it is, it’s very difficult to identify the right place.”

“It’s obvious that the person who wrote this didn’t want anybody to find it,” I said.

The professor cleared his throat.

“I’d say that this parchment was meant for someone who would understand it. In the Middle Ages, that “someone” had to be a good cartographer, and in those days that was another way of saying a Templar. Think about it. Very few people could read in those days, much less interpret a map like this. Come to that, even a century ago no one could have done what we’re doing right now, studying maps and linguistic references.”

“In that case,” I said, “let’s give thanks to the anonymous cartographer for his zeal and get started.”

I put the parchment beside the map that showed Guatemala and the south of Mexico in detail.

“The scale is too small for comparison,” I said, frustrated. “This river has more curves than a Playboy Special.”

“Sorry, it’s the best I have.”

“Don’t worry about that. I know a couple of internet sites with very precise maps of the area,” said Cassie.

So we went into the studio and sat in front of the computer. Cassie typed in the name of the site, and in a few minutes we had a topographical map of the course of the Usumacinta on the screen.

“Where shall we start looking? The source? Or the end?”

“Neither,” I said. “The parchment talks about a fifteen-day journey upriver, which would come to between a hundred and twenty five and two hundred and fifty miles, taking into account the lay of the land and what they were carrying. Let’s start here.”

Using a system to measure actual distances with the mouse, we decided to keep the search to a stretch of the river between the village of Emiliano Zapata and a hamlet with the ominous name of *La Lucha* (The Fight).

Cassandra blew up the map to maximum, so that we could see even the most insignificant streams and paths. She slowly moved the screen from north to south, following the winding course of the Usumacinta. First this took us through the wide plains of Tabasco. Then, when it became the border between Mexico and Guatemala, it led up a gentle valley which opened out as it neared the Guatemalan high plains.

There seemed to be no section of the river which looked very much like the one on the map, which was worrying. Then suddenly we reached the last but one curve of the river, and my heart leapt into my mouth.

“Stop!” I yelled so close to Cassie’s ear that she jumped. “Do you see what I see?”

They must have, because they were both staring with their mouths wide open.

“It’s amazing,” said the professor, as he held the photocopy of the parchment beside the screen. “They match perfectly.”

Right in the middle of the closed horseshoe meander, there appeared a curious symbol with a strange name below it.

“What does that mean?” I said, putting my finger on the screen.

Cassandra was perplexed. “That means we’re incredibly lucky.”

“Why’s that?”

She half turned in her chair. “I mean that this drawing shows an archeological site, and a pretty big one at that.” She turned back to the screen. “This, here, is the ancient Mayan city of Yaxchilan.”

The Aviateca DC-9 was flying over what looked like a green ocean covered by the morning mists. It was a vast, apparently endless emerald expanse, quite featureless. The plane had already begun to descend, but no matter how close I got to the window, I could see no place to land. For more than half an hour I had seen no sign of civilization in all that green confusion, whether roads, urban centers or a simple hut: nothing. The pilot seemed ready to land on the treetops.

It was only seconds before the landing gear was deployed that I glimpsed a first sign that we had arrived somewhere, a group of squat white buildings surrounded by antennas and radar receivers. We rolled along the tarmac in front of a dense cluster of military helicopters, and finally stopped beside a humble terminal with “Welcome to Guatemala” painted in big red letters. We dealt with the customs officers with surprising ease and without having to pay “a tip.” Before we realized it, we found ourselves outside the airport with our backpacks at our feet and a tropical sun that was already beginning to strike.

“*La chingada!*” said Cassie looking at the sun, shading her eyes with her hands. “We’re going to sweat it out here too!”

“Are you crazy?” said the professor. “Compared to the Sahara, this is like a spa!”

“Well, whatever. We have to find transportation, quick. So, let’s go.” I said as I shouldered my bag.

We got into a shabby old taxi and in less than five minutes we were at the terminal of “*Transportes Pinita*,” in the center of the shabby town of Santa Elena: a dusty border village right in the heart of the Petén jungle. It was hard to think of anything unrelated to archeology or exotic lumber or animal smuggling happening there.

Definitely, very few of the people we crossed with on the street looked like archaeologists.

We asked around the terminal, and it was not hard to find a driver willing to take us wherever we wished in his pickup, in exchange of course for a thick wad of US dollars. With Mario (that was his name) as a guide, we

devoted practically the whole morning to buying all the equipment we thought we might need and that we had not been able to bring on the plane for obvious reasons: picks, shovels, machetes, rope, three hammocks, bottled water and food supplies. We loaded everything onto the double cabin Toyota Hilux until we decided there was enough of everything to survive a couple of weeks in the middle of the jungle. Once the tank was full, we set out immediately, heading for the village of Campamac, by the Pasión River. This is a tributary of the Usumacinta where we thought we could get a barge to take us and all our equipment downriver to the ruins of Yaxchilan.

The pickup was jerking along the dirt road that goes through part of the untamed Petén jungle as we followed a southeasterly course from Santa Elena to Cobán, a few thousand bumps ahead. If there was a hell for our kidneys, it had to be very similar to that road. In spite of everything, the annoyance was compensated generously by the awesome experience of driving between two walls of vegetation which were easily between a hundred and a hundred and thirty feet tall. The road (to give it a name it hardly deserved) was like a dusty wound in the jungle, as much out of place as the uncomfortable vehicle we were traveling in.

“Pity ...” whispered Cassie looking out the window.

“What’s a pity?” I asked.

She turned around, surprised that I had heard her.

“Nothing, really, it’s just that we’re a stone’s throw away from the grandest Mayan city, and I would’ve loved to see it.”

“You mean Tikal?”

“Yes, the legendary Tikal. I’ve heard that only Machu Picchu can match in architecture and surroundings.”

“It must be impressive.”

“It has to be,” she said firmly. “Even George Lucas chose it as a location for his *Star Wars*.”

I took her hand and smiled at her.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I have a feeling that in Yaxchilan we’re going to have more than enough Mayan culture.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because, apart from dealing with Mayan hieroglyphs and Templar riddles, I bet that any creature that stings, scratches or bites will be waiting for us with open arms. They really know how to make you feel welcome.”

*... although my pain is great,  
For you I shall forget.  
It's not my fault, nooo  
I always loved you  
You lied to me,  
You lied to me...  
You were bad, bad with my love  
It's not my fault, nooo  
I always loved you  
You lied, you laughed  
At my poor heaaaaart...*

We finally said goodbye to Mario (and the never-ending CD of Greatest Hits by Los Machos de Culiacán he had been torturing us with all the way) when we reached the southern shore of the Pasión River. We had spent almost three hours jerking and rattling to cover just over thirty five miles of dust and bumps. With all our equipment unloaded onto the small dock of the village, we stretched our legs, then broke our fast with chicken and fried bananas at a hut that served as a rustic road bar. Then we began to look for someone with a barge big enough to carry us and all our equipment downriver.

In less than half an hour we were coursing down the Usumacinta on a small motor fishing boat, dodging huge boulders that loomed up at every turn, facing the countless rapids confidently thanks to our skipper Pablo's profound knowledge of the tumultuous river.

Taking advantage of a quiet stretch, and being careful not to upset the boat, I approached the skipper.

"I didn't think the Usumacinta was so turbulent!" I shouted, trying to make myself heard over the noisy motor.

"This is nothing, mister!" he shouted back. "The river gets even fiercer after the point where I'll leave you."

"In that case," I shouted again, "I'm glad we don't have to go further, because this looks dangerous enough to me."

Pablo, his hand on the steering rod of the barge, nodded and turned his attention back to the river. A little further on, the current changed rhythm again and turned into a chaos of white foam and muddy waters, roaring over the threatening rocks that very often were dangerously hidden.



The complicated descent of the river lasted more than five hours. It was already getting dark when Pablo reduced the speed of the motor so that we could hear the sounds of the jungle around us. Pointing at an impressive mass of gray stone partially covered by vegetation that stood out over the tops of the trees, he shouted one word, with a mixture of awe and fear in his voice.

“Yaxchilan!”

We unloaded everything we had brought with us on the shore at the edge of the jungle. Night was falling and all the mosquitoes in the world were trying to eat us alive. This was not the romantic landing we had imagined, but I was sure that the following morning would make up for it.

After saying goodbye to Pablo, paying him and arranging for him to come back in two weeks with more supplies, we were left watching him shrink into the distance on his barge. It was only then that we realized that from that moment on we were absolutely alone, with no possibility of contact with the rest of the world.

After a while, jabbed out of my contemplative mood by the mosquito bites, I fished into my backpack and opened my medical kit. I took out a flask filled with red liquid and offered it to Cassandra.

“Here, take this. Spread it on all exposed skin.”

“What is it?” she asked, shining her head torch on me.

“Oraldine. It’s sticky, but it will keep the mosquitoes from biting.”

“Mouthwash? Are you kidding me? Don’t you have a normal repellent?”

“Trust me, Cassie. Here there are different kinds of mosquitoes, horseflies, and gnats that come out to feed at sunset, and there’s no repellent in the world that will keep them away. If you cover yourself in this, I guarantee that no bug will come near you.”

“Ugh! Disgusting! But if it’s the only option, I’ll do it as long as I’m not eaten alive!”

When she had finished, I passed the flask to the professor who looked at it equally skeptically, and finally I smeared the liquid on myself. Then I suggested having a good dinner and turning in as soon as possible, because the following day was going to be intense.

We dined on spaghetti with meatballs under the light of our head torches, surrounded by an incredible cloud of flying insects that did not bite but whose incessant buzzing almost drove us to leave our meal and run to the protection of the river. Fortunately, when night conquered the jungle, the

attack faded away, and we were left free to hang up our hammocks in a semicircle around the small clearing we had used as a kitchen.

When I had finished with mine, making sure it was securely tied, I smeared the ropes with oil to prevent ants from reaching it, and looked to see how my friends were doing.

I noted that Cassandra's was perfectly hung, probably due to her experience in field work, so I went on to the professor. He was crouching, tying the last knots of the rope around his tree.

"Sorry, Doc. I'm afraid you'll have to do it all over."

He turned and dazzled me with his light.

"Do it all over again? Can you tell me why? I think it looks okay."

"It does look okay. But it's too close to the ground."

He turned to look at his hammock, checking the distance that separated it from the ground.

"It looks good to me. I don't want to break a bone if I fall off."

"Okay, suit yourself. But the moment you climb on, your weight will lower it about a foot. You do know there are jaguars and some of the most poisonous snakes in the world around here, not to mention tarantulas, scorpions and other nice little creatures. If I were you, I'd tie it up a little higher. But if you're not worried, forget it. I won't force you."

I turned around and began to prepare for the night. Behind my back I could hear the professor muttering under his breath and the sound of rope rubbing against the tree trunk.

Shortly after, I closed my mosquito net and curled up ready to sleep. I managed a faint "good night" before exhaustion overtook me. In the impenetrable darkness I began to hear the infinite sounds of the jungle at night: the howling of the monkeys, the flapping of some nocturnal bird or the occasional movement of some harmless rodent in the undergrowth. I finally fell asleep remembering how, as a Costa Rican biologist once told me, jaguars are such silent killers that the first sign of their presence is usually the last.

The first morning light was trying to find its way through the thick canvas of millions of leaves which, like a solid dome, covered the ceiling of the forest. Scandalous macaws chattered from their high towers and a family of white-faced monkeys stared at us with curiosity from a nearby silk-cotton tree.

Lying in my hammock, I watched a beautiful toucan flying swiftly in

and out of the trees. Suddenly, breaking the harmony of the morning and silencing every other living creature, a powerful roar vibrated through the dense air of the jungle, making every single hair on my nape stand on end and tearing me out of my pleasant slumber.

“Oh my God, a jaguar!” cried the professor.

“Take it easy, Doc,” I said. “That’s not a jaguar.”

“It isn’t?” he said, still huddled in his hammock. “Are you telling me that was a cat? Even the trees have moved!”

“It’s not a cat either, Doc. It’s a monkey.”

Even without seeing his face I knew he was frowning inside his hammock.

“You’ve got to be kidding me! Monkeys don’t roar!”

“It’s true, Doc,” said Cassie. “What you just heard is the warning call of a howling monkey. It’s telling you this is his territory.”

“Well, the bloody thing scared the hell out of me! I almost wet my pants!” He was furiously peering up into the trees, trying to locate the monkey.

“Don’t worry. If it’s any consolation, it happens to everybody when they hear it for the first time.”

Totally awake thanks to the impressive roar, we got up, checked our clothes and shoes, and got dressed. After the damp heat of the night, the morning was surprisingly cool and we had to put on the few warm clothes we had brought along.

“What a horrible night!” said Cassandra. “What with not being used to sleeping in a hammock, all the nocturnal racket, the heat and this disgusting mouthwash that made me feel even stickier, I’ve barely slept a couple of hours.”

“A couple of hours? Lucky you!” said the professor. “I didn’t even manage ten minutes!”

“That’s perfect,” I said as I started preparing coffee. “That way you’ll sleep well tonight.”

“Hah! What a nice thought!”

Cassie rummaged in her bag and took out a towel. “Well, I’m going for a swim before breakfast.”

“Be careful of the currents,” I warned her, “and the alligators.”

“There were no currents on the beach where we landed, and as for the alligators, I’m so hungry they’d better be careful about me! So, see you!” As

she was going away, she added, “Oh, and by the way, I like my toast with butter and the croissants really hot.”

After filling our stomachs, we put the rest of our food supplies safely out of reach of predators and the kleptomaniac coatis. We filled our canteens and put the things we would need for our study in our bags, and headed to the nearby ruins of Yaxchilan.

We advanced carefully along a narrow path, noticing where we put our feet as we did not want to inadvertently step on a poisonous snake, like the copper head which Pablo had assured us was more common than ants. The path ran parallel to the river through thick underbrush, with huge silk-cotton trees, mahogany trees, or red cedars towering above. Ten minutes after we started, the first remains of the ancient Mayas began to appear. At first it was only some mounds of stone shallowly covered by vegetation, but two hundred yards further we found ourselves in what centuries before must have been an impressive square plaza. It was surrounded by solid square buildings with tiered facades, like gigantic grandstands topped with small cubicles of polished stone. Even from a distance we could appreciate the many Mayan glyphs carved on the walls. The square itself was occupied by two dozen of slim trees whose roots had penetrated between the slabs that made up the floor. Ahead of us, at the end of a short corridor, we could see another plaza just as big. We were walking in awed silence, unable to utter a single word to describe how we felt at that moment. Only the rumor of the Usumacinta which ran at our right less than one hundred yards away broke the sacred silence of the place. Even the usually noisy macaws flew through the ruins as if afraid of making any sound.

I had never been anywhere like this before, and I felt my heart shrink at the magnificence of this colossal work. I had never seen any place built by man that could compare to this. I felt as if I were in a sci-fi movie, visiting another planet.

Besides, there was that unreal silence.

The city might have been dead for centuries, but its imposing presence was as intimidating as if it were alive and threatening.

We went on almost reverently, approaching in respectful silence each stone stele or relief we came across, taking photos of everything we saw.

We devoted the morning to exploring. By noon we already had an approximate idea of the layout of the buildings and even a basic map. We had

traced the location of the temples, of what looked like stone dwellings for nobles or priests and a good part of the stone stele we had found. Most of them were covered with strange drawings and symbols I had no way of deciphering. But the most majestic piece of the group was the pyramid that rose on a solitary hill, on one side of the first plaza we had found. It was the same one we had seen the day before, standing out over the treetops as we came up the river. Close to, it was even more imposing because its apex was topped with a great stone hall. There were three frontal entrances to this, entirely covered by glyphs. It gave a fine view of the whole complex, so that it was easy to appreciate the ambition of the builders and their clear-sightedness at placing it in the inner part of a prominent curve of the river. Only a narrow corridor of firm land was left, easily defensible, as the sole means of access to the city.

When evening began to fall we decided to go back to the camp. We descended from the “pyramid on the hill” by a very long stone stair. This brought us to an upright stele at the very foot of the hillock, to one side of what we had named the main square. From there we retraced our morning trail back to our base camp.

I offered to organize the camp site and protect our supplies while Cassie and the professor compared notes and argued about the significance of what we had seen. When I was satisfied with my job I went over to them and found them bending over a portable laptop fed by a small solar panel. They were downloading and filing the photos they had taken.

“I see you’ve focused on the hieroglyphs. Have you photographed them all?”

“No way!” said Cassie. “Barely a fraction of what can be seen. There are thousands more to photograph.”

“Honestly, I don’t understand your working method. Even if you managed to compile each and every one of those strange drawings, it would take you years to translate them. And even then, they might not give us any clue to what we’re looking for.”

“You’re absolutely right,” she said nonchalantly. “Even more so, taking into account that neither of us is an expert in Mayan hieroglyphic writing.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Absolutely not, Ulysses,” said the professor. “I have no knowledge of the subject and I think Ms Brooks here doesn’t know much about it either.”

“Then, what on Earth are you doing?”

“We’re preparing a data base, of course.”

I suspected they were teasing me, but at this point I began to worry.

“Let me understand this. You mean you’re going to spend the time we’re here photographing thousands of hieroglyphs that later you won’t be able to translate?”

“I didn’t say that,” said Cassie.

“Oh, no? You just admitted you couldn’t read them!”

Cassandra smiled and patted the laptop on her knees, affectionately.

“We can’t,” she said with something like parental pride. “But this can.”

“In the end, it’s not really so complicated,” explained Cassie, with a wave at the screen. “It’s a program some colleagues at the University have developed. It’s still being tested, but they’ve been kind enough to send it to us via the internet.”

“And how does it work?”

“The program compares photographic images of Mayan symbols with a data base of its own. The database has most of these symbols together with their possible meanings.” While she was talking, she projected one of the hieroglyphs onto the left side of the screen, something like a jaguar’s head with a disconcerting trunk pointing upwards. “The computer reviews all the possible “candidates,” determines which is the most likely and after a few seconds ...” A drawing very similar to the photo materialized on the right-hand side of the screen. “There! We have a translation into English. In this case, it’s the sign that represents Zotz, the fourth month in the Mayan calendar.”

“That’s amazing. How does the computer manage to identify a worn-out relief printed on a two-dimensional photograph?”

“That’s the best part. The program really doesn’t identify anything. It just compares points of light and shadow, until its memory finds one that coincides.”

Professor Castillo nodded as if it were the easiest thing in the world.

“I still don’t get it.”

“Well, let me give you an example. Have you ever seen one of those crime movies where they scan a finger print and then compare it digitally with a data base of suspects?”

“Yes, of course.”

“This is the same. The program doesn’t know a thing about Mayan

symbolology, it just reads the points of light and shadow in a photo and chooses the drawing in its files that has most in common.”

“I see,” I said, and put my arm around the professor’s shoulders. “Then, say if instead of the photo of a Mayan symbol, I give the computer one of the professor in his underwear ...”

“It will show you the symbol that most resembles it, plus all possible translations.”

“Let’s try it then!”

He moved away from me and peered over his glasses.

“And why don’t you do it? Then we’ll know whether the Mayas had a symbol for a dumbass.”

Evening fell as we put together all the information we had compiled that day and planned our actions for the next. We intended to identify each and every one of the buildings. Then came night with all its upsetting animal cacophony. The same ritual followed: We smeared mouthwash on our skin, ate our dinner surrounded by a myriad mosquitoes and then took refuge as soon as we could under the frail protection of our mosquito nets.

We said good night, turned off our headlamps and night became impenetrable.

Ever since man was first man, what he most fears, without doubt, is darkness.

We were no exception.

Sweating in our hammocks, we tried to sleep while all around us, very close, came movements in the vegetation and rending yells from animals warning of impending dangers. If you listened closely you could hear, or imagine you heard, the noise of long scaly bodies slithering through the damp undergrowth of the jungle.

It is hard to sleep when you know you are defenseless against an attack that might come any moment: furtive death by a jaguar, the poisonous bite of a snake you had never even seen, or a mosquito carrying malaria or hemorrhaging dengue fever.

The jungle is the opposite of civilization. It is the other extreme of a world we believe tamed and through which we walk about with arrogance, sheltered in our absurd conviction of immunity.

The jungle is the place where we suddenly become aware that we are fragile hairless monkeys and that the tiniest bug is capable of killing us without permission or justification. It is the place where we discover the

essence of life, and the triviality of our daily worries. In the jungle you understand there is no divine justice nor complaint sheet and that at one instant you may be at the peak of your existence and at the next, absolutely dead. No violin soundtrack, nor coin to give to Charon.

The jungle, like war, is fear, pain and death. But it is also a revelation. It is ultimately life taken to the limit.



An unexpected shower had fallen around midnight, and apart from drenching all our equipment and the clothes we had hung up, it had turned the path that led to the ruins into a sticky mud trench. Professor Castillo was dragging his feet in front of me. His arms showed the spots of dozens of gnat bites, and what had previously been his favorite shirt was now a blue cotton rag that matched his unkempt beard. He looked more like a poor castaway than a respected professor of medieval history.

Eleven days had passed since Pablo, the barge skipper, had left us at the edge of the jungle. Eleven long hot days in which we had been working hard and in the worst conditions. The professor was suffering from a bout of high fever of an unknown origin, perhaps the beginning of malaria. I had been stung in my left hand by a tarantula that had hidden in my bag, leaving me with an ugly swelling and nausea for a couple of days. Cassandra, on the other hand, had adapted much better to our extended stay in this green hell. She had not suffered any mishap with the local fauna and, as her understanding of the Mayan symbology chiseled on the walls of the city improved, so did her enthusiasm.

The contrast was remarkable. While the professor and I looked like a couple of beggars after a beating, Cassie was radiant, as if she had just arrived from a spa. It was she who was pushing us to forget our discomfort and exhaustion. It was also surprising to see how she had managed to decipher most of the hieroglyphs by using that smart Mayan-English-Mayan translation program which had turned out so useful. Sitting on a fallen tree or a boulder with her laptop on her knees, tapping away at the keyboard in a frenzy, she had become a part of the Yaxchilan landscape.

In spite of our insistence, she had refused to reveal her findings. The excuse she gave was that she still had not finished her study. She would send either the professor or me to take one more photo of some particular hieroglyph, or clear some corner of a building of underbrush with the machete. Obviously, at this point we felt that Cassie had taken control of the expedition. Apart from the fact that she was the only archaeologist in the vicinity, she radiated satisfaction and optimism, and both the professor and I

needed a dose of that.

As far as I was concerned, although Cassandra assured me that she was making progress, I could see no sign of it. We had not dug any holes in that ground, knowing that the Templar treasure might be under our feet, and this helped to dampen my spirit day after day.

“We’ve been here for two weeks,” I had told her the day before, “and it seems to me we are at the same point where we were the day we arrived.”

“At the same point?”

“Yes, the same. We’re not even sure the treasure is here, and instead of making every effort to look for it, all we have is a couple of thousand photographs that aren’t leading us anywhere!

“That’s not true. I’ve learned a lot about the history of Yaxchilan and I’m almost able to interpret most of the glyphs without the help of the computer.”

“Congratulations! You’re now an expert. But let me remind you that we haven’t been risking our lives to learn how to read graffiti a thousand years old.”

“I know, all right. But if we want to find that blasted treasure, first I have to confirm the written references that say it came through here.”

“Confirm? You mean you found something?”

She gave me a serious look. “As soon as I’m sure, you’ll be the first to know.”

“When do you think you’ll be able to say definitely?”

“Look, I’m trying as hard as I can, but don’t ask me for a deadline.”

“All right. But don’t forget that we’re carrying out an illegal exploration. If the authorities find out, most likely we’ll end up in jail. Or at least be kicked out of the country.”

When we got to the Main Square we found Cassandra, who had apparently woken up much earlier than we had, scrutinizing the stone stele at the foot of the stairs that climbed up the “pyramid on the hill.” Her hair was in a ponytail, and her shirt and shorts were incredibly dirty. Despite that, she looked beautiful amid all that magnificence of architecture and vegetation. It was as though it cherished her as much as it scorned us. She was so absorbed in the contemplation of the etchings on the stone that she did not hear us coming, and it was not until we said good morning that she turned and motioned to us to come closer quickly.

“What? Another photo for the album?” I grumbled.

She ignored the irony and replied good-humoredly. “Enough photos! Come see this!”

We went closer, without much earnestness, and found ourselves facing a series of Mayan symbols like the hundreds we had already seen, framing an extravagant scene carved on the stone. There was a Mayan man clad with feathers, wearing the head of a jaguar as a hat, with his arms wide open in a clear friendly gesture to the figure in front of him: a sort of winged snake with terrible teeth. It was portrayed dropping what looked like a bright sun with eyes, nose and mouth into the open maw of another grotesque creature.

We looked at the carving for quite a while. Finally the professor put into words what I was thinking myself.

“I don’t understand anything, Ms Brooks! I don’t see what you want me to see!”

She looked at us with surprise. Then, realizing our lack of interest in riddles, she said, “Okay. I’ll explain.”

She passed her hand over the stone like a caress.

“What you see here is one of the last stone carvings ever made in this city before it was semiabandoned. After that it was really only used as a religious center by the Lacandon Indians. They still come here occasionally.”

“The same Lacandones who live in this region, in straw and mud huts?” I interrupted. “Are they the ones who built this?”

“Exactly the same ones. Well, when they made this stele, it was centuries since the death of the last king of Yaxchilan, Kinich Tatbu Craneo III.”

“With a name like that I’m not surprised he was the last of his dynasty.”

“About four hundred *tunes* later,” she continued, ignoring me, “that is, about four hundred years later, something unusual enough happened to make the Mayas commemorate it on this stele.”

She looked me in the eye and I knew she had discovered something.

“What you see here, on the left, seems to be a Mayan priest with a headdress of quetzal feathers. In front of him, on the right of the carving, the god Kukulcan is represented as a winged snake. The snake is placing a gift represented by Itzamna, god of the sun and creation, in the mouth of Ah Puch, god of the netherworld. These glyphs here explain that the god Kukulcan visited this city several times over a number of decades. The last

time he came he made a great offer to the god Ah Puch. After that he went south, never to return.”

With those last words she turned to watch our reaction, clearly expecting us to be impressed.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” said the professor, “but I’m getting all mixed up with so many gods. I still don’t understand anything.”

“Ay, excuse me! Sometimes I take it for granted that you’re as familiar with the Mayan symbols as I am. You see, the man with the feathers is, as I said before, a priest. And the snake on the right represents the most important deity of the Mayan religion, better known by his Aztec name of Quetzalcoatl.”

“Wait a minute!” said the professor. “That god I do know. Isn’t he the one they mistook the Spanish conquistadors for?”

“Exactly! According to the legend, many centuries before the Spaniards came, a bearded white-skinned god arrived by sea from the rising sun, then reigned over these lands for many years. Then one day, without any explanation or reason, he went back to where he’d come from, but he promised to return some day to lead the Mayan people.”

“Do you think it could have been a Templar?” I asked excitedly.

“No, not at all. This legend is from a much earlier time. It might have been a Phoenician or Greek navigator, exploring the limits of the world. In fact, some people think that the hero of Homer’s Odyssey was this same man, and that he was the one who inspired Homer to tell the story of his incredible journey.”

“Do you mean ...?”

“Yes, Ulysses, your namesake. So, from that moment on, all the white, bearded men that landed on Central American soil were thought to be descendants of that mythical Quetzalcoatl, who had come back to fulfill his promise.”

“And that’s what happened with the Spaniards,” said the professor.

“And who knows, maybe with the Templars as well,” I added.

“That’s my point,” said Cassandra. “As you may already know, the Mayans had an obsession with dating everything: wars, births, deaths, sacrifices and even offers. And, of course, the one shown on this stele is no exception.”

The professor and I fell silent, expectant, guessing what this could mean.

“To be exact, this stele commemorates the offer that was made by Kukulcan-Quetzalcoatl. It’s dated the eighth *Tun*, of the fourth *Katun*, of the eleventh *Baktun* of the first Long Count. Or four thousand, four hundred and twenty two years after the creation of the Mayan calendar.”

“Speak English, please,” I said.

She seemed to enjoy confusing me. “According to the Gregorian calendar, the zero year of the Mayan calendar corresponds to the year 3114 before Christ, so if we add the four thousand, four hundred and twenty-two years marked on the stele, we get ...”

“The year one thousand, three hundred and eight!” cried the professor. “One year after the Templar ships left from La Rochelle!”

Cassandra paused to take a breath before her final conclusion.

“Exactly, Professor, but that’s not all. I’ve been carefully studying possible interpretations of the carvings and translating most of the glyphs on the stele, and I’ve come to a conclusion. The sun god could represent a great offer in the form of gold. Quetzalcoatl symbolizes some white men who were here around the year 1308, and Ah Puch incarnates, according to the Mayan cosmogony, a great cavern in the form of a deep natural cistern: what here would be called a *cenote*, a deep water reservoir.”

“That means ...”

“That means that I’d bet my hide that our friends of the Temple arrived here. And that, strangely, with the blessing of the native priests, they decided to hide the Order’s treasure in a *cenote*, as an offer to a Mayan god. And, if I’m not mistaken, it should be somewhere around here.”

We had a detailed military topographic map spread out on a slab of stone which, according to Cassie, had been used for human sacrifices. We were looking for any well, cavern or deep water hole in the vicinity.

“According to this,” said the professor, “the nearest water hole is more than sixty miles away.”

Cassandra crossed her arms in annoyance. “Well, either the map isn’t detailed enough, or else this particular *cenote* hasn’t been discovered yet, because I can assure you that my analysis of the inscriptions is correct.”

“Never doubted it. But the fact that the water hole is here is just your idea, right?”

She was not very pleased with my comment. “So what do you think, then? That they kept walking through the jungle carrying several tons of gold

on their backs? And that the person who carved this stele was a compulsive liar?”

“Hey! Don’t get mad at me! We have to consider all the possibilities, that’s all.”

“Well, you can rule out the possibility that I may be wrong, because I’m not!” she said angrily.

“Calm down,” said the professor soothingly. “Let’s assume that the water hole is somewhere around here, but for some reason it doesn’t appear on the map. What could be the reason?”

We all looked at each other, but none of us said a word.

“Could it just be that it’s small, and nobody’s located it yet in the middle of the jungle?” I said. I was not very convinced by my own words.

Cassie shook her head. “Could be, but it’s unlikely. This area has been thoroughly explored and mapped for years, by archaeologists and especially by the army. Any significant finding, like a *cenote* or a chasm would certainly have been included in this map.”

“What would the army want in these parts?” I asked.

She looked at me, surprised. “Don’t you remember the Zapatista revolution of the EZLN, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation?”

“Oh, sure. A native revolt led by a Subcomandante Marcos, is that it? Of course I remember. But did the war get to this part of Chiapas?”

“It not only got here, it still is here. The guerillas were expelled from populated areas and came to shelter in the jungle. They mostly operate in the mountains, but every once in a while they come down to lowlands like these. In fact more than one archeological expedition has bumped into them.”

The professor rubbed his head, visibly worried. “And whatever happened to them?”

“Nothing. They aren’t highwaymen. They’re Mayan natives, worried about the survival of their people and their culture. They’re only trying to make sure they’re not dealing with a group of looters, then they’ll leave whoever they bump into alone.”

His face showed unease. “But from their point of view, that’s exactly what we’d be: looters.”

“Well, what we’re looking for really has nothing to do with Mayan culture. But yes ... if we come across them it might be a little difficult to make them understand.”

“It seems to me,” I interrupted, “that we’re getting away from our

subject. Up until now, we haven't met with any revolutionaries, and what we really should be doing is looking for that water hole. So let's start searching and stop worrying about what's beyond our control."

"I agree with you," said Cassie. "But unfortunately, I can't think of a reasonable explanation for the fact that the damned *cenote* isn't where it's supposed to be!"

"Could it have dried out?" asked the professor, still shaken by our previous conversation. "You say a *cenote* is a deep water reservoir. Sometimes water holes dry up or get stopped up."

Cassandra shook her head. "No, Professor. These water holes are clear water sources, but they have nothing to do with wells. It's highly unlikely that they would dry up. The water comes from big underground springs which open up huge caverns in the limestone as they flow. Sometimes the roof of these caverns may be as big as a cathedral, and when it's too close to the surface, it collapses and leaves holes that could swallow a whole house. So, no, it's not likely that one of these holes would dry out, or get clogged up."

There seemed to be no answer to the riddle. There had to be a big hole in the area, but there was nothing of the sort.

"I can only think of one other possibility," I said. "That the blasted hole was covered on purpose."

She waved her hand in dismissal. "That's impossible! For the Mayas, these water holes were the entrance to the Underworld. They were sacred places, and a great part of their religion and cosmogony centered around them. They would never have clogged one up, even if it was in a conquered city. The Mayas worshipped *cenotes* and always protected them, no matter what."

"I didn't say 'clogged,'" I said "covered." To protect it, perhaps."

"I don't understand."

"What I mean is that this city is full of temples, and you've been telling me for days that they were built either as tombs for kings or as worship centers for some particular god."

"So, what exactly are you getting at?"

"I'm getting there, but tell me something first. Have you been able to find out if any of these temples is dedicated to this water hole god?"

"His name is Ah Puch, and of course he has a temple dedicated to him." She pointed. "It's precisely this 'pyramid on the hill' right in front of

us. In fact, the name it's given in the hieroglyphs is *the temple of the water hole.*"

A crazy idea was taking shape in my mind, and the more I thought about it the less crazy it seemed to be.

"So, wouldn't the water hole be near its temple?"

Cassandra swept her arm across the square. "It should be, but it's not."

"Or maybe it is, and it's just that nobody can see it."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that I think the water hole we're looking for is right here, in the holiest and most protected place the Templars could find to hide their treasure."

I pointed at the immense mass of stone which seemed to be watching us and added, "Inside the pyramid."



“Quick!” said Cassandra. “Come here! I think I found something!”

I hurried across the dark halls of the small sanctuary at the top of the pyramid “The House of the *Cenote*” where we were investigating, until I saw Cassie’s flashlight beam shining on a section of the stone floor. I crouched beside her as the professor joined us.

“What’s up?” he asked, breathing hard.

She pointed at a worn-out slab with a strange engraving in the middle. “Look at this!”

“What is it?” I asked, intrigued by the shadows that revealed a complex drawing.

“A representation of the god Ah Puch.”

“The god of the underworld and water holes?”

“That’s the one.”

“Well,” said the professor, “considering that we’re at the top of a pyramid dedicated to him, why is it so strange that his effigy would be here?”

Cassie’s eyes had a special glint as she shone her flashlight on the stone. “What is unusual isn’t the engraving, but the material it’s been done on and where it is.”

“Be more specific.”

“If you come closer and pass your hand over the surface, you’ll notice that the texture is different. Unlike the ones used throughout the temple, this is a limestone slab. It’s more fragile but also lighter than the others, and it’s bigger. It must be more than seven feet long. Besides, it’s right in the middle of the temple, and that’s at the top of the pyramid. Interesting, isn’t it?”

“Very much so,” I said. “But logical up to a point. As the professor said, it’s his very own temple.”

She pointed upwards. “Of course,” she said, “but you’ll understand better if you shine your flashlights on the ceiling.”

Immediately, three beams of light swept the dome of the hall until they converged on the same spot, right above our heads. There, a threatening figure with horrible features, trapped in the stone for a thousand years, was watching us from several feet above.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Cassandra, “let me introduce you to Kukulkan, also known as Quetzalcoatl. Or, alternatively, the symbol in stone of the white man who came from the sea.”

The professor cleared his throat loudly, as if he could also clear his thoughts in the same way.

“You mean to say this stone slab may be the entrance to the pyramid?”

Cassandra looked at him. “I think it’s very possible. A lot of things suggest it.”

Although I was getting more and more excited, an uneasy thought was nagging at my mind.

“Listen, I don’t want to be a wet blanket, but I just thought of something that doesn’t fit. How could a water hole, which as you say is just an underground river whose roof has collapsed, possibly be right in the middle of a mountain?”

“I wouldn’t call this a mountain,” she said. “At the most it must be a hundred to a hundred and thirty feet high.”

“It wouldn’t matter, even if it were just sixty. It just doesn’t fit, an underground river and a mountain, or hill or whatever you want to call it, all by itself in the middle of a plain. In a plain, the phreatic layer is always below ground level, and as convenient as it would be for us, flowing water could never rise through the inside of a mountain to form a water hole at the top. Damned gravity would never allow it.”

Cassandra looked at me, disappointed, and a glance at the professor confirmed that he agreed with me.

“Then ... all those symbols don’t mean anything?”

“Maybe they refer to something else,” I suggested. “Maybe they’re an indication that will lead us somewhere else.”

She shook her head emphatically. “No I’m pretty sure this is the entrance to the water hole.”

The professor tried to comfort her, putting his arm around her shoulders. “My dear, the problem is that where we are there can’t be any. As Ulysses just said, a mountain can’t ...”

He stopped in mid-sentence, startled by Cassandra jumping to her feet. Without a word, she left the semidarkness of the temple and began to go first down the stairs, then the side of the hill, with long strides, to the absolute astonishment of the professor and myself. She seemed to have gone mad all of a sudden. And before I could ask her what was up, she was running back

to the camp through the mud.

She returned after a few minutes carrying a pick in one hand and a shovel in the other.

We were still at the entrance of the temple at the top of the hill, and had no idea what she was going to do. We thought she had really lost it when instead of coming back up to where we were, she stopped half way up the hill. Leaving the shovel aside, she began to hit the soil with the pick as if her life depended on it.

We finally decided to approach her and try to sooth her, although we were worried about the force which she transmitted to the pick with every blow.

“Cassie, are you okay?” I said gently when we reached her.

She looked up at me. To my surprise, her face with its surrounding mass of uncombed hair did not show the desperation I expected to find. What I saw in her eyes was the gleam of enthusiasm.

“Come on! Help me, man! Don’t just stand there staring!”

“Help you? How? Can you please tell me what on earth you’re doing?”

“What I’m doing?” she replied without stopping. “I’m helping you find the damned treasure! That’s what I’m doing!”

She’s really lost her marbles, I thought.

“Honey,” I said sweetly. “In the middle of a mountain?”

Then she stopped digging and leaned on the pick. She looked at me as if she had just found the cookie jar.

“That’s precisely what I’m not sure of.”

“What?”

“That this is a mountain.”

While the professor watched us expectantly from above, Cassie and I, drenched in sweat, dug into the side of the hill. When we were almost ready to give up, exhausted, the tip of the pick hit on stone. Half an hour later we had uncovered a tiny part of a colossal man-made structure.

“I knew it!” she yelled. “I knew I was right!”

“You’re so smart!” I said staring at the cyclopean stone step we had unearthed. “I’d never have thought.”

“That I’m so smart? Or that my pyramid was hiding beneath all this?”

I could not help smiling.

“That you’re so smart, of course. I would’ve found that buried pyramid

in no more than ten or fifteen minutes. Right, Doc?”

Ignoring our conversation, he had come near the unearthed block of stone and was fingering its surface, as if he were making sure of its reality and that it was not some by-product of the debilitating fever he was still suffering from.

“What I can’t seem to understand is how you were able to know there was a pyramid underneath. I’m very impressed, Cassie.”

She blushed and smiled broadly. “Well ... the fact is I ought to thank Sherlock Holmes, really.”

“What?”

“Because I remembered him saying: *when you discard the impossible, no matter how hard it may look, the improbable must be the answer* or something like that. But, didn’t it strike you as strange to find a mountain right in the middle of a plain like this?”

“Now that you mention it,” I said, rubbing my neck, “I did find it a bit odd. Even so, it never crossed my mind that it could really be a pyramid. It’s too big.”

“Not so much,” she said as she stared up at the temple. “With Ah Puch’s temple ... it’s not more than two hundred feet high. More or less like the ones at Tikal, although with a wider base.”

“What is clear,” I said, “is that the Maya had a lot of free time on their hands. To build this monstrosity they must’ve needed huge resources and decades of work.”

“Centuries, Ulysses, centuries. In general, the Maya built their pyramids around an inner structure.”

“I don’t get what you mean.”

“When a king built a pyramid, whether as a tomb or as a monument in honor of some god, his successor built his own right on top of the existing one. Then the next king did the same, and the next and the next, century after century. Until they made real mountains, like this one here. In fact, a short time ago, they found several pyramids, one inside the other, in perfect condition, even including the paintings that originally covered them.”

“Like Russian dolls,” I said, dropping to the grass. “There’s always one more inside the other.”

“Something like that, but on a gigantic scale.”

The professor cleared his throat. His mind seemed to have wandered elsewhere.

“Then, you think this pyramid was built like this?”

“Absolutely, Professor. Just look at the size of it.”

This time it was my turn to ask. “And, isn’t it possible that only the last “enlargement” was the one dedicated to this god of the underworld? That originally it was a tomb or something like that, I mean, and that underneath all that rubbish there isn’t any water hole at all?”

She shook her head. “No way. It’s one thing to *enlarge*, as you say, a temple that’s already built. It’s very different to change the meaning of it. That’s something the Maya would never do. “My only concern is whether after seven hundred years it may not be possible to reach the water hole.”

I stood up with renewed energy. “Well,” I said, “then, we’ll just have to find out!”

The great slab of stone with the relief of the god Ah Puch set right in the middle of the temple was meant to cover the mouth of a tunnel, and that tunnel must lead inside the huge pyramid. That much was obvious. The problem was that the slab must weigh several tons.

“How on earth are we going to lift that?” said the professor. “Did anyone think of bringing a crane?”

Cassandra was crouching, studying the edges of the slab and trying to clean them out by inserting the tip of her knife in. “I think we can take out the putty that joins it to the floor, but even so, I don’t see how we can move it either. There’s only three of us, we’re tired and we have nothing but picks and shovels. I’m sorry it’s me saying this, but I think we’re stuck.”

“What if we simply break it?” I said.

Both of them looked at me as if I had suggested burning the Mona Lisa.

“No way!” said Cassie.

“Under no circumstances!” said the professor. “We have to find a way of moving it without damaging it.”

A bit flustered, I said, “I don’t get your reasoning. On the one hand, you have no qualms about plundering an extremely valuable treasure, then on the other, you cry to high heaven when I suggest we break a simple stone slab. Really, I don’t understand either of you.”

Cassandra gave me an angry look.

“That simple slab of stone, as you say, may be more than one thousand years old. And it is an irreplaceable piece of the history of the Maya. Each stone in this city is sacred, and I’m not going to allow you to tear it to pieces just to save yourself some work!”

“Some work? Are you kidding me? That rock weighs like, like ... the world!”

And then, as soon as I had said this, the professor sprang up.

“That’s it! Move the world!” And he began to hop around in a kind of extravagant celebratory dance.

This place seemed to bring on sudden onslaughts of madness I found disconcerting. “Will you please tell us what you’re talking about, Doc?”

“Archimedes! *Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world!*”

“Of course,” said Cassie. “If we use levers and insert them under the edges, we could move the slab.” She stamped a kiss on the professor’s cheek. “*Órale*, Professor, you’re a genius!”

My enthusiasm was much diminished as I sat on the floor looking at them. “I don’t want to sound negative, but we lack the tools to do that. To lever something like this we’d need steel crowbars, not to mention a crew of strong workers. As far as I know, we have neither.”

“We could go to Santa Elena for them,” said Cassie.

“And come back here loaded with excavation tools as well as men and supplies? Don’t you think that would raise suspicions?”

“Well, then, you tell me what we should do. At least it’s a better idea than smashing an archeological find with a hammer.”

“And what makes you think I haven’t thought of an alternative?”

Now they looked at me wonderingly.

“I think I know how to lift that blasted slab. But it’ll be very hard, and I’m not sure we can manage.” I glanced at the professor and saw that although he was in good spirits, the fever had obviously robbed him of his strength.

“As far as I’m concerned,” said Cassie, “I’m willing to go on to the end. We still have supplies for four or five days, which is when the skipper returns ... and until then, I haven’t anything better to do.”

“And you, Doc? You see yourself up to it?”

He looked me up and down, very straight, and said, proudly, “What I see is that we’re wasting precious time with all this chit-chat. Enlighten us. What’s this brilliant idea of yours?”

“Bamboo?” they both asked in disbelief after I had explained my idea.

“That’s it, bamboo. In case you haven’t noticed, this place is crawling

with it.”

“But it’ll break at the first attempt,” said the professor. “You said yourself a moment ago that we’d need steel crowbars. And now you’re suggesting that we lift more than four thousand pounds of limestone with a handful of reeds?”

“Well, in fact we’ll need more than a handful, but yes, that’s the idea.”

“Have you been drinking?” asked Cassandra. There was real worry in her voice.

“Let me explain. Bamboo, though you might not think so, is the latest in construction materials. In Hong Kong, for example, they build skyscrapers hundreds of feet tall, using a framework of supports and scaffolding made of bamboo. We might find this odd but it’s only because we’re used to thinking that anything good has to be shiny, polished and ultramodern. But I can assure you that bamboo is stronger than steel in some ways and lighter than aluminum.”

“And how do you know so much about this?” asked the professor. “As far as I know, you’ve never been to Hong Kong working in construction.”

“What can I say? I’m a fan of Discovery Channel, and I once saw a very interesting documentary about it.”

Cassie looked at me skeptically. “You got all that theory about bamboo and moving the slab from a TV program?”

“Well, in a way, but I’m pretty sure it’s a good idea and that it’ll work.”

“Very well,” said the professor. “Let’s say you’re right about the properties of bamboo, but we still have a problem. There are only three of us, and as you said before, we’d need a lot more help to exert enough pressure.”

“I have the answer to that too.”

“From the cooking channel?”

“No, Cassie. I went mountain climbing once with some friends, and we had to make a Tibetan bridge.”

“A Tibetan bridge? What on earth is that?”

“It’s a bridge you make with three parallel lengths of rope. They form a “V,” you walk on the bottom rope while you hold on to the two others. You must’ve seen it in a movie.”

“Yeah, I know what you’re talking about,” said Cassie, “but I don’t see the relation between a scrawny bridge and what we want to do.”

“I’m getting there. What’s interesting is that in order to lay that bridge and to keep it firm, we had to tense the ropes to their limit. We had to exert a

force of hundreds of pounds. And there were only three of us, just like now.”

“So how did you do it?”

“By using pulleys.”

“Pulleys?” said the professor. “But we don’t have any pulleys!”

“We don’t need them. We have more than three hundred feet of good rope, some snap hooks and a whole lot of props. Believe me, we don’t need anything else.”

The evening light slid over the entrance to the temple, suffusing the still white walls inside with orange. Just as it had been doing for the past six hundred years, it brought life with its shadows to the enigmatic reliefs carved on the floor and ceiling of the hall, the work of men dead and forgotten.

Yet this was different from those other thousands of evenings. Quiet and solitude did not reign in the temple. That evening there was a chaotic tangle of fragile bamboo canes that practically filled the sanctuary. They were tied together with pieces of cord, bridles and even lianas, forming a complicated structure no one could have guessed the purpose of.

To top it all, a length of rope ran, zigzagging through the extravagant construction. The starting point was at the entrance of the temple, with the end tied to one of the picks. We had taken the handle off and wedged the flat tip of the pick under the edge of the slab that marked the border with the kingdom of the dead.

“Are you sure of what you’re doing?” asked Cassandra as she tied knots.

“Of course not!” I said as I secured a snap hook. “How many Mayan pyramids do you think I’ve raided lately?”

I finished fixing the snap hook with a piece of rope and went to her side. I had not kissed her all day.

“Let me explain it to you ...” I said in what I hoped was an inviting tone.

“Come on, Ulysses. Don’t be a jerk.”

“Yes ... I’m your jerk and you’re my jerk,” I said as I held her in my arms and searched for her earlobe.

“Ulysses ...” she protested faintly. “The professor can hear us.”

“No, he can’t.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Come on,” she laughed, “stop pawing me and tell me what I’ve been



working on since this morning.”

“All right ... Professor! You come too. Everything’s ready.”

I waited until we were together before I gave them a brief description of how our invention worked. Standing by the piece we wanted to move, I said, “Let’s see. What I intend to do is lift the slab slightly by one of its corners, using the tip of the pick as a lever. Then we’ll wedge pieces of wood to hold it and stop it from closing again. Then we’ll tie the same rope around the end of the slab that’s lifted, so that we raise it up enough to let one of us fit into the opening. It’s really very simple.”

“Do you think the three of us can do it?”

“Cassie, you have to think that each pulley multiplies our strength, and I’ve installed ten of them. That means it’ll take us a while to lift it a few inches, but we don’t need more.”

“Okay then,” said the professor. “All we have to do is try. Where shall I stand?”

“At the start is when we need most strength, so all three of us will have to pull on the rope. But when I tell you, run to place the props I’ve left prepared right there. Any other questions?”

“Only one,” said Cassie, pushing up imaginary sleeves. “What are we waiting for?”

The sun was setting behind us. We were sweating, our clothes were grubby, we had put socks on our hands so as not to get burnt with the rope, and that same rope we were holding was about to open the door onto one of the greatest mysteries of history. Obviously, we were hardly dressed for the occasion.

“On the count of three, pull once as hard as you can,” I said. “Then hold and don’t let go, and when I say so pull again. I’ll set the rhythm, all right?”

They both nodded, and after taking deep breaths (more to calm our nerves than to gather strength) we pulled as hard as we could. The first few inches would be the hardest, but if we managed that, the rest would be easy.

“Now!” I shouted, and we pulled again as if our life depended on it. I could feel my muscles tense under my shirt as if they were about to burst.

“Come on! Come on!” I yelled when I noticed the slab yielding a little. “It’s coming!”

Inch by inch the heavy stone slab began to separate from the ground under the relentless force we managed to generate. This was thanks to the pulley structure concentrated on the tip of the pick, which acted as a lever.

As soon as there was space to put the other pick in as a first prop, I told the professor to do it fast. After another strong pull, the space widened. We propped it generously until we thought we could pass another rope under the slab.

I made a clove-hitch knot around the end we were lifting, and pulling and propping again, we managed to open a space of about a foot and a half between the slab and the floor of the temple.

We secured the slab with several props and approached the black opening with awe. A concentrated smell of mold and dampness made us all take a step back.

Cassandra whispered in my ear, “I swear I’m all shaky.”

“I believe you, because so am I.”

“I don’t know what made me think of it,” said the professor, also in a whisper, unable to take his eyes off the dark hole, “but I just remembered

what happened to Howard Carter and his team after they opened Tutankhamen's tomb."

"What happened to them?" The moment I asked I regretted the question.

Cassandra gave me a side glance. "They all died within weeks. Supposedly, because of a curse put on anybody who violated the tomb."

"I see ... I suppose there's no point in asking whether there's a curse like that here, is there?"

"Well, after all, this isn't really a tomb."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Would it stop you from going in if I said there was?"

I did not have to think long.

"The fact is, it wouldn't."

"Well then, don't think about it."

The professor took his socks off his hands and snorted.

"Well, it's been a pretty tough day. Let's go to sleep. Tomorrow we'll deal with all the curses you want."

"No way!" I said. "I'm going in right now!"

"Are you kidding me? We're worn out, and besides, it's almost night!"

"I'm not asking you to go in, I'll do it alone. Remember that down there it doesn't matter whether it's day or night, it's always dark!"

"But that's madness and you know it! Cassandra, you go ahead and tell him. Perhaps he'll listen to you."

"Oh," she said to his astonishment, "I'm going in too."

"You're both crazy! Can't you wait until tomorrow?"

"No, Doc. If I don't go in now, I'll spend the night wondering about it, then tomorrow I'll be even more tired. All I'm asking you to do is to help me take down the rope so I can leave one end tied up here, sort of like Ariadne's thread. Down there it's pretty dark. It doesn't seem like the best place to get lost."

Followed by the professor's curses, Cassandra and I managed to get in through the opening and crouch on a ledge where there was barely room for both of us.

He put his head through the hole. "Is everything okay?"

"For now, yes, although it stinks of stale air," I said.

"Sure, the air conditioning must have broken down a long time ago."

"Yeah, that must be it. Okay, Doc. See you in a while."

“Please be very careful.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect him.”

The dim light that came from outside only allowed us to see each other’s eyes. I could see fear, excitement and a trace of madness in Cassandra’s pupils. They could also be a reflection of my own feelings at that moment.

“Ready?”

“No, but let’s go anyway.” She kissed me on the lips. Then, turning toward the darkness, she switched on her flashlight and illuminated what was before us.

“Oh my God!” she said as she directed the light downwards. “A stair ...”

“And you can’t see the end ...”

Starting on the ledge where we were crouched, a stone stair about three feet wide, blackened by lichens and damp, plunged down to the bottom. It looked more like a well than a real means of reaching what was below.

“We’ll have to go carefully,” I warned her. “I’ll go first, then I’ll loosen the rope and you can shine the flashlight and follow. Don’t let go of the snap hook. Okay? These steps are pretty slippery and if you take a tumble it might be your last one.”

“Get going, man! Stop fussing and go down!”

With exaggerated caution I began to descend, trying to fix my feet firmly on each step, as they were completely covered in a layer of lichens and moss. It was like trying to walk on ice while stepping on banana peels at the same time.

Step by step, we left behind the professor’s light and went deeper into the darkness. The coolness of the first minutes turned into real cold very quickly. We had not counted on this, so we were still wearing the light and sweaty clothes we had been working in. This, together with the dampness of the place, made me begin to shiver, and I heard Cassie sneeze a couple of times.

“Welcome to the underworld ...” she said in a gloomy voice. “I always wanted to say something like that!”

“Well, if this is hell, it is colder than I’d have expected.”

“I had noticed that, but I thought it was only me.”

“If we don’t reach somewhere soon, I suggest we go back up and try again tomorrow, a little better prepared.”

“Go back now? Not in a million years!”

“If we catch pneumonia it won’t do us any good.”

“All right, let’s go on for another five minutes and if we don’t see anything, we’ll go back.”

“Five minutes, no more.”

Time was almost up when Cassie’s light shone on something that was not steps.

“Do you see it?” she asked.

“Yeah, it seems we’re reaching the end.”

“The suspense is killing me. Can’t you go a little faster?”

“And risk breaking our necks, now we’re getting somewhere?”

“Okay, okay, I’m only saying ...”

“Be patient, we’re almost there.”

We went down another dozen of steps, and finally we reached a level floor.

We sat down on the last step to recover our breath. Then, hardly managing to keep our hearts in their place, we began to advance slowly along a corridor more than ten feet high. The walls were decorated with amazing scenes painted in bright colors. There were figures as tall as we were, depicted with great precision. They were carrying obsidian shields and swords and wore green, red and blue feathers together with mantles of jaguar hide or alligator heads.

“It’s ... it’s ...” stammered Cassie, hypnotized by the succession of paintings that unfolded beside her.

“... bloody awesome!”

“The whole history of Yaxchilan is told here,” she whispered, shining her flashlight everywhere. “Births, wars, pacts, defeated kings and triumphant ones, human sacrifices ... everything.” She swallowed. “We’re walking on the biggest Mayan archeological discovery in history. It’s like a dream come true.”

“What an extraordinary place. Look! There are even pictures on the ceiling.”

“I see ... Oh my ... I could stay down here for days just looking at them.”

“Me too, make no mistake, but we still have to see what’s at the end of this corridor. And if I’m not wrong,” I said shining the light to where the corridor seemed to end, “we’re about to find out.”

We were at the threshold of the tunnel and we passed through into a hall so big that our beams sweeping here and there faded into the darkness. Hundreds of feet above our heads, the walls met in a gigantic dome. Thousands of small stalactites hung from it, reflecting the flashes of our lights, so that they shone as if they were made of diamonds. The walls, as far as we could see on either side, were covered with hieroglyphs and sculptures of mythological creatures of cyclopean proportions.

"The dwellings of the gods," said Cassandra, shivering. "The Mount Olympus of the Mayas."

I knew hardly anything about either the people who had built it or what it signified, but all the same, this unbelievable cavern overwhelmed me. Partly this was because of its colossal dimensions, but equally I was certain that this was not simply a huge cave. It was more than that: a sacred place as full of significance and spirituality as the Holy Sepulcher, or Mecca.

The incredible creatures, born of the stone, that looked down on us from their elevated height as the intruders we were, seemed to watch us closely from the shadow. They might have been waiting for the right moment to punish us with their sharp claws and massive teeth for committing the blasphemy of treading on that sacred enclosure.

"This is not ... not what I expected," muttered Cassie. "I was so wrong."

"What do you mean? It's exactly where you said it would be."

"But this is no simple ceremonial water hole ... I've been in others in the Yucatán Peninsula, and I've even snorkeled in a couple of them. They were just huge wells full of ancient offerings and remains of human sacrifices. This is totally different." She was almost choking. "Never ever has anything like this been discovered, not even remotely similar. Never!"

"Well, congratulations then. You're going to be famous."

"Famous? You're kidding! No way! Discredited, you mean!"

"What are you talking about? You just said this is a unique discovery."

"A unique discovery, made illegally, without adequate staff, skipping all the necessary protocols for an archeological digging. If I tell anyone what we've found here, I'll be lucky if I don't go to prison." She snorted. "It's ironic. I make the discovery of a century, and I can't tell anybody."

I drew her to me and held her close.

"If it's any consolation," I said cheerfully, "maybe tonight you'll be an extremely rich woman."

“Well ... I guess maybe that could help me get over my disappointment. And by the way, where is the water hole? I’d forgotten all about it.”

Carefully, we moved away from the wall, walking toward what we felt was the center of the great cave deep in darkness. We left one of the lights shining as a beacon by the door we had come through. That way we wouldn’t go crazy looking for the way back.

So now we were using only one light which set the shadows swaying a few feet ahead of us. Cassandra was holding on to my arm, shivering with excitement and cold, as much as I was myself.

The floor of polished stone became damp earth. Three or four feet away from us, the ground opened suddenly like a great mouth, even darker than the darkness surrounding it. Great jaws with grotesque, sharp teeth of stone pointed at the ceiling, as if claiming their due of blood in human sacrifice.

“Oh, my god!” said Cassie, digging her nails in my arm, “it’s dreadful.”

“You don’t say! Those people certainly knew how to inspire fear.”

“They even painted the teeth white to make them more realistic. Macabre, but amazing.”

“I have the idea that you wouldn’t think that way if you’d been here seven hundred years ago.”

“You can be sure of that. Most likely whoever came down here then, was either a priest or ended up as lunch for the insatiable god of the underworld.”

Tense with excitement, we took the last steps to the edge of the abyss. In the absolute silence of the cavern, our footsteps echoed like cannonades, as we walked on the slippery mud. Our flashlights shone timidly inside the abyss. This was several feet wide, with irregular vertical walls, plunging into the earth: the throat of Ah Puch.

One more step and the beam shone back as a blue reflection from the bottom of the hole.

I stepped close to the edge, very careful not to slip, and peered into the void with Cassie still holding on to me. I flashed the light, which was shaking visibly, toward the heart of hell.

The first thing we saw was a magical dance of reflections in transparent water of the purest blue. The whole *cenote* was flooded with the light it must have craved for centuries. The dark abyss was transformed into a ghostly play of lights, reflected in each of the million drops of moisture that pearled the

walls of the well.

Dazzled, I gradually began to make out the details of the bottom. It must have been about thirty feet deep and ten feet or so beneath the level of the water. As far as I could make out, a layer of green sediments covered the floor of the hole. I recognized a white shape standing out in the bottom, and I felt my hair prickle on my scalp.

“Cassie, do you see what I see?”

“A skeleton,” she confirmed. “Water holes are usually filled with them.”

I kept on shining the light on the bottom but I had the uneasy feeling of profaning a cemetery.

Suddenly, a reddish reflection caught my attention as it appeared for a fraction of a second. When I turned the beam on to the spot I thought it came from, I recognized a familiar silhouette half buried in the mud and nearly dropped the flashlight.

“Cassandra!” I yelled, although she was close beside me. “There it is!”

“There is what?”

“Can’t you see it? Down there! By the wall!”

“Holy mother of God!” she said when she saw what I was looking at. “It’s a gold crucifix ... with a huge ruby!”

We sat on the mud at the edge of the hole, careless of the dampness and the cold, trying to quiet our galloping hearts because the blast of emotions threatened us with a stroke.

“We found it,” I said after a while. “We found the treasure of the Knights of the Temple.”

“You found it, Ulysses. I just came along.”

“Nonsense. I’d never have managed it without you.”

“That’s true,” she said proudly. “Although I guess Professor Castillo had something to do with it too.”

“The professor! I completely forgot about him! He must be worried sick!”

“Then we’d better get back up to the surface. I’m dying to tell him the news.”

Using the climbing rope, we went up quite fast. It was much easier to go up than down because with the rope to hold on to, there was practically no risk of slipping. As a result, it took us much less to reach the top of the stairs.

When we were only a few feet from the opening, we realized there was



no light above. We figured that he would have turned his light off to save the battery. Caught in the excitement of the moment we decided to surprise him by coming out stealthily from the crypt.

Cassandra, in front of me, silently slipped out of the hole. I got ready to follow. But as I stepped out into the heat of the Chiapas night, a strong beam of light hit me square in the face and blinded me momentarily.

“Damn it, Cassie! Not in the eyes!”

The answer was a loud guffaw that was strangely familiar.

I turned on my flashlight in alarm and directed it to the source. I was in for as big a surprise as the one I had had minutes before when I peered into the *cenote*.

Standing in front of me with arms akimbo and his unmistakable shark-like grin, macabre laughter still trailing from it, was the last person I would have wished to see under the circumstances.

“Hello, John,” I managed to say at last. “Don’t tell me you were just passing by.”

Professor Castillo, Cassandra and I were sitting around a folding table, in a big tent that served as a meeting hall. There was even a purring portable air conditioning system. We were being watched by a Nordic-looking big fellow with cold eyes dressed as a paramilitary. He carried a gun on one side of his belt and a threatening hunting knife on the other.

We had arrived there after a short walk along a path that headed north from the ruins, escorted by three men armed with futuristic assault rifles. Amid all the confusion of the situation, I was even more surprised when we reached a clearing in the jungle and found out that less than a mile away from the Mayan city where we had been working for days was what appeared to be a perfectly organized military camp. There were half a dozen camouflage tents and several hardened individuals patrolling, armed to the teeth. It was obvious they had been spying on us for days, waiting for us to get the hard work done before they made their appearance.

John Hutch, who was leading the way as if we were just taking a night stroll, turned to us when we arrived at the most lit up part of the camp and said with ironic courtesy, "If you'll be so kind as to follow my men to the command center, I'll be with you in just a few minutes."

Knowing that we had no choice, we followed those men to the tent. We looked at each other abjectly, not daring to comment about our discovery in the knowledge that someone might be listening.

I was angry at myself. Finally, unable to hold my tongue any longer I said, "I can't believe that they were able to set all this up, right under our noses and we never had an inkling!"

"It's hard to find something when you're not looking for it," said Cassandra.

"Besides," said the professor looking at the man at the door, "these people look like professionals. I'm sure that if we had met them before, nothing would be any different. Although I can't figure out how on earth Mr. Hutch has managed to find us."

"I can't understand it either, but I bet his call to my mother had something to do with it," I said.

“A call to your mother? What do you mean?”

“I didn’t mention it because I didn’t think it was important. But the thing is that while we were in Mali, Hutch called my home and spoke to my mother, and well ...”

“I see,” said the professor, who knew of my mother’s fondness for gossip, “but I still don’t see how he could’ve found us in the middle of the jungle in Chiapas!”

“Hutch has all the means at hand,” said Cassandra, “both human and material. We haven’t done anything to cover our traces and it must have been very easy for him to hire someone to track us down. We’ve been stupid and now we’re paying for it.”

“Hey, hey ... let’s not get melodramatic. Although I have a bad feeling about all these guns, surely we can reach an agreement with Mr. Hutch. After all he’d never have come so far if it hadn’t been for us, so if we play our cards well, we might be able to ...”

As if I had mentioned the devil, John Hutch appeared at the door, closely followed by his lieutenant Rakovijc.

“How nice, we’re all here. Did you bring the cards?”

Rakovijc gave me an icy don’t-be-a-smart-ass look and Hutch sat in front of us, ignoring my comment.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” he said in his nasal voice. “What have you found?”

“Why should we tell you?” said Cassie.

Hutch looked at the three of us calmly, relit a half-smoked cigar and sat back in his chair.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on, just in case you haven’t understood already. Right this minute, a team is exploring the inside of the pyramid, and first thing in the morning I’ll have a detailed report on my table of everything that’s in there. And, given the tremendous effort you must have made in order to move that slab, I’m sure it’s something very much worth the trouble. So right now you have two options: you either join my team as counselors in the excavation, which would mean a small part in the benefits, or if you don’t want to help, we’ll put you on a boat back to Guatemala and you’ll hear about my discovery in the newspapers.”

“*Your discovery?*” snorted Cassie. “You crook! It’s our find!”

“Well, according to the excavation permit that my attorney is securing in Mexico D.F., that’s not what the authorities will think. Hutch Marine

Explorations has the exclusive rights over any discovery made in the next three weeks, as well as the absolute ownership of any object of non-Mayan origin.”

“You’re a bastard! How many state workers did you have to bribe?”

“Don’t be cynical. You were going to do exactly the same thing. I’m just doing it legally.”

“But we’ve risked our lives to get here, and you’ve just been spying on us.”

“Remember you betrayed me first, not telling me about your findings,” he said amid a cloud of smoke. “My conscience is clean, I can assure you.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “Our agreement was limited to the search for the hull.”

“I decided to extend it. And now,” he said, getting to his feet, “I’ll leave you to meditate on my more-than-generous offer. Goran will take you to a tent so you can spend the night, and I expect your answer in the morning. Pleasant dreams!” He left puffing on his cigar.

We had spent several hours discussing his ultimatum in low voices, inside the tent they had assigned to us. Before this, we had told the professor what we had found inside the pyramid. I was obliged to cover his mouth to muffle his excited cries so that the whole camp wouldn’t hear them. Although we were losing the chance of getting hold of the treasure, he was a historian above all, and as such the confirmation of his theories filled him with joy and pride. He was unaware of the anger and disappointment that Cassie and I felt.

We weighed up our alternatives. If we refused to help, we would be completely cut off from the discovery of the century and also put ourselves in danger. Although we had no proof that Hutch was a murderer, he might well reach the conclusion that to avoid any future problems we should end up in the river as dinner for the alligators of the Usumacinta.

We finally came to a unanimous decision, and around three in the morning we collapsed in our camp beds. Here at last we gave in to all the emotions and exhaustion accumulated during that day.

“Well? What have you decided?” said Hutch, standing by the table, which was covered with diagrams and photographs.

They had woken us up at dawn. I was still half asleep when a blond gorilla of a man led us to the tent that served as command center.

“I want the names of Cassandra and Professor Castillo to appear first in

any article or statement made about the ownership of the discovery,” I said, trying to speak firmly, “and we claim a part of whatever we find, as well as a percentage of the profits.”

“You are in no position to claim anything,” said Hutch drily. “In fact you’re tempting me to put you in a boat and send you downriver.”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“And what’s to stop me from doing that?” he asked reluctantly. “Here I have the full report from my men. Complete with images and graphics of the crypt in the water hole, and even a close-up of a gold cross with a ruby set in it. Most likely, right now, I have more information about this place than you do, so I don’t see why I should accept your demands if I don’t really need you.”

“You might be right about that. But I would take into account the fact that things might not be so simple.”

The treasure hunter was getting impatient, and this could be good or bad.

“What the hell do you mean?”

“Well, I mean that finding one gold cross, however valuable it might be, doesn’t necessarily mean that the whole treasure is in that water hole.” I was nervous, speaking as slowly as I could to hide my bluffing. “If the Templars decided to split their treasure, hiding it in more than one place in this city, you’ll need our help to find it.”

“That would be debatable,” he said with a dismissive gesture. “I have a team of very able men and the best search gadgets that money can buy, and there are even more technicians on their way here right now. I really don’t think I need you at all.”

“Oh sure! Dig up the whole city, tear it all down, don’t leave a stone unturned, a fantastic plan! And if you happen to find a Mayan hieroglyph that turns out to be a capital clue, you can always ask one of your g-men to translate it for you, right? And if you still can’t find it, you just go ahead and blow it all up, and that’s that.”

Hutch was silent, thinking over my words and how much truth there might be in them. It was obvious that after reading the optimistic report on his table he had decided he did not need us. And backing up on his decision was not something he liked.

Finally he said, “All right. Your names will appear in a prominent place in any mention made of the project, but you’ll join the exploration team with

the same payment as the rest, neither more nor less. And I warn you, if I have the tiniest suspicion that you're hiding information or trying to rob me, I'll leave you to Goran and his friends so they can do whatever they want with you. Have I made myself clear?"

I nodded and a shiver ran down my spine at the sadistic grin I caught on Rakovijc's face.

During the morning, asking here and there, we had found out that the six armed men were mercenaries or, as someone had euphemistically called them: specialists in security. They turned out to be ex-commandos of South African special forces who had found a better-paid job offering their services to companies like Tactical Solutions Inc. This was the company that employed them and which Hutch had hired for reasons we didn't fully understand.

We spent nearly the whole morning picking up our small camp and moving to Hutch's. At noon we approached the main square, in front of the pyramid where Hutch had told us to meet him.

When we arrived he was talking to Rakovijc while the latter pointed at different parts of the city. They were both looking around them as if studying the land.

We kept our distance, ignoring their conversation. After jotting some notes down, Rakovijc left in the direction of the camp. Hutch took notice of our presence and came to us looking surprisingly good-humored.

"Everything is going according to plan. I just spoke to my attorney by satellite phone and he's confirmed that the excavation permits are signed and sealed."

"How much did the bribe cost you?" asked Cassandra sarcastically. "You must have gone to the top, because this time it's not just a question of diving in search of an unlikely treasure. This is a valuable archeological site. And knowing you, it'll probably be irreversibly damaged."

"I always try to be as careful as possible, Ms Brooks," he said with unusual patience, "but you know as well as I do, because you've done it yourself, that you cannot make an omelet without breaking the eggs first."

The reference to her time working for him was foul play and left Cassie sullen.

"What I'd like to know," I said before the conversation took a turn for the worse, "is how long you've been spying on us and what those

mercenaries are doing here. We've been here quite a while and we haven't encountered any trouble. In fact, until yesterday we hadn't seen a soul."

"We arrived three days ago. Regarding your second question: any precaution counts, even more in the case of a treasure worth more than a million dollars. A risk capital group has entrusted Hutch Marine Explorations with more than thirty million dollars for this operation, and I intend to take all the necessary measures in order to succeed."

"Thirty million?" I said with disbelief. "What have you invested it in? Have you bought all of Yaxchilan?"

"I could, you know? But instead, I have acquired the best land prospecting equipment and hired the best men to carry out the mission in the time allotted."

Cassie looked around. "And where are they, if I may ask? You surely don't mean those armed gorillas, do you?"

"No, Ms Brooks. The team and the necessary staff still have to arrive."

"And how many days will that be?" asked the professor.

"Days? None! In fact they're almost here. Oh, yes ..." he said, pausing to listen, "I think they're here already."

Instinctively, the professor, Cassie and I looked toward the river, trying to see some kind of boat appearing round the bend. But we soon realized that the dull buzzing Hutch had heard was not coming from the river but from further in the jungle.

The rumor turned progressively into a deep rumble. When the noise began to be overwhelming, the tops of the trees that marked the edge of the jungle began to bow under an invisible weight. Suddenly, like monstrous insects out of a nightmare, three huge double-rotor Chinook cargo helicopters, with camouflage paint and the Mexican flag standing out on their fronts, made their dramatic entrance. They touched the tips of the trees with their landing gear and stopped right over the main square, a few feet from where we were standing. They caused a tremendous wind which blew dust, leaves and branches all over with the strength of six small hurricanes.

The following hours were full of frenetic activity. Unloading the helicopters was only one part of it. Even though about twenty technicians and mercenaries had come on the choppers, the material to be unloaded was huge and, some of it, quite sensitive. If that was not enough, the ingenious workers erected a command post of prefabricated planks right at the foot of the

pyramid. Before evening this already had a running water system, air conditioning and electronic support that would be the envy of many universities. The electricity was provided by an impressive Powertech Inc. diesel generator. This was powered by a two thousand cubic inch Cummins engine with twelve turbo-fed cylinders which provided five thousand kilowatts, incredibly quietly. This was enough energy to supply a whole village.

Around the control center they built some smaller sheds to keep tools, supplies and the armory, all of them guarded by mercenaries. The miracle of erecting all this in just a few hours was the responsibility of Extreme Engineering, a company devoted to doing civil work in unusual places or situations, as I later found out. They would also be in charge of pulling out the treasure from the jaws of the water hole. Leading the team was a quiet and taciturn mining engineer called David Carter, and with him a jovial geologist called Michael Benedict. Apart from all the technicians and mercenaries, two more men who we had met while on the *Midas* had arrived with the helicopters: introverted Dr. Francis Dyer, with whom I had never even exchanged a word while we were on board, and Nat Duncan, mechanic, electrician and in general trusted fixer of everything on the ship. It was he who now was in charge of making sure everything worked perfectly to Hutch's orders.

At sundown, Hutch sent us back to the camp. Right then, he said, we were not necessary and so we should rest as the following day would be very long. We were practically the only ones as the technicians continued working non-stop. In the meantime they were beginning to lay cables from the generator to the top of the pyramid.

Very early the following morning we headed to the command center where the "prospecting team" was waiting for us. To our surprise, it consisted only of Benedict, the geologist, with his extravagant cowboy hat. With the three of us the team had grown to four times its size.

"Call me Mike," he said cordially when we introduced ourselves. "And all this about a "prospecting team" sounds a little too pompous for what we really have to do."

"And what is our job?" asked Cassie.

"For the moment, let's take a stroll inside the pyramid."

"Wow, I see we hooked up with the right team," I muttered.



The Texan laughed and gave my back a slap that almost made me fall on my face.

"I said *for the moment*. As soon as we've done a preliminary reconnaissance, I'll be up to my ears in work and I'll need all the help you can give me. Have you ever used a stratigraphic detector? Or a ground radar?"

Benedict studied our expressions, deducing that we had no idea what he was talking about.

"I can drive," I said raising my hand.

Before I could avoid it, another slap drove all the air out of my lungs. I decided it was no good joking with this man.

"Don't worry, I'll show you how they work and the guide lines we have to find. In a couple of hours I'm sure you'll manage them as well as I can myself."

Once he had said this we took a flashlight each from the tool room and headed to the temple at the top of the pyramid.

Parallel to the stair that went up the false hill, there was a line of several cables climbing up to the entrance of the temple. To our astonishment, not only the bamboo structure that had cost us so much to put up had been taken down, but the stone slab that had covered the entrance to the hole had disappeared as if it had never been there.

Just when we were nearing the underground mouth, David Carter came out of it, like a pale rabbit coming out of its hole. He nodded briefly, and once outside he took out an old pipe and proceeded to fill it and try to light it with an old Zippo while he studied the three people he did not know.

Once he had his pipe going he said, "So it was you who put up all this mess of canes and rope ..."

"Well, you know ..." I said, annoyed at the way he said "mess." "We were getting bored, here in the jungle and we thought it'd be fun."

"Don't misunderstand me," he said, apologetically, "I thought it was very smart. I was sorry to have to dismantle it."

"It doesn't look it, seeing how fast you took it down."

"We had no choice. We had to put in the hydraulic jacks to remove the slab; it was in our way."

"By the way," said Cassie, "where have you put it? I don't see the slab anywhere."

"We've taken it down. We decided to use it as a counterweight for

elevator 1.”

“An elevator? What for?” I asked.

“To bring up all the equipment, of course. You didn’t think we were going to use mules, did you? We have several tons of material to take down to the water hole, not to mention what we have to take out.”

“I see you’re not worried about expenses,” said the professor.

This time it was Mike, at my side, who said, “We do have an almost limitless budget and our priority is to do the job as quickly and efficiently as possible. So logically we’re using all the means at hand.”

“Yes, I see,” he said. “It’s only that where we come from things are usually done in a sloppier way.”

“It’s usually more expensive in the long run that way.”

“Absolutely, but bad habits die hard, particularly if they are tolerated as *cultural characteristics*,” said the professor.

To prevent the conversation from straying, I interrupted them. “What have you put up here? Do these cables going into the tunnel mean there’s light down there, now?”

Carter looked at me, surprised that I should ask about something so obvious.

“Of course. That’s the first thing we did. We’re now beginning to cable an inside communication system, and putting down rails for elevator 2. That’s the one that goes to the crypt.”

I was astonished at the speed at which they were working and how ambitious the project seemed. I would have liked to ask the engineer some more things, but he took his leave politely, saying he had a lot of work to do.

Without wasting any more time we went to the opening, which was now surrounded by a yellow plastic barrier with intermittent stroboscopic lights. We began the same descent we had made twenty-four hours before.

At first we went cautiously, but dozens of small low intensity bulbs had been installed along the stairwell the night before (which eliminated part of the mystery), and abrasive sand had been spread on the slippery steps. This eliminated the risk of a fall.

In far less time than it had taken Cassie and me the day before, we got to the bottom of the stair and the beginning of the corridor where the paintings were. We had to drag the professor out of it, whereas Mike barely paid any attention to the now brightly illuminated magnificence. Even for a layman like me it was an amazing spectacle to see how all those pictures and

stories spoke of wars, sacrifices and kings dead for hundreds or thousands of years.

When we reached the threshold that separated the corridor from the great cavern, we let the professor go first before we went in ourselves.

The technicians of Extreme Engineering had put up lights here too, but this was not a case where a few would have been enough. The whole perimeter of the cave had been lined with potent thousand-watt spotlights set up on tripods, and these lit up the place as never before. Not even those who had built it centuries before could have seen it like this, with the powerful dome of the roof more than a hundred feet over their heads, and the twelve gigantic figures with inhuman features whose shadows made them even scarier than their ancestors could ever have imagined.

The size of the cavity with the pyramid rising above it was simply colossal, and I could not help thinking about the powerful impression it would have made on those who had the misfortune to look upon it before being laid down for sacrifice. The terror of their imminent death would have been added to that of realizing that their immortal soul was in the hands of such powerful and merciless gods.

But what caught the attention of the four of us was the water hole itself. It was also lit up from inside, and shone with a spectral bluish sheen that suited the place. It was like the open jaws of an evil being who challenged, with its stone teeth, anyone who dared to walk into its guts and take away what belonged to it and the spirits of the dead.

To our misfortune, we still did not understand that we were indeed standing in front of Ah Puch, the Mayan god of death, who after centuries of hunger for human lives would make up for it with those who meant to violate his domains.

After taking a number of photos and measurements of both the cavern and water hole, we went back to the command center. This was for a joint briefing and to establish the working plan for the following day.

Hutch was outside, patiently waiting for everyone to arrive. When we had all gathered there, at the agreed time, he cleared his throat and climbed onto a box. From up there he addressed us with a studied voice, just as he had done a while before on the deck of the *Midas*.

Raising his voice above the general murmur he began. "First of all, I want to thank you all for being here. I know that for some, the time between being in their beds with their wives and sitting on a plane to Central America was less than two hours, but you'll thank me later on." They all laughed. "Although all of you will be very well paid, I have to thank you for your trust in our project and for being here, in this jungle, one step away from rewriting the history books."

He paused and looked at his audience with satisfaction, then thrust his jaw forward and went on.

"In recognition of this, after reaching an agreement with our investors, I'm glad to announce that if we conclude our mission within the appointed time given, one per cent of the profits of the operation will be distributed among all you present here!"

All the staff broke into hurrahs and applause as they tried to calculate the thirtieth part of one per cent of ten thousand million dollars.

Without doubt, Hutch knew how to motivate his workers.

He tried to contain the wave of enthusiasm with a gesture. "In exchange, I would ask of you to give your best, because to achieve this ambitious aim of ours we have to work at a hundred and ten per cent. We only have a few days to complete the job, but I have no doubt that we'll do it no matter how many problems might arise. I trust you won't disappoint me."

Once more, applause and appreciative whistling flooded the silence of that lost city. If it had been a football stadium Hutch would have been carried out in triumph through the main door.

In contrast with all this excitement of mercenaries, technicians and

scientists, the three of us were sitting at the back, commiserating on the fact that we had been relegated to the second place in a race we had not even known was taking place.

The rest of the day was devoted to learning the basic functioning of some hi-tech gadgets whose names I could not even pronounce. Mike needed help in elaborating a stratigraphic map of the cavern. The aim of this was to know exactly what kind of rock the engineers would have to deal with, as well as the tributaries and underground drains that carried the water coming in and out of the water hole. Mike explained that although the water appeared still it could not really be, otherwise it would be filled with algae and bacteria and would not be as absolutely crystal clear as we had found it.

We were testing equipment and going over the work ahead of us well into the night, until the geologist, finally satisfied, allowed us to go back to the camp. A camp that had quadrupled its size in just twenty-four hours, with showers, latrines and even a kitchen which seemed to have sprouted by magic. All these changes made me think of being inside a fairy tale where industrious elves had been working busily and invisibly.

These people did their jobs very well, and very fast.

The night was calm, and thanks to the professor, who offered to go for a stroll under the moon, Cassie and I were able to enjoy a little privacy in our tent. We had not made love in days, and the disappointment of seeing our expectations thwarted was forgotten as we kissed slowly. I rediscovered how soft the skin of the woman I had fallen in love with was as we explored under each other's clothes and let our bodies melt into one. What was really important, I realized, was the fact that we were alive and that we loved each other.

That night of passion and reasserting our love must have had a cathartic effect on me: I slept like a baby for the first time in two weeks and woke up with renewed energy.

At eight in the morning, after visiting the kitchen tent to gather a supply of peanut butter and jam sandwiches, we headed to the command center in the main square. Here we found Mike waiting for us in his cowboy hat.

"Good morning," he said touching the brim of his hat. "Did you sleep well?"

The professor winked at me. "Some better than others ..."

I must have looked as if I were in a daze, because all at once Mike

realized what he meant.

“Oh, good!” He also winked. “I just hope you guys saved some energy, because it’s going to be a tough day.”

We carried the electronic equipment to the base of the pyramid, where I discovered that “the elves” had been at work again. Where the day before there had only been a bare hillside, two parallel bright aluminum rails now ascended from ground level to the temple at the top. A futuristic-looking mine wagon was waiting at the bottom.

“Carter said he was going to build something like this,” I commented admiringly, “but I never thought he could accomplish it in just one night.”

“Yes, they’re fast,” said Mike. Obviously, the geologist had worked with them before and was not surprised by their efficiency.

Cassie pointed at the wagon with distrust. “Do we have to ride on that?”

“No, Ms Brooks, *that* is only for cargo. Put the instruments in it and we’ll walk up.”

Once we got to the top, we pressed a small switch, and the wagon climbed the hill silently, pulled by a thin steel cable.

We gathered the equipment and went down the stone stair. We noticed as we went that more aluminum rails had been put along it as well. Most likely the following day there would be a small scale version of the wagon we had just used.

When we arrived at the cavern we found several technicians installing a sophisticated crane on the very edge of the *cenote*, as well as five complete diving suits laid on the floor on top of a blue plastic sheet.

“What’s all this for?” I asked out of curiosity.

“I have no idea,” said the geologist, “but in any case, it’s none of our business. Let’s just do our job.”

We began to assemble the various instruments following Mike’s instructions, then we interconnected them via a small laptop. The screen was divided into several windows which showed a succession of incomprehensible graphics being loaded in the hard drive. Five hours later we had taken readings of the entire cavern floor. We left the measuring instruments there, and headed up to the exit.

“Now, I’ll load all the information we’ve gathered into the central computer,” explained Mike as we walked up the stair, “and thanks to a complex program, which by the way I helped design myself, we’ll get a

three-dimensional map of the cave floor.”

“It’s like magic,” said the professor. “How does it work?”

“It’s not easy to explain, but basically we’ve been bombing the terrain with low frequency electromagnetic waves and infrared. This way we can manage to see through many feet of rock and earth below our feet, regardless of its density.” He took off his hat and scratched his head. “You’re right, it’s like magic.”

Half an hour later, in the semidarkness of the computer room at the base, each with a soda in hand, we were watching the main screen as it formed, layer by layer, a colorful depiction of the cavern floor down to a depth of fifty feet. In a few minutes the computer had finished the task, and Mike moved the mouse to make the image rotate on its three axes. Then he printed the cross-sections he thought were most revealing.

We were in the middle of this when Hutch appeared at the door. Without greeting anybody he took a seat beside the geologist.

“Do you have the readings?”

“All of them, and I just finished analyzing them,” said Mike.

“And?”

“Well, as I thought, the whole ground is basically limestone, and there are no important fissures in the rock. That means you can go ahead and seal the channels without fear of landslides.”

“How many are there?” asked Hutch.

“Two. One in, and one out.”

“Excuse me for interrupting,” I said, “but what’s all this about sealing? What channels are you talking about?”

Mike turned around in his chair. “The channels are the ways the water comes in and goes out of the hole.” He put his finger on the screen. “It’s these two branches that leave in opposite directions, do you see? They’re about nine feet under the water level, and we’re going to seal them with plastic explosives.”

“What for?” I asked again.

“What for? Well, to block the passage of the water, of course. Drain it, and once it’s dry, we can take the treasure out easily.”

“And if the channels aren’t perfectly sealed? I find it hard to believe that no water will come in.”

Mike shook his head.

“That won’t be a problem. Carter, the engineer, could give you more details, but we have a pump that can extract three thousand five hundred and thirty cubic feet of water per minute. Even allowing for leaks, the well will be virtually dry.”

Cassandra was looking at the strange image on the screen, something like an inverted thick tree with two perpendicular branches growing in opposite directions. She asked the question that was also forming in my mind.

“Isn’t this water hole too symmetrical?”

“You’re right, Ms Brooks, I’d noticed that,” replied Mike. “It’s an extraordinary chasm, perfectly round. It almost looks man-made.”

“Are you sure it isn’t?” asked Hutch in a worried tone.

“It’s unlikely but, what would be the difference?”

“Traps,” he said seriously. “If someone built it, they might have set up traps.”

“Set up almost a thousand years ago?” said Cassie. “Don’t be paranoid. This isn’t Viet Nam. The Mayas didn’t set traps in their sacred places; that only happens in movies.”

Hutch turned to her with a malicious grin.

“I’m glad you’re so sure of that, Ms Brooks, because you two,” he nodded at me, “will be the first to go down.”

We were due to go down into the hole the next morning, so Cassandra spent the afternoon studying the paintings in the corridor that led to the cavern. She asked the professor and me to go with her.

I took her laptop with the translation program and we went down into the pyramid for the second time that day.

“I thought you asked me to join you for my charisma and sense of humor,” I grunted, “not as a porter.”

“Of course I didn’t ask you to come just for that. You could also come in handy in case there are bugs in the cave. Or when there’s some heavy lifting to be done.”

“Let’s face it,” said the professor, “we’re only cheap labor for women. And what’s worse, we love it.”

“It’s all the fault of this blasted testosterone ...”

“Well, I like it,” whispered Cassie behind me. “Will you let me enjoy some of it tonight?”



"I can hardly wait."

"Ulysses, you're losing the little dignity you had left," said the professor.

"You're just jealous."

He chuckled. "Well, yes, no point in denying it."

As he was in front of me I slapped him on the shoulder.

"Come on, Doc, cheer up, maybe we'll find a mummy your age in the cavern, with an offering of Viagra."

Perhaps it was our good mood, but the descent seemed shorter this time. Before I realized, I was already at the bottom of the stair, walking in the "art gallery," as we had agreed to call it.

It was the fourth time I had been in it, and each time I found new symbols and images there. I was struck by how subtly those artists had emphasized the individuality of the various attitudes and actions of figures which were apparently so similar. Around each character or scene, was a series of hieroglyphs which described and dated the events like a pre-Columbian footnote. In that wide passage about seventy feet long, I counted at least thirty scenes distributed on both walls and the ceiling. It was on the ceiling that I was shining my flashlight with curiosity. In spite of the soft electric light, details more than ten feet above us were difficult to appreciate.

Cassie and the professor were looking closely at a scene in which a priest in a spectacular headdress of macaw feathers cut out the heart of a warrior dressed in a leopard skin and threw it into the jaws of Ah Puch. Meanwhile, I kept running my flashlight along the passages in the ceiling with little hope of understanding their meaning but seduced by the strength those figures communicated. Anyway, after an hour walking up and down the corridor I began to feel saturated with all those feathered kings, sacrifices and executions. I was considering going back to my comfortable camp bed to catch up on the sleep I had missed the night before, when, for no obvious reason, my attention was caught by a small illustration just over the threshold that led to the main cavern.

I studied it carefully, trying to decide what made the scene so remarkable. An evil-faced snake decorated with green feathers was depicted beside some kind of carriage loaded with what looked like a stone coffer or something similar. Surely it's nothing, I thought, but I'll take a photo anyway.

At that moment, the professor came to my side and asked me what I

was looking at so intently.

“Nothing, just a painting that caught my attention. I thought I’d take a picture of it.”

“Let me see,” he said shining his flashlight on the scene. “Oh yes, it looks like an image of a god. Funny that it should appear beside a ... a...? Oh my God! Ms Brooks, come here, quick!”

She came running and directed her light to the same spot. She choked back a cry of surprise and took a step back so as not to fall from the shock.

“It’s impossible,” she whispered, “unless ...”

I was baffled by this. “Can you please tell me what’s going on?”

Without taking her eyes off the painting, Cassie said, “What we can clearly see is the god Quetzalcoatl, standing by what looks like a wooden cart. That’s what’s going on.”

“Yeah, I can see that. So?”

“So, the wheel wasn’t supposed to appear in America until the arrival of the Spaniards. Ulysses, the Mayas didn’t know the use of the wheel.”

The incredible engraving turned out to be the last in a series, painted on the ceiling that began at one end of the passage and ended at the other. According to the inscriptions that Cassie was interpreting, they told the story of how the sons of the god Quetzalcoatl had arrived at the city of Yaxchilan by following the river, many times in the course of several short cycles. The last time they had come, they had presented themselves to the priests and asked for their help. Then they had made an offering of gold and precious stones to the god Ah Puch, the biggest offering ever seen in these lands. After that, the white bearded gods, symbolized as usual by figures of Quetzalcoatl, left toward a place in the mountains to the south called The City of the Temple. They never returned. They took with them an exceptional jade carving representing a feathered snake, offered by the priests as a token of their recognition, together with a mysterious stone coffer. According to those sons of Quetzalcoatl, this contained a sacred treasure.

The professor was spellbound, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

“It’s undoubtedly the account of the Templars’ visit to this place. Their arrival, the offer to the *cenote* and their final departure. It all points in the same direction, and if the interpretation we’re making is correct, I have no doubt that all the riches of the Temple lie in the bottom of that water hole.” He added pointing at the blue reflection from beyond the corridor.

“It makes sense to have left the treasure here. I imagine it must’ve

seemed like a good hiding place, safe from the natives who feared the anger of their gods and very far from the claws of the Pope and the King of France. Besides, I don't think they wanted to go on dragging tons of gold and jewels through the jungle." I turned to Cassie. "What do you think?" I asked, hugging her from behind. "You're very quiet."

"Uh huh, that part is very clear," she said. "It's just that I'm intrigued to know what they meant by all that about a "sacred treasure." I'd like to know what they were carrying in that stone coffer."

"I don't think it's really relevant," said the professor. "Probably books or manuscripts they couldn't throw into the hole because the water would destroy them. And the pompous way of referring to it is surely because they thought the white bearded men were gods. So that whatever they were carrying in that coffer would be by definition a "sacred treasure."

Cassie considered the professor's reasoning.

"You're probably right but ... oh, I don't know, it's a loose thread I would've liked to see tied up."

With the images from the corridor stored in the camera's memory, we went back to the surface to find that it was already night. We had something to eat and went to sleep early, thinking the following day would be just as tough.

What we could not imagine was that apart from being tough, it would also be one of the most tragic days in my life. A long and violent day.

Like a disturbing omen, the roaring of the howler monkeys woke me up with the first rays of light filtering through the canopy of the jungle.

There was no sense in lying there, studying the folds of the tent ceiling, so I decided to get dressed and go out to watch the sunrise from somewhere high in the ruined city. And what better place than the temple that crowned the pyramid I was getting to know so well?

Dawn was rising over the treetops when I reached the top. The sun illuminated the world, inflamed and powerful, vividly restoring the colors of that amazing corner of the Mexican jungle.

It occurred to me that one thousand years ago, a priest dressed in feathers and animal skins might have been exactly in that same spot, welcoming the rising sun in the same way I was doing now. He might have been equally impressed with the vision of clouds like the ones I was seeing at that moment colored in blood red. And perhaps, that priest could have warned me of the coming doom foreshadowed in those clouds.

When I went back to the camp, I caught up with Cassie and the professor having breakfast. I sat down with them and shared some freshly made rolls and butter.

“Morning!” I said.

“Where were you?” asked Cassandra reproachfully. “We were getting worried.”

I spread butter on a roll. “Hanging around, greeting the sun god.”

“Well, you’d better hurry with the butter god, because we’re going in the water in two hours and we still have to check the gear.”

As soon as we finished our breakfast, we made our way to the pyramid. When we reached the edge of the underground stair we saw the second wagon had already been installed on the rails that disappeared into the depths of the temple. This wagon was much smaller than the one that climbed the man-made hill, little more than a section of an aluminum ladder with four little wheels attached to it.

“What on earth is that?” asked the professor.

A technician was giving the last touches to a switch. “We call it the

death sleigh,” he said, amused. “But don’t worry, up to now it hasn’t lived up to its name.”

“Up to now?” I asked. “How many people have used it?”

“Nobody has!” he said, laughing at his own joke.

We did not think it was so funny, but we had no choice but to sit in the peculiar wagon that looked more like something from a fun-fair attraction, only without the safety bar, and much more fragile looking.

At our sign the man started the machine and we went down for the umpteenth time, reaching the “art gallery” in less than two minutes.

When we got to the cavern we found Hutch and Rakovijc already there. Hutch was checking the diving equipment and making sure the bottles were full while Rakovijc was handling some small packets. When I got close I saw they were cartridges of plastic explosive with *Semtex* inscribed on the wrapping.

“Wait a minute,” I said to Hutch. “You’re not planning on Cassandra and me placing the explosives in the hole, are you?”

He looked at me arrogantly.

“Do you think I’d let you handle explosives so close to *my* treasure? That job can only be done by an expert like Rakovijc.”

“Then, what exactly is the purpose of sending us down?” asked Cassie.

“To make a visual inspection of the water hole and the two underwater channels and to take photos using the underwater camera. Then we can decide exactly where to put the charges. Can you do it?”

The offensive tone had become disagreeably common in practically all our conversations.

“You forgot to say, *check for traps*,” I added.

“Of course, and if you find one, please, fall in it.”

“For you, any time.”

Like any diver who appreciates life, I rechecked the equipment we would need for the immersion. Although it would be brief and not too deep, we would have to swim into the channels, at least for a few yards, and any malfunction in the regulator or the bottles could be fatal.

Someone had installed an aluminum ladder that sank a few feet into the clear water of the hole. I was checking its stability when the echo of a thunder bolt reached us from the surface.

“How weird,” I said, nonchalantly, “I didn’t notice any storm clouds as we were coming over.”

A distant uproar made the air reverberate, and this time I thought I could feel a light tremor under my feet.

Then, the intercom in the cavern crackled and an urgent voice was heard through the loudspeaker.

“Mr. Hutch! We’re under attack!”

We were frozen to the spot. Hutch and Rakovijc on the other hand reacted immediately, giving me the feeling that this was something not totally unexpected.

They dropped what they were doing and ran to the exit passage and the elevator.

“Wait a minute!” I cried the moment I came out of my stupor, as they were leaving the cavern. “I’m coming with you!”

“No!” shouted Cassie.

Hutch stopped for a moment. “Do you have any military training?”

“Some years ago I did my military service, which used to be compulsory in Spain. I suppose I remember some things.”

“All right. Come with us.” He said not very convinced.

“Ulysses!” called the professor, as I ran after the two men. “It’s not our war! Whoever is attacking, it’s against them, not us!”

Already at the threshold of the cavern, I turned for the last time.

“Do you really believe, Doc, that if they get down here you’ll be able to persuade them that you’re *us* and not *them*?”

Without waiting for a reply I ran along the passage to the elevator wagon. Behind me I knew I was leaving the woman I loved and my father’s old friend. I had no way of knowing whether I would be seeing them again.

We went up at the maximum speed the elevator could make, praying that the electric supply would not get cut off before we reached the surface. While I squirmed in my little seat I could feel the adrenalin surging through my whole body, with a heart rate of two hundred beats. It was pumping blood to my temples so strongly that I thought my head would burst. We were going up backwards, and we kept looking over our shoulders, fearing that any moment an armed man might appear at the top. He would have had us at his mercy in such a vulnerable position.

With a bump the wagon reached the top. Without wasting a moment, Rakovijc jumped out of it with his Sig Sauer in his hand. After checking both sides he ran out and called Hutch and me to follow him.

It was far from what I had been expecting. Instead of a bloody war

field, from our privileged position at the entrance of the temple I could barely see anybody. We could just make out a couple of the mercenaries hired by Hutch, crouching behind some trees. They were firing short rounds against an invisible enemy apparently hiding in the depth of the jungle. The air vibrated with the constant rounds of the weapons to right and left of our position. Only the traces of smoke revealed the location of the attackers, and we still did not know who these were.

“Rakovijc to security team!” roared the ex-soldier on his radio.  
“Rakovijc, to security team! Report on the situation!”

A breaking voice answered immediately.

“Kruger, here! The situation is extremely hostile! They’re trying to surround us from north and west!”

“Do you know who’s attacking us?”

“Negative, sir! I couldn’t identify the attackers but I thought I saw some of them wearing red scarves round their necks.”

“Zapatista guerilla bands.” He spat in disgust.

Rakovijc held the radio so hard his knuckles went white.

“Have we sustained any casualties?”

“Three civilians and two of my men have died.”

“Can you hold them back?”

The answer took a few minutes this time. When it came it had a resigned tone.

“I don’t think so. They’ve taken us by surprise from high positions and it would be very difficult to overcome them.”

Hutch spoke into his radio.

“Kruger! This is John Hutch! You must resist at any cost! Do you understand? At any cost!”

“We’ll do what we can, sir. But I suggest we fall back to the pyramid, where you are.”

“And leave millions of dollars worth of equipment unprotected so they can be plundered?”

“Sir ...” said the voice, “I think at this moment being robbed should be the least of your concerns.”

Hutch gave Rakovijc a questioning look and the man nodded.

“Okay, Kruger,” he said reluctantly. “Regroup your men around the temple, then send all the civilians over here.”

As he finished speaking, a tremendous blast hit my eardrum. A huge

ball of fire exploded into brilliant light over one side of the square in front of us. It nearly reached the height of the pyramid itself. At the same time a violent shock wave brutally threw us against the walls of the temple.

“Jesus Christ!” shouted someone through the radio. “They’ve blown up the fuel drums!”

I tried to get up, stunned and unbelieving, and saw that where the generator and the fuel drums had been there was now a huge fire, with black smoke rising from it.

I immediately realized that Cassie and the professor would have no light, and they would be alone in the darkness of the cavern. What had seemed most sensible minutes before seemed a lot less so now. The situation above might be complicated, but at least it would give them more chance than staying below, in total darkness, like rabbits in a hole.

I was thinking about my friends’ situation when Rakovijc’s voice reached me as if he were very far away. The fact was the explosion had left me half deaf.

“We have to get to the arsenal!” he was shouting. “We’re going to need all the weapons and ammo to resist the attack!”

“We also have to get to the command center!” shouted Hutch. “The satellite phone is there! We can call the Mexican Army for help!”

“Then let’s make up two teams!” Rakovijc shouted over the ever closer shots, and grabbing Hutch by the shirt he added, “You come with me, we’ll get that fucking phone.” He then turned to me with a pointed finger. “You go to the arsenal with my two men and help them bring here whatever they tell you to. Understood?”

“Understood! But I don’t have a weapon!”

He showed his teeth in a mocking grin. “Well then, I suggest you bend over as you run.”

I followed Rakovijc’s orders. I had no weapon to defend myself and I was completely in the open as I ran from the pyramid and crossed the square to the arsenal amid enemy fire. It was suicidal. But I was ready to risk it if it would give my friends any chance.

“At my order, give me covering fire!” ordered Rakovijc on the radio.

He waited a few seconds. Then, with a quick gesture, he set off downhill, and we followed.

I had never felt the sinister whistle of bullets flying over my head



before, and if all my senses had not been focused on keeping my footing in our crazy race downhill, I would instinctively have looked for cover. Although in fact there was no cover, and I was running so fast that I would not have been able to stop even if I had wanted to.

By the time I reached level ground at the esplanade, my lungs were nearly exploding. Still, I kept zigzagging until I reached the maintenance sheds, where I could catch my breath behind their steel walls. A few seconds later the two soldiers arrived, panting with the effort. Without stopping completely, they motioned me to follow them. So as to offer the least possible target, we moved between the sheds until we reached the armory. Here one of them keyed a code into the door lock and it opened with a click. While the taller of the two stayed at the door, I followed the other to pick up everything we could and carry it back to the pyramid.

The shed was about sixteen feet long. It had no windows, so it was very dark inside. Obviously, my partner knew what he was looking for, because he was opening the different cupboards feverishly, and selecting what we had to take. There were night vision goggles, several assault rifles of a strange make, a sniper's gun with a prominent telescopic sight, fragmentation grenades and of course many boxes of ammunition. In that room there were enough weapons to start a small war, which meant that either Hutch was extremely foresighted, or for some reason he was counting on the possibility of such an attack.

When he was satisfied with his collection, the mercenary opened a cardboard box and took out six sports bags, which we filled with all the material on the floor.

"Hey, pal! I need a gun!" I shouted when I saw he was getting ready to leave the shed.

He looked at me, surprised, but when he saw my empty hands, he took one of those weird rectangular rifles out of a bag.

"This is a G11 k2 Heckler & Koch," he said as he lifted a cover on the top and inserted what looked like a small magazine. "You load it from the top, close it, release the safety catch and you're ready."

He put it in my hands. I was surprised by its lightness.

"It's the latest in recoilless assault rifles," he said when he saw my puzzlement. "It's made of carbon fiber and it shoots more than two thousand .19 caliber bullets per minute in rounds of three. It has two more magazines

with fifty bullets each inside the butt. But, most of all,” he added, “don’t lose it. This assault rifle is the best in the world, and it costs more than a new car.”

“Thank you,” I said, overwhelmed by this indigestible mass of information. I hung it from my shoulder and muttered to myself, “Well, at least, the trigger seems to be where it should be.”

Without another word, the man picked up four of the bags. When he went outside, he gave two of them to the other mercenary, who was aiming his gun at the dense vegetation beyond the corner of the shed.

The shots sounded from both sides of the square and we were in the middle of it. We had to cross it in the open, loaded with ten or fifteen pounds of weapons each. At the same time we had to dodge the crossfire which was getting more intense from both sides. The fifty yards that separated us from the base of the hillock seemed more like five hundred, and while I tightened the straps on the bags to make my run easier, I was trying not to think about the odds against coming out unscathed from this corridor of death. Odds that became less as we climbed to the temple, under cover of a few stray trees, and slowed down by both the weight of the bags on my shoulders and the steepness of the climb.

When we were ready, the man who had come into the shed with me took a grenade from his vest and ordered us to run to the pyramid. Then, he took out the pin and threw the grenade into the shed. Aware of what that would unleash, I began to run after the other soldier as fast as my legs could make it, ignoring the warning to bend over. When that grenade exploded all hell would break loose, and half a yard more might be the difference between one more and one less hole in my behind.

A few seconds later a huge explosion at my back left me even more deaf than I had been. A fraction of a second later a brutal heat wave threw me forward and flattened me to the ground. A chain of explosions followed the first as the ammunition and explosives in the shed burst in the intense heat, launching a hail of shrapnel and projectiles above us.

Fortunately, a side effect of my temporary deafness was that I could not hear the bullets whistling by my head, although that old military saying came into my mind: it is the bullet that you do not hear that kills you.

“I’m glad it’s not true, or I’d be done,” I muttered to myself with my face pressed into the mud. Then I looked up and saw that the two soldiers had already stood up and were running toward the pyramid as if the devil were after them. This meant that I was now dangerously alone in the square, like

the last duck in a fair booth.

Gathering all the cool I could muster I decided the best thing was to run and pray that my guardian angel, if I ever had one, was on duty that day. So I stood up, swaying under the weight of the bags, and I tried to keep up with the mercenaries in a surreal silence in which I could only feel the accelerated beatings of my own heart.

I reached the foot of the hillock, panting, and forced myself to go on without stopping. As I went I tried to ignore the lumps of soil that the bullets were tearing out of the ground on my right. Apparently this was where our attackers were hiding.

With a final effort, I caught up with the two men. At the same moment the smaller of the two took a strange leap to one side and fell with a scream, clutching his leg. He had been hit.

His partner immediately crouched beside him, dropped the bags he had been carrying and started shooting in the direction of the fire. Overwhelmed by it all, I could only think of dropping my bags too and using the straps to make a tourniquet for the wounded man's thigh. He was clenching his teeth as he watched the flow of blood. He must have known that if he had been hit in the femoral artery, and if we did not manage to contain the hemorrhage, he could very well bleed to death right there.

As soon as I had the strap tight enough to reduce loss of blood, I told his partner to help me. With the man's arms over our shoulders and carrying his bags as well as ours, we went on with our climb.

The murderous bullets I could once more hear whistling around me consistently crashed into the ground or the trees. I was thinking how incredible it was that none had hit me when I felt something like a bite burst in my right arm. I dropped my weapon with a painful spasm and nearly fell, dragging the two others down with me.

To this day I have no idea how I managed, but I kept my feet. After a couple of agonizing moments I saw that my arm was still there, although there was a gaping bleeding hole in the muscle in my right shoulder. Fortunately the bullet had done no more than graze me. I gritted my teeth and pulled on the wounded man, very conscious that there were still twenty yards to cover till we reached the shelter of the temple.

We finally got to the top of the pyramid after that crazy race there and back with the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse. My lungs were burning, I was soaking with sweat and the effort, but I was alive. I saw that half a dozen

technicians and a few Tactical Solutions mercenaries were already there, firing shots right and left against anything that moved. Someone helped us with the bags and we called Dr. Dyer on the radio to come and help the wounded man.

I dropped on the cold stone floor, with my eyes wide open. I was gasping for air and had strength only to check my own shoulder wound. Although the pain was intense, neither bone nor artery had been affected. I just took a bandanna out of my pocket and covered it to reduce the loss of blood.

I tried to get my breath back, ignoring the confusion of shots, explosions and shouting around me. I thanked my guardian angel for getting me there with just a scratch. Without a doubt, I had been very lucky.

After a moment's rest, I went over to see how the wounded man was doing. I found the doctor already with him, trying to stop the hemorrhage.

Practically all the survivors of the team had regrouped in the temple, with two noticeable absences that caught my attention: Hutch and Rakovijc. I peered carefully over the edge of the terrace, looking toward the command center. Two figures, crouched behind the building, seemed to be trapped there without any means of escape.

"Aren't those Hutch and Rakovijc?" I asked pointing at them to a tattooed heavysset command, stationed behind a column.

"We can't do anything for them right now," he said coldly. "They're better off where they are. But they've told us by radio that they managed to use the satellite phone and the Mexican army is already on its way. They've been assured that reinforcements will arrive in an hour."

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, trying not to show my unease.

"And do you think we'll hold for an hour?"

Without taking his eye off his rifle's sight, he simply shrugged and said stoically, "Perhaps. You never know."

I was trying to calculate what percentage of probability of survival was in that "you never know" when an alarm went off in my head. Cassie and the professor were still in the cavern!

I could not leave them there a minute longer. If I wanted to get them out of that rat trap I would have to go down for them, but on top of that we would need quite a while to get back up to the surface, and I had no way of knowing how long the mercenaries could hold the position. I grabbed three flashlights

by the elevator switch and went to the tunnel.

There I realized that the descent would be almost as complicated as it had been the first time. The stairs were dark again, and the elevator, without power to move it this time, was just a wagon held by a cable. I had no choice but to climb over it and go down step by step. I was just going to start when my foot caught on something long and narrow. When I shone the light on it I saw the magic words framed in yellow plastic: CAUTION: CABLE RELEASER.

Without thinking too much (if I had, I would never have managed it), I sat in the little wagon and pulled the lever with all my might.

There was a click, followed by a clack and quite silently, the wagon began to move downward. First it went slowly, but then it gathered speed. I shone my light ahead and saw the steps passing faster and faster. At this rate, I thought, I'll be down in less than a minute.

Unsurprisingly, though, that sleigh with wheels was not managing a constant speed down a thousand year old stair. It was going so fast the steps were just a blur. The wagon, unhooked from its cable and with nothing to hold it or create any friction, sped cleanly over smooth aluminum rails and showed no signs of slowing down.

The idea of getting on the wagon and letting go of the brakes did not seem so brilliant now.

At least, I said to myself, it's a creative way to kill myself.

Just then I thought I could make out the end of the stair. I pressed down the lever I had pulled up. But the result was not the same.

In fact, there was no result. I had expected a sudden jolt, but there was only a slight decrease in speed and a trace of sparks left behind by the steel cable and the braking mechanism as a result of the friction.

I was going too fast and I could not make it stop before the end of the stair.

And that piece of junk had no safety belt!

To my horror, only two seconds before the end I noticed something I had not seen on our previous descents. Someone had had the brilliant idea of putting a bumper there. It was like the ones at the end of railroads but on a smaller scale, although equally menacing.

The last thing I remember clearly of that moment is the image of that piece of aluminum covered with rubber getting closer and closer. The next moment, the wagon hit the bumper with such force that it pulled it off and threw it right over my head.

Then there was chaos.

The wagon jumped off the rails. With the momentum built up during two hundred feet of crazy descent, it hurtled through the art gallery bouncing against the walls, destroying everything in its way as if this had been the very purpose of its design.

The worst thing was that I was still on it.

All I could do was hold on to the safety bar like a limpet, praying for it to stop. But it continued its stubborn course of vandalism, bumping from one side to the other of the corridor, defacing from the waist down all those irreplaceable passages of Mayan history.

If I ever come out of this, I thought fleetingly, Cassie will kill me.

I was convinced that mad race would not end well for me, and I prepared to jump off the wagon as soon as I had the chance. I thought it would be better to roll on the floor, get some scratches and maybe break a couple of bones rather than leave my teeth on the profile of some ancient king of Yaxchilan.

Right then, the wagon hit the left wall diagonally. Without stopping to think I hurled myself ahead as far as I could. Added to my existing speed, this catapulted me forty feet, out of the corridor and into the cavern in absolute darkness.

The next thing I knew was a hand on my chest, a strong beam of light blinding me and a female voice speaking from afar.

“Ulysses!” the voice was shouting. “Are you all right? Say something!”

I tried to remember what had happened and whose sweet voice that

was, calling me from beyond that blinding light.

“Cassie?”

“Yes, sweetie, I’m here with the professor. How do you feel?”

“As if I’d had an accident with a wagon.”

“But what on earth happened?” asked the professor.

I tried to get up. “I’ll explain later, Doc. What we have to do now is get out of here at once.”

“Oh, my God!” said Cassandra as she saw the bloodied cloth on my shoulder. “You’re hurt!”

“It’s nothing,” I said soothingly. “The bullet just grazed me.”

“The bullet! What bullet? You’ve been shot?”

A very reassuring comment, yes sirree.

“Listen,” I said trying to remain calm, “someone is attacking us from the jungle. They took the security guys by surprise. Right now the whole team is regrouping at the temple, but I don’t know how long they can hold out. So I think it’s best if you come up to the surface with me.”

“But won’t that be more dangerous than staying here?” said the professor uneasily.

“Perhaps. But at least we’ll know what’s going on, and if things get ugly, we can always try to hide in the jungle. If we stay here,” I added, “we’re trapped.”

“But even if they find us down here, there’s no reason we should be threatened. We’re just scientists, for heaven’s sake!”

“Doc, we’re losing precious time. In that hole there’s a treasure worth thousands of millions of dollars. Do you believe that whoever is attacking us, and by the way, has already killed several technicians, will leave witnesses that could point at them at a trial?”

Cassandra shone the flashlight on herself. “I’m coming with you.”

“So what do you say, Doc? Are you going to stay here alone, with your nice friend Ah Puch?”

Even without seeing his face I knew he was fighting his own fear.

“All right, all right, what else can I do...”

Before starting up the stair, we agreed to look for the other flashlights I had brought down with me, hoping they might still be intact.

Searching the floor with the one we had, we entered the corridor and soon found the remains of the wagon, smashed against the stone threshold to

the cavern.

Cassie let out a long whistle.

"I'd say you got lucky. If you hadn't jumped off in time you'd now be meat mince... Oh, no!" She stopped when she saw the walls. "You've destroyed the murals!"

"Jesus! You say it as if I'd done it on purpose."

With no reply she went to the battered paintings and passed her hand over the most damaged parts.

"You should've been more careful," said the professor sternly. "Those murals are unique, irreplaceable."

"Hey, I'm very sorry to have crashed into such valuable works of art. The next time I risk my life to save you, I'll be more careful not to break anything."

Then someone spoke from the darkness at the end of the corridor.

"So here's where you were hiding," the voice said coldly.

Cassandra took a step back and shone her light toward the place it had come from.

A figure dressed in black, with his clothes torn and his hands bloodied, was in the middle of the corridor that led to the stair. He had a gun in one hand, and with the other he was taking off a pair of night vision goggles. His face was also bloody.

It was Rakovijc, and his gun was pointed directly at me.

"I thought you were trapped at the command center," I said when he came near.

"Sure, and that's why you decided to come back here." He nodded as if I were confirming his suspicions. "To try to take everything you could."

It took me a few seconds to realize his implication.

"Are you crazy? I came here to save my friends."

"Yeah...yeah... your friends."

"Rakovijc, you're being paranoid," said Cassie.

Unexpectedly, he hit her with a brutal slap that sent her flying into the wall.

"Shut up, you *chicana*!"

Without thinking I threw myself at him. But, thanks to his military training, he avoided me easily and kneed me in the pit of my stomach, leaving me breathless on the floor.

"Crazy son of a bitch ..." I muttered.



“Hey, man! Be calm!” shouted the professor fearing he might shoot me. “I swear we don’t want to take anything, we just want to get out of here.”

“You shut up, pops,” he said threateningly. “Help your friends up and go to the cavern.”

“To the cavern? But we have to get out of here ...”

Rakovijc’s tone sounded cold even for him.

“Do as I say if you don’t want me to kill you right on this spot.”

The professor helped me to my feet and we both picked up Cassandra, who had a nasty gash on her forehead.

Rakovijc took our flashlight. Lighting the way, he pushed us to the other side of the cavern.

And then he turned the light out.

“You can’t see me but I can see you. So don’t move one muscle or I’ll kill the three of you.”

“What are you doing?” I said. “Why are you threatening us? Have you lost your mind?”

In the silence of the cavern I sensed an evil chuckle.

“I’m following orders.”

“What orders are those?”

“That you remain down here.”

I could feel this was not all.

“And then?”

The answer came from the dark, with another chuckle.

“Then I’m blowing up the entrance.”

“Now I get it ...” I said bitterly. “Hutch doesn’t want any loose ends.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cassie.

“That either way, whether he’s forced to flee and the guerillas get control of the pyramid or whether the Mexican Army gets here in time to rescue them, the secret of the cavern and the hidden treasure will be exposed. Unless ...”

Professor Castillo finished the sentence, somberly.

“... unless they blow up the entrance so that the place stays hidden until they can come for it with another expedition.”

“What does that have to do with wanting to kill us? We’re part of the team!” said Cassie.

“No, Cassie, we’re not. What we are is a nuisance, something to get rid of. Hutch doesn’t want risks and as long as we’re alive, we are an unnecessary danger.”

“Then we must do something about it, otherwise we’ll die here.” I was surprised by Cassie’s self-possession in saying this.

But there was not much that we could do.

We were at Rakovijc’s mercy.

He had a gun, night vision goggles and the determination of a man with no scruples.

And we could not even see him, although we could imagine he was right there, preparing the explosives which should have served to block the water hole’s channels.

I was aware that I had very little time to act. It would take Rakovijc no more than five minutes to place the Semtex in the corridor. If I did not manage to stop him before that, we would be buried there until death came by hunger or asphyxia. So I made a crazy decision and began to run in a zigzagging line toward where I thought the thug was.

As I had expected, a bright flash shone in the dark, the shot echoed on the walls of the cavern and for the second time that day, I felt a bullet strike my flesh.

Rakovijc had shot me in the leg thinking I was trying to escape. But

once again fortune was on my side, and in spite of the sudden intense pain I managed to stay on my feet to carry out the second part of my plan. The shot had been followed by a cry of pain that had not been mine.

Knowing that he was using night vision equipment, I had made him fire his gun and the flash had allowed me to locate him at the same time as it left him momentarily blind.

The tables had been turned.

For a brief moment he would not be able to see me, but I knew where he was. Or so I thought.

I lunged, limping, toward the spot where the shot had come from, and suddenly I crashed against Rakovijc's body. Trying to make the most of the surprise, I groped for his arm hoping to get at the gun in his hand. I grabbed his right arm and twisted it behind his back, then reached for his hand.

With an unpleasant feeling of *déjà vu* I discovered it was empty.

It was then I remembered that Rakovijc was left-handed.

The next thing I felt was the cold metal of the gun against my temple.

"You're going to die, you smartass," he said in my ear.

Rakovijc cocked the gun and was about to shoot when something fell on both of us, dragging us to the floor and making the bullet bounce on the stone ceiling of the cavern.

It was the professor, who had followed the sound of the struggle.

The three of us rolled on the ground. I got elbowed in the jaw. And, although I knew it was not serious because I could still move my leg, the bullet wound hurt like hell. Sunk in the deepest dark I hit and kicked like a blind man in a street fight, hoping the groans would let me know who I was hitting. In the confusion I managed to grab a foot in a military boot which could only belong to Rakovijc. I pulled with all my might, trying to twist it and immobilize its owner, but instead I received a kick in the face from his free foot, and I lost my grip.

While I was trying to get back up, I heard a brief struggle that ended with a snort and the sound of something metallic falling to the floor. A few seconds later, a light shone straight in my eyes as a heavy boot hit me on the side.

I fell on my knees, twisting with pain, and I heard the professor panting beside me.

"I should kill you two right now. But it'll be fun knowing that it'll take you weeks to die," said Rakovijc scornfully.

The light shifted to look for the exit of the cavern. As soon as it found it, it began to move in that direction.

“Give my regards to that god of hell!” he said as he moved out.

I was petrified with fear.

There was nothing obvious I could do. He had the explosives, the flashlight and the gun. If we followed him, he would kill us. And if we stayed, he would kill us all the same. There was only one way to do it.

“Ulysses,” whispered the professor, “I think he’s lost the gun and the goggles.”

Of course! That was why he had not shot us. The metallic sound I had heard must have been the gun falling to the ground. Unfortunately, in that darkness it was impossible to find.

“We have our last chance,” I whispered back when I saw the light stop at the entrance to the corridor. “We’ll try to get close to that son of a bitch now that he’s busy with the explosives, and when I say so we’ll jump on him and crush his skull. Agreed, Doc?”

Silence.

“Doc ... Are you there?”

No reply.

I heard footsteps running way ahead of me, close to the exit.

As soon as I stood up, I saw the professor’s shape crossing the lighted threshold.

“Professor, don’t!” shouted Cassie behind me.

I started to run after my father’s old friend, but I had only covered a few feet when I heard a shot and a bump.

The light went out. Someone screamed. And, suddenly, the world exploded.

A blinding flash burst into the cavern, driving clouds of dust and rubble in front of it, coming out of the corridor like a cannon blast. The floor shook under my feet. A rock hit me on the head and made me lose my balance, and the brutal noise of the detonation echoed in my ears inside the resonant box that was the cavern. The terrible sound of stones splitting off and walls collapsing made my blood freeze. At the same time, the darkness was flooded with dust and dirt which got into my nose and mouth, filling my lungs and preventing me from breathing.

I was suffocating. I felt myself faint.

But my thoughts went to the woman I loved.

I could not leave her alone there.

And as I sank into the abyss of unconsciousness, I called her name with my last breath.

“Cassie ...”

Someone was shouting from far away. "Ulysses! Ulysses, wake up, please!"

The voice calling me sounded vaguely familiar, but it had to be very far away. It might be even calling to another Ulysses. Anyway, I did not care. My head ached terribly and I just wanted to stay wherever I was. And on that subject, where was I?

I was feeling very confused. I forced myself to open my eyes but what I saw was even more perplexing. Everything was light, an intense bright light.

Could it perhaps be that light those who have had near-death experiences talk about? What did one do in that case? Go to the light or get away from it? I should have paid more attention to that film.

The light spoke again. "That's it, my love! Come back to me!"

The light drew me irresistibly and spoke so sweetly, but I still wanted to remain in the world of the living.

"If you're an angel," I mumbled after spitting dirt that must have filled my mouth, "let me go back to Earth. I want to live."

The shining voice changed its tone, speaking now with what sounded like a mixture of worry and mockery.

"I can see the blow was bad, although it's thoughtful of you to confuse me with an angel."

Then the light that was everywhere disappeared, or rather shifted to illuminate a face with eyes like emeralds.

"Cassie?" I recognized those eyes. "What happened?"

"There's been an explosion and something big hit your head."

"Of course ..." I tried to raise myself while the memories slowly came back. "The explosion."

And suddenly a jab to my heart jolted me into asking with panic, "The professor! Where is he?"

Standing in front of all the rubble and rocks that had been the entrance to the cavern, I moved the flashlight searching from side to side for any indication that would give me hope of finding him alive.

"Help me move those rocks," I called to Cassie. "We have to get the professor out of there! Professor! Eduardo!"

Her hand grabbed my arm, stopping me.

“Ulysses,” she whispered, “I’m so sorry but I don’t think there’s anything you can do for him.”

“Don’t help me if you don’t want to, but he’s under all that and he may be still alive.”

“If you move a single rock,” she said, suddenly serious, “it can all cave in, and I won’t let you risk your life or mine for nothing.”

Despair clutched at my chest and I could not breathe.

“I don’t give a damn! I have to find him! He might still be alive!”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart ... but it’s impossible that he could have survived the explosion and then the cave-in. I’m really sorry.” She put her arms around me, murmuring in my ear, and I burst into tears.

I cried for him, for us and even for the loss of that link which had joined me to my father through the professor.

I cried all the tears I had saved until then. Cassandra cradled me trying to comfort me while I felt the warmth of her silent tears sliding down my neck.

In that moment I would have traded gladly all that damned treasure for the life of Professor Castillo.

I understood too late, as usual, that there is no gold in the world worth one life.

A lesson learned late that I would always remember.

When at last I calmed down, a long while later, I slid to the ground with my head in my hands, and I asked myself aloud, “What shall we do now?”

Cassie sat beside me. “Wait. Pray and wait.”

“For what?” I asked bitterly. “To be rescued?”

“Maybe if the army comes, someone might decide to investigate down here.”

I sighed. “I doubt it. At the most, they’ll find a cave-in at the end of the corridor. We’ll be lucky if they rescue our bones in a few years’ time.”

“Wow! I didn’t know you were such an optimist.”

I stood up. “It’s not that. What I meant to say is that we have to try to get out by our own means ... and fast. The longer we stay, the weaker we’ll be.”

“Okay. Any ideas?”

“Not yet, but while we think of something, can you tell me how on

earth did you get that flashlight?”

“Sheer luck. While you were fighting Rakovijc I tried to get close in the dark, but I tripped and fell right on top of it. It must be one of those we were going to use in the reconnaissance dive.”

I suddenly saw everything clearly. A thought pushed its way through my battered brain and I knew we had a chance. I grabbed her arm.

“Quick!” I said. “Show me where you found the flashlight!”

With the small beam it was not difficult to find the place where Cassie had tripped. As I had suspected, the diving gear was perfectly aligned and ready to use. Small aluminum one-gallon oxygen bottles, Poseidon regulators with compensated membrane, Tech Deep technical vests, goggles, flippers, and Uwatec Smart Com diving computers in the octopus’ small whips.

“Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?” she asked worriedly when she saw me checking the diving gadgets.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Better than suicide? Well, sure, more than one. We don’t know if those channels lead anywhere, or how long they are, or even if we’ll be able to fit in them. There might be currents that would drag us to some pool we couldn’t get out of, or we might get lost in a labyrinth of caves where we’d go on searching until we ran out of air. A thousand things could go wrong, and none of them have a happy ending.”

I stroked her cheek gently. “Would you prefer to stay here, praying?”

She thought for a moment and then made a face. “No,” she admitted, “Not really.”

“Well, then, let’s go. Gear up and let’s try to get out of this damned cavern once and for all.”

Even moving fast, it took us longer than usual to get the equipment on in the feeble light. But finally we were ready, with the bottles full of oxygen and the thick neoprene suits covering our skin. We didn’t think the water would be cold, but the suits would protect us from any scratching or scraping.

“Ready?” I asked as I put on my diving mask.

She replied by giving me the thumbs up.

I inflated the vest to the maximum in order to ensure buoyancy, and with my flippers under my arm, I grabbed the aluminum ladder that went down into the depths of the *cenote*. Slowly I began to go down.

Cassie’s flashlight shone over my head, illuminating the edge of the hole, but under my feet the silent darkness waited. It knew that from the



moment I had violated its sanctuary, Destiny had dictated that I should pay a high price for it, and here I was, going into its jaws like the ancient Maya submitting to the call of sacrifice.

The descent seemed never ending, but finally I felt the touch of water on my feet and after a few more rungs I let go of the ladder and floated in the bottom of the hole. The edge seemed to be much higher than it had appeared when it was fully lit.

That distance separated life on one side from death on the other. What mattered was finding out which side I was on at that moment.

“I’m there!” I shouted to Cassie. “You can come down now!”

Her black silhouette appeared beside the ladder and began to descend, with the light swaying from her wrist.

Suddenly, a strange noise, like the scratching of nails on a blackboard, echoed through the walls to the bottom of the water hole. It was clearly coming from the cavern, but I could not imagine what it was until a tremendous crack, followed by the sound of stone against stone, made me realize something serious was happening. In fact the worst that could happen.

Cassandra stopped to listen.

Again another split, then another and another, followed by the resounding boom of huge masses of stone crashing against the floor of the cavern.

The dome of the sanctuary was crumbling above us.

“Cassandra,” I cried urgently, “Jump! Let’s get out of here!”

“I can’t see anything!” she said anxiously from several feet above. “I’ll break my skull if I jump into the dark.”

“And we’ll both die if you don’t! Come on!”

There was a new splintering sound and this time a huge boulder fell beside me, crashing loudly against the water, shoving me toward the wall of the hole and sending a column of water several feet high.

As if it were the signal she had been waiting for, Cassie uttered a war cry, let go of the ladder, and fell into the black void.

I was trying to get out of her way when she hit the water, and I lunged forward to find her. I knew the inflatable vest would push her back up to the surface.

“Cassie! Where are you?”

After what seemed an eternity I heard her coughing in the dark. “Here, I’m here.”

“Thank goodness!” I said when I reached her. “Are you all right?”

“I ... I think so. I felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole and ... Oh shit!”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“The flashlight! Ulysses, I lost ... Oh! There it is!” she said relieved. “I can see it in the bottom, I’m going for it.”

“No! Wait! Don’t go alone!”

A splash was all the answer I got.

“Cassie?”

I looked down in time to see the triangle of light she had lost in her fall get bigger until it shone directly in my eyes.

“Don’t you ever do that again,” I said sternly when she resurfaced beside me. “From now on, every move we make must be coordinated. Is that clear?”

I heard Cassandra taking the regulator out of her mouth.

“Sorry, it’s just that I can’t stand being in the dark.”

“It’s okay. Now tie yourself to the end of this rope that’s attached to my vest and pass me the light. I’ll go first.”

“Where?”

“Wherever the current takes us.”

As soon as I said this, a new and louder series of cracks filled the air of the cavern, and huge blocks of rock thundered down to the floor. It seemed the whole pyramid was crumbling around us.

Ignoring the racket, Cassie came up to me and whispered, “Ulysses, I love you.”

Even behind the diving mask, her eyes reflected her love in the dull light, and I knew that I loved her too, more than my own life.

“I know ...” I was absurdly happy at the thought of being there, about to die, but in the company of that amazing woman.

I took her face in my hands and kissed her. Perhaps for the last time, I thought.

A new cave-in brought down rubble a few inches from our heads, so we deflated our vests until we almost touched bottom. With the regulators adjusted, I turned to look for the underwater galleries Mike’s scanner had shown.

It did not take long to find one. I tried not to disturb the bottom with my

flippers as I edged halfway into it. I relaxed all my muscles in order to feel the slightest movement of the water around my body. I closed my eyes to concentrate better. Then after a few seconds of this underwater nirvana, I got out of the hole and shone the light on myself so Cassie could see my thumbs up. I had found the water hole drain.

Through our bubbles I saw she understood. I turned back to the hole and went in, with Cassie following closely.

It was a dark passage, less than four feet wide, spiked with rocky edges that threatened to tear our suits or catch some vital part of our gear. The light I carried was just enough to let me see a couple of yards ahead.

Under other circumstances I would never have gone into the water like this, not even up to my ears with tequila. Besides my natural aversion to underwater caves, we did not have Ariadne's thread to guide us back should we need it. Neither did we have extra oxygen bottles. And should anything happen to either of us while we were under, given the narrowness of the passage, we could not turn round to help each other. It was, as they say in the divers' lingo, a shitty dive.

I flapped my feet very slowly, because if we lost visibility we would also lose any chance to come out of there alive. While I was avoiding the ancient stalactites, sharp as swords waiting for us to make the slightest mistake, I kept thinking of the severity of our situation and that it could hardly get worse.

I was naive.

A few yards ahead, at the limit of the illuminated area, there appeared the last thing I wanted to see.

A branching of the tunnel.

In front of me there were two openings in the dark, right and left. Both had the same menacing feeling, as if either one were the mouth of a huge hungry anaconda.

The limited supply of air forced me to make a decision about which way to go, but I had no idea which would be the right one, if either of them was.

I advanced to the point where the underwater tunnel forked. When I stopped, Cassie bumped into my legs. It was a life or death decision, as I was fully aware that once we went into one of the narrow drains, there would be no chance to turn back.

What I could do was swim forward a short way into each one and

estimate by the flashlight which one appeared less sinister.

I put my head in the left opening and shone the light as far as it would go. This was a similar gallery to the one we had come through, although it was somewhat narrower and it seemed to go downward, which was not promising. I pushed back with my arms, carefully, and did the same with the right-hand opening. It was just as narrow, but it definitely tilted up toward the surface.

This had to be the way out.

Using hand signals I made Cassandra understand that the left opening went down while the right one went up. By the faint light I saw her motioning me toward the latter. She wanted to get out as much as I did.

I directed the light to my right, avoiding a threatening stalactite that guarded the entrance. I went into the tunnel, convinced that it would lead us out of that claustrophobic place. I barely had room to flap my feet, and although the mud had disappeared from the bottom, the gallery was so narrow that I feared we might get stuck at some point. Then without room to maneuver the current would ...

And then I hesitated.

There was something that did not fit.

An inner alarm, the product of many years of experience under water, began to ring in my head. I stopped terrified, trusting my instinct but unable to make out what had alerted it.

I felt Cassandra tugging at my flippers, reminding me she was waiting and urging me to go ahead. I ignored her and closed my eyes so that I could relax and go over what we were doing. I wanted to find out the cause of that eerie feeling in my stomach.

I knew that every second I spent motionless was a second of air that might mean the difference between life and death, but I stayed there waiting for the thought to emerge from my subconscious telling me what was wrong.

Just when Cassie was tugging on my flipper again, more impatiently this time, one word appeared in my brain as if written with fire under my eyelids: *current*.

I had not noticed it until then, but now there could be no doubt. There was no current in that gallery.

And it could only mean one thing: we were heading toward a dead end.

I tried to turn around nervously, but there was barely room to look over my shoulder. Shining the light on myself I tried to explain with signs that we

needed to back up fast. At first she looked at me with puzzlement. Then after a few tries she made the okay signal and started to back up, as fast as she could in that narrow space, to the branching of the passageways a few yards behind.

Once there, I checked my air supply and discovered that between my efforts and nerves, it had been reduced considerably. So, of course, had the time we had left to find an outlet. Cassandra must be in the same situation ... or worse.

Without wasting more time, I pushed myself hard into the left-hand opening, closely followed by Cassie.

I could tell that this gallery ran deeply underground. I tried to remain calm, thinking that the current I was in had to carry us to some outlet, but I could not get away from the idea that perhaps this exit might be beyond our reach.

Leaving behind any precaution, I was letting myself drift with the current down an ever narrowing channel which increased the speed of the water and the danger of hitting any of those sharp rock walls.

I checked my supply of air in the bottle. Less than five minutes. And we were still going down.

I kicked harder, ignoring the bumps and scratches, not to mention the bullet wounds. Although these were not very deep, they smarted like hell every time I grazed against the walls of that nightmarish ever narrowing tunnel. There was no space even to look over my shoulder. I trusted Cassie could keep up with me, because if she had any trouble at my back there was nothing I could do for her.

I didn't feel like dying in a place like this: a dark underground passage that might not be visited again in decades, when someone would find two skeletons in black neoprene suits.

The tunnel seemed to have no end, and time was running out.

Every time I inhaled it was more difficult to draw in much air, a sign that my supply was getting dangerously low.

God, I prayed desperately, help us get out of this one and I swear I shall be a good boy from now on. But please, lend us a hand ...

At that moment, a sudden force seemed to grab me by the shoulders. With irrepressible strength, I felt it push me upwards. It launched me like a rocket through a tight hole that opened vertically in the ceiling of the tunnel, sweeping me in the same direction as the bubbles that preceded me toward a

bright disc of light that rendered the flashlight useless.

I didn't understand why or how, but I was ascending to the surface at top speed.

Pushed by the powerful jet of underground water, I broke the surface much faster than I would have wished for. After that prolonged dive in the underwater tunnels, I prayed that the rapid ascent would not leave me with microbubbles of nitrogen in my blood or overexpanded lungs.

As soon as I emerged I tore the regulator out of my mouth and looked for Cassie. She appeared a few seconds later, preceded by a surge of bubbles, then tore the regulator out of her own mouth to breathe the fresh air.

I shouted her name and she turned, looking for me. When she saw me a few feet at her back she swam to me, threw her arms around me and kissed me in relief.

“Sweet Mary Mother of God!” she said, “I thought we’d end up dancing with The Grim Reaper down there!”

“I’d say we got pretty lucky!”

“Lucky? That’s been a *pinche* miracle! I still don’t get what happened.”

“It seems we came out through a siphon. The hydrostatic pressure, somehow pushed us to the exit. Just like you say: a *pinche* miracle!”

Cassandra took her diving mask off and looked around. She discovered we were floating in the middle of a wide muddy river. “And where on earth did we end up? This looks like the Usumacinta.”

“Yes, it does,” I said, noticing the size of the river bed and the sheer cliffs flanking it. “But we must be downriver, nearly half a mile away from the ruins.

“Well, what do we do now? Shall we go back?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. If the guerillas catch us they might kill us. And if it’s Hutch ...”

“So, what do you suggest? We’re thousands of miles away from anywhere, in a river potentially full of alligators, and you’re still bleeding. I don’t think it’s safe to stay here.”

“Even so, I vote for staying in it. The suits will protect us from the cold, and further ahead the current gets stronger. Alligators don’t like strong currents, nor guys as ugly as me.”

We drifted with the current, trying to save our energy, until we came to

a part of the river where the walls narrowed. Huge black boulders emerged threateningly among the spray, and in a matter of a few feet the placid course of the Usumacinta turned into a roaring chaos of waves and whirlpools. We would have to be alert if we wanted to make it out alive.

“Cassie!” I shouted, “listen to me! Get rid of the weights, take off the life vest, put your bottle under it and inflate it to the fullest with the remaining air either in it or in the mouthpiece.”

“Why?”

“Trust me. Then get on top, lean your elbows on the vest and with your upper body out of the water, push with your flippers and don’t let the river take you. Everything will be all right.”

She looked at me, frowning, not pleased with the idea.

“Have you ever done anything like this?” she asked over the roar of the river.

“In a way, yes. It’s like hydrospeed without the sleigh. All you have to do is be careful to avoid the whirlpools and hitting your head on a rock, the vest will protect us from impacts on the torso.”

She did not seem entirely convinced by my escape plan. “And why don’t we just take off the gear and walk through the forest?”

“Through a jungle plagued with dangers, the guerrillas occupying the area and no water or food supplies? And supposing we could climb those walls, which I don’t think we could. Honestly, I don’t think it’s an option.”

Cassie looked ahead, where the water broke into spray as it crashed violently against the rocks. She was worried.

“And you really believe your plan is better?”

The river was dragging us more forcefully, tossing us like leaves riding the current. I felt a prickle of fear, but there was no turning back.

“You just follow me and do what I do.”

Abruptly we found ourselves in the rapids. I had done hydrospeed a couple of times, years before, in the Noguera Pallaresa river in Spain, but this looked very different. Not only did we have no protective equipment or water sleigh, but the Usumacinta was a lot bigger, tougher and wilder than its distant cousin from the Pyrenees. This was no tourist excursion.

As soon as we began, we went down a three-foot fall, and I hit both my knees on the bottom. I was still struggling to keep my head above the water when a mass of rock the size of Gibraltar loomed amid a cloud of spray, right



in my path.

“Careful with that one!” I shouted as loud as I could, but even I could not hear myself in the steady roar.

I bent my body and pushing with my legs to the right managed to pass the boulder. In the process I grazed my arm, right where the bullet wound was.

Clenching my teeth I looked behind for Cassandra, but in that storm of water and rock I could see nothing. I prayed I had not made a mistake in putting her through this hell.

I found I had to kick my legs constantly, as not doing so would mean crashing against any of the thousand rocks in those rapids. At the same time I tried to maneuver right and left, sinking down small leaps of water that tried to suck me when I went in and trying not to leave my skin behind on one of those sharp edges.

I was exhausted, my legs were barely responding, and it was getting increasingly difficult to avoid the obstacles the Usumacinta was set on putting in my way. Adding to the danger of the boulders and rocks, there were fallen trees. Some of these were being pushed by the current like torpedoes. Others were anchored to the bottom with sharpened stumps that could skewer us if we chanced upon them.

As soon as I had a few seconds of relative calm, between leaps and falls, I strained my neck trying to locate Cassie behind the swell of water that appeared and disappeared among curtains of spray, but not once did I see her mass of hair in the waves. I was at the end of my strength and I could not fight against the current to try to find her. She would have to fend for herself in order to survive in all that chaos of water and rock.

Just as I would myself.

The air tank under my vest kept hitting the bottom of the river. I used it as a bumper against those rocks I could not avoid in time, and it absorbed most of the impact. I held onto the straps of the vest with both hands, trying not to let go, because that was what kept my upper body above the water and allowed me to breathe. So when a ledge slit the air bag and it began to deflate I knew that if those rapids did not end soon, the only end would be that of yours truly.

I could barely raise my head, but beyond the spray I glimpsed what seemed the limit of the rapids less than three hundred feet further off.

Gathering the last of my wits and strength I swam to the middle of the

current. Here it was more violent, but the obstacles were fewer. I saw one last waterfall separating me from the quieter waters. When I was at the edge, ready to fall, I realized with horror that there was one more test to overcome: a perfect whirlpool more than thirty-five feet across, right in the middle of the river. It was sucking everything that passed near it to the bottom, including whole trees, branches and a few seconds later, two desperate divers.

There was no way I could avoid it. The current dragged me straight into it. When it caught me in its spiral it rolled me helplessly around inside an evil funnel of water. I prayed that Cassandra would be spared and come out unscathed.

Resigned, aware that I had no way of escaping from that last joke of destiny when respite was so near, I held on to the vest and took in air before the inevitable plunge into the whirlpool.

There seemed to be a raffle to see whether I kicked the bucket that day or not and I certainly had all the tickets for it. "There's no way I'm getting out of this," I thought.

And then I started swirling and swirling ... faster every time. Then an invisible hand pulled me down and there was darkness. The diving mask was torn off my face and the straps of the vest from my hands. Something hit my chest and I lost all the air I had saved in my lungs.

I was drowning.

At the edge of unconsciousness I noticed that the pressure had decreased, and though I was still under water, the strength of the whirlpool was not crushing me against the bottom of the river any longer. In desperation, I moved arms and feet to let me reach the faint light of day that filtered above my head through murky water. Fortunately, this was not very deep so that it took me just seconds (although they seemed like an eternity) to reach the surface. I filled my lungs with air panting like a fish.

Unbelievably, the brutality of the rapids had transformed into a gentle flow of water, and I felt I was not in the turbulent Usumacinta but in an entirely different river.

The life vest must have ended up at the bottom of the whirlpool, as well as the mask and fins. I still could not understand how I had escaped the centrifugal force that must have crushed them to pulp against the rocks. In any case, I would not need them in this part of the river ...

Then I remembered Cassandra.

I looked around in every direction, on the shore and downriver, but I could see no trace of her.

Terrified, I considered the possibility that she might be trapped underwater.

If that was the case, I had no time to waste.

Ignoring the exhaustion that cramped my muscles, the intense pain in my arm and my wounded leg, not to mention the possibility of getting trapped myself trying to rescue her, in which case we would both die, I began to swim against the current.

With difficulty I arrived at the edge of the whirlpool. When I was ready to dive in search of the woman I loved, certain that she must be trapped down there, she emerged from the churning water in front of me as if by magic.

"Gee, that was fun!" she said, beaming as soon as she recovered her breath. "Let's do it again!"

We drifted placidly on the current into a noticeably wider part of the river. The steep cliffs had given way to gentle banks covered with thick vegetation. The neoprene material of our suits helped us stay afloat. In fact, if it had not

been for the worrying possibility of alligators, drifting along that part of the Usumacinta would have been a very pleasant experience.

We floated in silence, watching the margins for the dreaded reptiles. Suddenly Cassie cried out in my ear, nearly making me leap out of the water.

She pointed ahead. "Ulysses, look!"

With my heart in my mouth I turned my eyes to where her finger was pointed, expecting to see a cold-blooded monster with eighty sharp teeth.

But what Cassandra had seen was something very different.

A faint column of black smoke behind the trees was vanishing in the evening sky.

"Can it be the guerillas?" she asked.

"I've no idea, but it's on the right-hand shore, so it's Guatemala. I'd be surprised if the Zapatista guerillas risked crossing the border, even if it's only to ford a river."

"I wouldn't put it past them. Frontiers don't have much meaning here."

"Anyway, in a few minutes we'll find out."

Shortly after spotting the smoke, we got to a bend in the river. Around this was a wooden hut on stilts, with a roof of palm leaves. A small fishing boat, made from a hollowed tree trunk, was beached close by. Two dirty kids were in it, playing at being fishermen.

"At least they don't look like guerillas," I said, following Cassie who was already swimming toward them.

When they saw us come out of the river, staggering like a couple of zombies, bleeding, with torn wet suits, their eyes popped. As if the demons of the Usumacinta were coming for them, they ran toward the hut screaming in terror.

"Do we look so bad?" I said.

Cassie looked me up and down. "Worse."

The wound in my leg made me limp visibly. My arm hurt badly and I was bleeding through the rags of what had been my wet suit.

"Well," I sighed, "at least we're alive. Even though no one will ever believe our story."

She cleared her throat. "Well ... maybe they will."

"What do you mean?" I said when I saw her smile.

She did not say another word but pointed at her stomach.

I looked at her with puzzlement. I needed a moment to identify the silhouette that showed under her black wet suit and another one to take in

what my mind refused to believe.

“But ... how? When?”

Her eyes beamed in her elfin face.

“After I fell into the *cenote* and lost the flashlight, I dived to get it, and right beside it, half-buried in the mud, I found this. I just had to stretch my arm and pick it up.” She smiled innocently. “How could I leave a gold and diamond crucifix lying in that water hole as if it were trash?”

Three days later, with my wounds all dressed and both of us covered with bruises, we were having breakfast at the café of the Swiss Hotel in Ciudad de Guatemala.

The kids’ father had, fortunately, been less impressionable and had taken us to a small native village nearby. Thanks to the locals’ generosity, we were able to eat, sleep and then the following day, travel on the back of a pick-up truck which dropped us off at a doctor’s clinic in Santa Helena. He stuffed us with antibiotics and sewed us up without asking too many questions.

We had nothing on us but rags, but a couple of collect calls worked the miracle and enabled us to receive money through Western Union. With this we bought a pair of tickets to Ciudad de Guatemala. Once there, as of course we had no papers either, we told a number of plausible lies, and the Spanish and Mexican embassies duly supplied us with temporary passports. Next we purchased two seats on the first flight to Barcelona.

Cassandra had agreed to come and live with me as a “try-out” as she called it, and I was delighted with the idea.

We had spent several intensive weeks looking for the legendary Templar treasure. We had even had it within reach, but now that it was all over (once we had taken in the fact that in spite of all our efforts and sacrifices we would be neither famous nor millionaires) we had to face the question of what there really was between us.

We didn’t know the answer, but we were both willing to find out.

Unfortunately, what should have been relief at having survived this dangerous adventure was veiled by the mist of pain and guilt.

Professor Castillo was not there with us, and knowing that he was dead was making me anxious to the point of being unable to sleep since we had left Yaxchilan. I had gotten him into the whole thing. If I had never shown him that wretched bronze bell, or pressed him to come with me in that crazy

search around half the globe, he would still be alive. And that was something I could not forgive myself for.

“Ulysses,” said a voice that seemed to come from miles away.

I looked up to see her eyes filled with tenderness on the other side of the table.

“Don’t think about it.”

“Is it so obvious?”

“You’ve been buttering the same piece of toast for the last ten minutes.

“Huh.”

She took my hand in hers and put it on the tablecloth.

“I thought we’d agreed last night that you weren’t responsible for what happened. As I remember, you didn’t tell Rakovijc to kill us, nor did you put the explosives at the entrance of the water hole.” She pressed my hand in an attempt to provoke a reaction in me. “Professor Castillo decided to come with you of his own will. When things happened, you tried everything in your power to save the three of us.”

“It was him who gave his life for us.”

“That’s true. I swear that I’ll call in any favors with my contacts in the Federal Archeological Department and do all we can to make sure he’s acknowledged as the discoverer of the *cenote* and the treasure hidden in it. His name will be written in golden letters in the history books, along with Howard Carter and Heinrich Schliemann.”

“I’d rather have him here having breakfast with us.”

She let go of my hand and leaned back in her chair.

“I know he was an old friend of yours and your father’s, and I understand how you feel. It saddens me too. But tormenting yourself won’t bring him back and it won’t make you feel any better. So stop feeling sorry for yourself and go back to being the optimistic and passionate fellow I’ve fallen in love with like a school girl.”

We had booked a 7 pm Iberia flight, so we had all morning free. Cassandra suggested getting away from the noisy center of the Guatemalan capital and taking refuge in the quiet of the Archeological Museum, where there would be fewer people.

The taxi we took at the hotel drove us from *Zona 18* to the Aurora Zoo. Opposite this were the four major museums of the city, including the Archeological Museum. This was a well-preserved building of neo-

Mozarabic architecture surrounded by leafy gardens with a big Maya stele, similar to those we had seen in Yaxchilan glowering over the main entrance. When I saw that stone carving I felt a pang of sadness at the memory of the tragic events that had taken place there.

“I don’t think it was such a good idea to come here,” I muttered at the door.

“Yeah, it’s true. This brings it all back, I know. But we have to get over it and now that we’re here ...”

I shrugged, tired.

“Sure, let’s go in.”

We paid the meager fee and went into the museum. It was divided into two big halls. One was devoted to the Maya and the other had all the materials related to the Spanish conquest and colonization. We decided to start in the second. The labyrinth of corridors was flanked by glass cases full of helmets, swords and other objects of that period. Cassie stopped frequently to study anything that caught her attention, while I followed her without much interest. The weapons were mostly rusty, even a sword they claimed had belonged to the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. Although the hundreds of parchments exhibited were written in Old Castilian, they were indecipherable to the untrained eye due to their wealth of elaborate signatures and incomprehensible filigree decorations.

The section devoted to ancient maps, on the other hand, awoke my curiosity, at least up to a point. These were mostly regional, indicating limits of royal land grants and municipalities, although there were some representing the whole Viceroyalty of New Spain, including Mexico and the rest of Central America as far as Panama. But the one that caught my eye was exquisitely illustrated and exclusively devoted to the Province of Goathemala. On it was depicted every village, hamlet, road and river of the country. Even the settlements that belonged to Spaniards or Creoles were differentiated from those inhabited only by native Maya. I was surprised to note that the territory of Chiapas had been a part of Guatemala at the time, and said so to Cassie.

She explained that until 1815, when Guatemala became independent from Spain, Chiapas was one of its provinces. Afterward, political instability drove all of Guatemala to join what was then the Mexican Empire.

“Mexican Empire? I didn’t know there’d ever been one.”

“Well, it wasn’t a brilliant part of our history and in fact, it didn’t last

long. But the thing is that shortly after the Empire went down the drain, and what had been Guatemala became independent once more, Chiapas decided to stay with Mexico, and so it is today.”

“It doesn’t seem to have done them much good,” I commented. I was thinking about the Zapatista Indigenous Movement and their continued claims for rights and freedom.

Cassandra looked at me sadly.

“Believe me, the Guatemalan natives have had it much worse.”

Later on we passed into the Pre-Columbian section, which was devoted entirely to the Maya. Guatemala had been the heart of the Mayan culture, and their city-states had extended all over the south of Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Belize. But it was in the vast plains of the north of Guatemala where the biggest pyramids and the most refined temples had been built. Their cities had reached colossal sizes. Paradoxically, according to Cassie, this fact had been one of the main reasons for the sudden collapse of the Mayan Civilization.

“The jungle soil is very poor,” she said, “and a population of one or two hundred thousand inhabitants needed massive cleared areas. Then after one or two harvests they were forced to abandon them because they were unproductive, so they had to go on clearing more and more forest.”

“That doesn’t fit with the idea of the brotherhood between the native and nature that we hear about so much today.”

“Ulysses, don’t be fooled by clichés. Humans are the same today as they were one thousand years ago. If they had to feed their families, don’t doubt for a moment they would clear forests and fell trees just like we would. In fact, the wars between Mayan cities for the possession of land were constant.”

“That doesn’t fit in with the idea of the peaceful Indian.”

“The Maya had many virtues, Ulysses, but I wouldn’t include pacifism among them.”

We kept walking through the museum halls, which were getting more interesting. There were dozens of bowls and jars in an amazingly good state, decorated with similar symbols and colors like the ones we had seen in Yaxchilan, plates, corn mills and even a rudimentary tobacco pipe. In the next hall we found the section devoted to Mayan weapons: intimidating hatchets and obsidian knives beside a jade mask, a breastplate decorated with the same material, and a small semicircular blade with a gold handle. I could



not fathom the purpose of this.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I’d say it’s a ceremonial knife.”

“Ceremonial?”

“Aha ... They sacrificed prisoners, virgins, chosen to be given to the gods, and the losers in the ball game.”

“I didn’t know they took sport so seriously.”

“More than a sport, it was a sacred ritual. Just like it is now.”

We kept walking, stopping to look at an amazing collection of jade pieces: death masks, calendar rounds, and sculptures of kings and gods. Then Cassie stopped abruptly and focused her attention on an eight-inch-tall figure, also made of jade and of a shape one could only call extravagant. She took a step back and moaned, with her hand on her chest.

“Ulysses ...”

I turned back, as I had been walking a little ahead of her. “What’s the matter?”

When she did not answer, I went closer.

Cassandra was gazing at that strange sculpture with eyes as wide open as her mouth, from which still no sound came out. When I looked at the sculpture more closely, I felt there was something familiar in it, but could not put my finger on what it was.

“Don’t you recognize it?” she finally whispered hoarsely.

“It does ring a bell, but ...”

And then I saw it.

Those twisted shapes, those fangs and the crest of feathers sprouting from the nape of its neck. Now it was unmistakable, and I remembered where I had seen it before.

In the “art gallery.”

There we were, unable to believe our eyes, standing in front of the gift that the priests of Yaxchilan had given the Templars almost eight centuries before.

Incredulous, I read the inscription at the foot of the figurine for the third time: “Representation of Kukulcan in jade. Mayan deity in the shape of a plumed serpent also known as Quetzalcoatl. Found in the year 1910 by a peasant in Tecpán, and donated to the museum by Lic. Jacobo Barrientos. This is a unique piece, as there is no other proof that the Maya had ever produced any other carving of equal value, both material and symbolic. It should be noted that it is carved on a single piece of jade of a size never seen before, and of extreme purity, which suggests that it belonged to a powerful king as yet to be identified. Another interesting fact is that there are no known Maya kingdoms of any relevance in the area where it was found, and the type of jade is very similar to that found in later archeological excavation sites along the Usumacinta. It may have been taken to Tecpán from that region.”

We both remained silent astonished before that plain glass case that held what seemed to be the final key to an extraordinary enigma we had already given up all hope of solving. With an unexpected twist it seemed to tempt us to follow one final trail.

“What were the odds on us coming across this?”

“I have no idea, Cassie, but clearly, someone up there is having a laugh at our expense.”

She snorted and crossed her arms. “So ... what do we do now?”

My lips shaped the words and I was surprised to hear myself say determinedly, “We’ll go to Tecpán.”

Cassandra must have been thinking the same because she checked her watch.

“Well, we have a plane to catch in less than eight hours and we don’t even know where that village is.”

Although I had suggested it, I was not too sure I wanted to go on with it. That folly had already taken several lives, including Professor Castillo’s, and I did not want anyone else suffering on my account.

“Cassie,” I said grabbing her shoulders and looking her in the eye, “are you sure you want to go on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, isn’t it time we stopped?”

She looked at me out of those green eyes. “Stop now? Why?”

“I have a bad feeling,” I said, stroking her hair.

“Oh, sure,” she said with scorn. “The best reason to leave one of the greatest enigmas of history unsolved.”

“Too many people have already died on account of this treasure. I don’t want you to ... I mean, that anything should ... well, you know.”

We looked at each other in silence until Cassie hugged and kissed me. Her eyes were moist.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered, “we’ll only go and take a look. What on earth could happen if we just take a tourist tour trip for a couple of hours?”

One thing I’m sure of: as a fortune teller she would have starved.

Before we left the museum in search of Tecpán, we thought it would be a good idea to talk to one of the exhibition curators. We needed as much information as possible about the exotic carving and the place where it had been found.

In a few minutes we found the museum supervisor, a rotund civil servant who introduced himself as Licenciado Oscar Sanchez. He was friendly and agreed to see us in his little office in the west wing of the building.

“What can I do for you?” he said as he invited us to sit.

We had decided Cassie would do the talking.

“Mr. Licenciado, I am an archeology student at the Autonomous University of Mexico D.F., you see, and I’m on holiday in your beautiful country. I absolutely had to visit your splendid museum, and I’m impressed by the quality of the exhibits. It’s obviously been put together by real professionals, under the firm hand of a highly competent supervisor ...”

As Cassie was speaking the Licenciado was swelling with pride. A couple more compliments and he would burst.

“You are very kind, *Señorita* ...”

“Brooks, and this gentleman is *Señor* Vidal, also a student at U. A. M.”

We shook hands and he asked, “So what can I do for you?”

Cassie leaned forward in her chair and fixed her emerald eyes on him.

“It just happens that I’m preparing a thesis on the iconography of Quetzalcoatl in the Aztec culture and its implementation in the Meso-American religions.”

“Interesting ...”

“Yes, very interesting. But we’ve come to see you because we discovered a carving in your exhibition I had never heard of before now. I think it could give a whole new focus to my research.”

“You’re referring to the Quetzalcoatl cut in jade,” he said uneasily.

“Indeed. It would be a great help for my research to see its file.”

The Licenciado seemed uncomfortable as he tried to fit his enormous humanity into his seat.

In a sad voice he said, “I’m so sorry, *Señorita* Brooks, but unfortunately I don’t think I can help you.”

“Why not?”

“Because in spite of being shown at this museum as a piece of Mayan origin its authenticity has been questioned lately, given the fact that nothing even remotely similar has ever been found in any other location. There’s reason to believe it might be false. Therefore, I cannot let you include a report from this museum that later on might be proved, let’s say *inaccurate*, in your study. You have to understand that we cannot compromise the credibility of the museum without being absolutely sure that the piece is authentic.”

“I can tell you that it is ...” I said without meaning to.

“Excuse me?” he turned to me.

“What my colleague means,” intervened Cassie, “is that in our opinion it is a Mayan piece, and I can guarantee that the fact that the authenticity of the piece is still *sub judice* will be clearly specified in the thesis, and all the speculations will be in my own name.”

The man scratched his chin, doubtful.

“I’d be very grateful, if you did me this personal favor ... *Señor* Licenciado,” she said, flirting outrageously.

The man blushed. Mumbling something about a confidential file, he got up heavily, and searched in a cupboard. The next moment he put a thin folder on the table in front of us.

Trying to stay cool, we leaned forward and Cassie opened the file. Excitedly we began to read the single sheet of paper inside it.

A minute later we were looking at each other in puzzlement.

“Is that all?” Cassie asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

“But it’s practically what it says on the quote beside the piece.”

“As you have read, it was found by a peasant and later donated to the

museum by a doctor who owned land in the area. He found out about it by chance, it wasn't the result of any archeological excavation, and no more data was found. One more reason to consider it might be a fraud."

Cassandra and I looked at each other again, disappointed.

"Well," she said as she got up, "thank you so much for your help. You've been very kind."

We shook hands again and as he accompanied us to the door, I remembered one last thing.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Is the place where the peasant found the carving very far from here?"

"Tecpán? Not at all, less than half an hour by car, but you can save yourselves the visit," he said, shaking his head, "it's just a native village with nothing to offer."

"I see," I said disappointed.

"Although it is really peculiar," he added thoughtfully, "that a city whose name in the Maya language means City of the Temple doesn't have a single one."

Cassie was already at the door, but she turned around with sudden interest.

"You said City of the Temple? That's what Tecpán means?"

The Licenciado looked at her, surprised.

"Of course!" he said. "It's the mythical city founded by the *Tecpantlaques*, or as you would say in English: The Men of the Temple."

After hastily saying goodbye to the supervisor, we ran out of the museum and stopped a taxi. The driver agreed to take us to Tecpán, wait around, and drive us back to the airport for one hundred US dollars, which equaled two weeks' pay.

We crossed the city in record time, jumping all the traffic lights as seemed to be the local custom, and took the Inter-American road toward Quetzaltenango. We went at a daring speed, sorting derelict trucks and exotic buses toward a place we had not even suspected existed half an hour before. At that moment, it seemed to us the ultimate and inevitable end to that long, tragic trip.

"It's hard to believe," muttered Cassie as she was looking out of the car window, "that after all and by sheer chance, we have come across the last refuge of the Templars in a tiny village in Guatemala. It's so ... unbelievable."

"Well, we're still not sure that those Men of the Temple were our Templars, it may all be mere coincidence."

"What are the odds," she said, "that a relic we know was given to the Knights of the Temple should appear in a city founded by a community called Men of the Temple at the same time we know they arrived here, and that both things might be unrelated?"

The answer was evident, and though I was trying to curb my enthusiasm, I could not help but wonder what we would find there.

"The thing I find strange is that being a populated area, nobody has found any trace of the Templars having been there seven hundred years ago," I said, more to myself than to Cassie.

"They found the jade figure."

"That's exactly what I mean. If they found the carving of Quetzalcoatl, why not weapons or any other Templar object?"

Cassie was thoughtful for a while, her mind lost in musings of her own.

"Several possibilities occur to me, but the most likely is that those objects have indeed been found."

"What do you mean?"

“Well, you can’t forget that this land was conquered by the Spaniards two hundred years after the Templars arrived. I suspect that archeology wasn’t one of their priorities. So, if they found something that might have been useful, like a sword or a crucifix, they probably would’ve kept it, thinking it belonged to a previous expedition.”

“That makes sense,” I had to admit, “but what about the buildings they must have raised? I guess that if they founded a city, small as it might have been, they had to have built something, right?”

“There’s an explanation for that, and the answer is easy too. What would you have done if you had been a viceroy or a governor and you were informed that in your newly acquired lands there already existed a city, with houses and churches unmistakably built by Christians? It would question your right to the property of the said lands, wouldn’t it?”

It didn’t take me long to see what she was getting at.

“I’d destroy them.”

“And all proof that there had been Christians there before you.”

This thought gave me an uneasy feeling.

“Then, what’s the point of going to Tecpán, if we’re not going to find anything?”

Cassie looked at me enjoying the game.

“I didn’t say we wouldn’t find anything.”

I was confused.

“We have a great advantage, Ulysses. We know what we’re looking for.”

“And *what* are we looking for, if I may ask?”

I saw passion in her eyes when she answered.

“A piece of proof, Ulysses. A *pinche* piece of proof!”

Half an hour later we arrived at a crossing on the left where a sign indicated the way to Tecpán. We followed the bumpy dirt road, which wound along a fertile valley covered with fields of maize, bordered by gentle hills with pine and oak.

“This is beautiful,” I said, fascinated, hanging out of the taxi window.

“That’s why they call Guatemala the country of eternal spring,” said Cassandra, also charmed by the bucolic beauty of the Guatemalan countryside.

From the moment we left the capital, we had encountered groups of

natives dressed in their flashy traditional clothes. They were walking beside the road with farming tools and sacks of maize in a *mecapal* tied around their foreheads, although most of them carried nothing. As we went deeper into the rural world, the amount of men, women and children wandering about the road multiplied, as if a great evacuation were under way.

“Excuse me,” I said, leaning over to the driver, a shaggy halfbreed who had not said a word. “Where are all these people going?”

The taxi driver looked at me in the rearview mirror with surprise.

“Nowhere, mister.”

“What do you mean nowhere?” I insisted. “I imagine they’re not walking just because.”

“Actually, yes,” he said bitterly. “Most of them are poor little Indians whose lands were taken away, so they have nowhere to go. They walk and walk, because there is no more land for them.”

“And isn’t there anyone who can help them?” I asked candidly.

“God,” was the laconic answer. “But it’s been a long time since God took a stroll in Guatemala.”

In half an hour we arrived in Tecpán. Our taxi driver dropped us off at the village square with the promise that he would pick us up at the same place in three hours.

The little town was a succession of concrete blocks of houses, one or two stories high, all with the same rusty grates coming out of their flat roofs, but painted each in a different color: electric blue, garish yellow, rabid green, intense orange or fiery red. Clearly the Guatemalan taste for flashy colors was not limited to their clothes. How different, I thought, from the grey European cities, with their grey inhabitants dressed in grey.

The only exception in the whole village, among so much color, was the snowy white church, on one side of the square. It was also the tallest building and, of course, the most beautiful, with its two pair of columns at the façade crowned by unknown saints. Its tiny belfry and its stone buttresses told of a solid earthquake proof construction.

“Well,” I said rubbing my hands. “Where do we start?”

Cassie shrugged. “No idea, man. Shall we try the town hall?”

“Good idea. If there are any archeological remains in the village, they must have written evidence.”

The good thing about colonial towns is that all the relevant buildings



are around the same square: the town hall was four steps across from the church.

As soon as we went in the door, an armed guard with an unfriendly face blocked our way.

“What is it you want?” he asked putting his hand on the butt of his revolver.

A little surprised by this reception, we looked at each other, realizing we had no idea who to ask for.

I improvised. “Good afternoon, my name is Ulysses Vidal, and I would like to speak with the cultural representative of Tecpán.”

“He’s at a meeting,” he said without taking his hand off his gun.

“Could we see someone from the department?”

“He’s also at a meeting.”

“And any other representative of the town hall?” asked Cassie. “No, don’t tell me,” she said when she saw the guard’s face. “They’re all at a meeting.”

The man stared at us in silence, with an unpleasant grin, as if that were a bank and we were wearing stockings over our heads.

“Those meetings must be fun, with so many people,” I could not help saying. “But with that attitude of yours, you’ll never get invited.”

As it was clear that we would not gain anything from him, we turned around and headed to the local school, hoping to talk to a teacher.

After asking the locals, we arrived at a building surrounded by a fence at the outskirts of town. To our surprise there was a paper stuck on the door with a handwritten note: Closed for the holidays.

“This isn’t turning out as I’d expected,” I said as I sat on the sidewalk.

Cassandra did the same, thoughtful.

“I think all that remains to do is ask the people we meet in the street.

“And what shall we ask them? Excuse me, do you know of any Templar canteen in the area?”

“Maybe we’ll be lucky; the older villagers usually know local legends.”

“Anything will be better than sitting here.”

We got up and went back toward the central park hoping to catch an elder unaware. We walked down a cobbled street, where some native women had laid tablecloths on the sidewalk with piles of tomatoes, potatoes or onions. But then I had a sudden inspiration after I raised my eyes for a moment and saw over the rooftops of the houses the little white belfry.

“The priest!”

“Excuse me?”

“The priest, Cassie, surely if there’s anything archeological in the village, he will know.”

“Okay...” she said, not very convinced. “I don’t share your enthusiasm, but let’s go talk to him. Nothing to lose there.”

Heartened by a hunch, I crossed the square with long strides, followed by Cassandra. When we got to the massive wooden door of the temple, I banged the knocker several times.

I insisted for more than two minutes, but no one appeared.

I pushed the door to make sure it was closed, but it did not give one inch. Cassie shook her head.

“The authorities in this village seem to be totally absent.”

“There must be a side entrance,” I mumbled.

“You’re not thinking of sneaking into the church, are you?”

“We’re not going to steal anything. I just want to talk to the priest.”

“But if he doesn’t open the door, he’s probably not there.”

“Or he’s taking a nap ... or he just doesn’t feel like opening the door.”

“And if that’s the case, do you think you’ll be able to persuade him to open by acting like a thief?”

“Look at the bright side. At least there’s no guard here and if you later wish to confess, you have it at hand.”

We went around the church and into the cloister by a little side door and from there into the temple itself. Once inside, we knocked at all the doors and even called out, but nobody appeared. So, tired and without ideas we sat on the benches to rest and decide our next step.

Inside the church it was dark, just the faint sunlight came in through one of the narrow stained glass windows reflecting on the candelabra, and a few candles flickering at the feet of some beatific bearded saints.

As if to make my sacrilegious deed complete, I lay down on one of the benches with my hands under my head to rest my tired back. I was thinking about what I would do with what we made from the crucifix while my eyes wandered along the convoluted etchings of the ceiling.

Suddenly, my eyes rested on a relief placed exactly in the middle of the dome, where the eight arches that supported it joined. In spite of the poor light, perhaps unconsciously, I noticed that the figure didn’t fit in with the rest of the place and that it was strangely familiar, although I could barely

make out its silhouette.

I gave myself a minute to get used to the lack of light. When I looked again at the figure suspended thirty feet above my head, I was so shocked at recognizing it that I could not say a word. I just raised my arm, pointing with my finger.

There, on the ceiling of a village church in Guatemala, was the same symbol I had seen in the cartographer's seal and on an ebony box in the Sahara dessert.

Two knights riding the same horse.

“It’s ... it’s ...” stammered Cassie, standing in the middle of the aisle and looking up at the ceiling. “How on earth did that get up there?”

“I guess someone put it there when they built the church,” I said as I got up and stood next to her.

“Sure, of course, but what I mean is when and especially why?”

“Could it have been built by the Templars themselves?”

Now she looked at me before answering.

“I don’t think so. The style is clearly colonial.” She pointed out various details inside the different chapels. “I’d say it’s from the sixteenth or seventeenth century.”

“That means it was built two or three hundred years after they arrived here. And by then, supposedly, the Order of the Temple had died out.”

“That’s just what doesn’t fit.”

“Perhaps it was built by their descendants.”

“Descendants?” she said, amused. “Let me remind you, Ulysses, that we’re talking about a community of celibate monks.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot.”

I was tired of looking up, so I began to walk around the church, musing. There was absolute silence since the thick walls isolated the place from the also quiet streets. Only my footsteps broke the unreal stillness. That little church seemed to be outside ordinary space and time, floating somewhere indeterminate in the past, when religious feeling was solid and palpable.

I was walking with my hands behind my back, looking distractedly at the floor, when I received an even greater shock than before as I passed in front of the altar.

Just then Cassie spoke. “I think I know what happened here. Surely there must have been some kind of Templar building that was destroyed for some reason, maybe an earthquake, or by the Spaniards who wanted to wipe out all trace of them. The thing is that when they built this church, they must have used the stones that were there already. The architect must have found the one with the relief of the two monks on horseback among them. Not

knowing its significance, he probably thought it was amusing and decided to put it on the ceiling as decoration.” She snorted and turned to me. “What do you think?”

I had been paying very little notice to what she was saying, and the question caught me unawares. Clearly what I had in front of my eyes at that moment turned things around completely.

I took a deep breath and said, “What I think is that you’re not going to believe what I just found.”

I could not take my eyes away from what was at my feet. Carved on a worn-out stone slab was the familiar silhouette of the god Quetzalcoatl, and above him in massive Latin characters was the inscription MILITES TEMPLI.

Cassie was stunned into silence. She crouched beside the slab and passed her fingertips over the engraving very carefully.

“It’s very eroded,” she said, unable to hide her excitement, “but ... I’d say, going by the type of markings at the edge, whoever made this used stone tools and not an iron chisel.”

“Stone tools?”

“Yes, and the same technique the Maya used to carve their murals.”

“Does that mean that the Maya wrote this? In Latin?”

“It means that Mayan tools were used. Whether the person who used them was Amerindian, European or Mandarin Chinese, I have no way of knowing. Although, if I remember correctly, I think the traditional Mayan chiseling methods died out as soon as the Spaniards set foot in America and brought iron hammers and chisels with them.”

“Then this inscription is at least contemporary with the Spanish conquest.”

“At least.”

“And it could have been made when we suppose the Templars were here.”

“Perfectly possible.”

I tried to put my ideas in order, but the next question came by itself.

“Do you think this slab is also just a decoration?”

Cassie was silent for so long I began to think she had not heard me, but when I was just going to ask her again, she said, “I bet you anything you like, this slab is part of the original floor of a temple that dates back to before the

arrival of the Spaniards.”

I began to feel an anxious tingling in my chest.

“A Christian temple, or a Mayan one?”

“I don’t know,” she said, looking at the floor. “Perhaps both. During the last few weeks I’ve learned a lot from all the information the professor gave me. The Templars were very eclectic. I mean they had no qualms about assimilating different cultures, at least as far as outward form is concerned. In fact, temples of the Order, for example in Castile, had little to do in terms of architecture with those built in Scotland or Palestine. I don’t see why they couldn’t assimilate the native culture and build new Christian sanctuaries which incorporated part of the Mayan symbology.”

She stood up and looked around with renewed interest, as if in the light of her conclusions that dark church had been transformed into the Sistine Chapel.

“Let’s see if there’s more!” she said in a sudden frenzy of energy. “If this floor was originally part of a Templar sanctuary, there could be more markings around.” With a wave of her hand she took in the whole nave. “Let’s find them!”

“All right, but first you’d better tell me what exactly to look for.”

“Anything! Any engraving that looks out of place or shows any Templar iconography. The two men riding the same horse that you already know, for example. Or Octavian crosses, open roses, or even the head of an elder they called Baphomet or Buphomet or something like that, which symbolized the essence of wisdom. The more signs we find of Templar presence in this church, the easier it’ll be to prove they were here before Columbus.”

“Then we’d better not waste time, because I have a feeling that if someone discovers we’re here, they’re not going to like it very much.”

Cassandra remained looking around the altar, while I went to explore the rest of the church. To light my way, I had to “borrow” a thick candle from a black virgin who presided in the chapel and reminded me a lot of the Catalan one at the Montserrat monastery.

After fifteen minutes of meticulous searching, I sat down on one of the front row pews. Cassie was already sitting there with her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands.

“I don’t understand it,” she complained. “There should be more signs, inscriptions or whatever. Any Catholic church is full of Christian symbols,

commemorative inscriptions and even tombs of priests or bishops buried under the floor. But here, apart from that slab, there's nothing, *nada*, zero. It's really weird."

"Well, at least we have this. It seems to me like a pretty solid proof."

Cassandra looked at me without moving.

"I see you have no idea of how the business of verifying archeological findings works. If the methods used aren't very clear, the archaeologist's reputation is questionable, and the final conclusions contradict the existing accepted theory in favor of a wild one instead, then there's not much chance of being taken seriously."

"But we have heaps of proof! The bell, the will, the parchment, the gold cross, the water hole ..."

"Circumstantial," grunted Cassie, "falsifications, controversial interpretations. That's what they'll say, and let me remind you that the *cenote* disappeared with the cave-in.

"We have nothing that's cast-iron, Ulysses, nothing."

In spite of Cassandra's pessimism, I could not accept that our adventure which had taken us so far on the track of the Templars and their fateful treasure had to end like this: sitting on a pew in a small church in a lost village of the Guatemalan high plains, not being able to say anything about what we had been through without being called frauds, and carrying a lifetime's weight of remorse for the death of Professor Castillo, whose valuable contribution to the discovery would never see the light of day.

My head was boiling. I was trying to find some ray of hope in the darkness of that temple. It can't be, I kept telling myself. What a waste if we got here for nothing.

Feeling restless, I got up and began walking again up and down the aisle. Crazy ideas kept popping into my head: excavating again under the pyramid, or trying to reach what might have remained of the water hole by swimming back up the underground channels we had used to escape. But I was aware of the huge investment that would involve and of how few opportunities we had left to us.

I walked with my head down between two rows of pews. I reached the altar and was about to turn around, but stopped instead and looked at the stone slab with the Mayan god and the Latin inscription.

"Cassie, you said before that they used to bury members of the clergy under the floor in churches?"

She looked up. "I did say that. Why do you ask?"

"So couldn't this be the slab of a Templar tomb?"

Cassie looked at the slab without much interest.

"I don't think so. If it were, it would have the name of the deceased and the date of his death on it. I don't see either."

"But the Templars had different customs, didn't they? They were warrior monks, and all that. Maybe they did things their own way when it came to burials."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe, I have no idea. You know I'm no expert on the subject."

I sat down on the steps to the altar to reflect on that.

"I'm sure we're missing something."

"We've looked at everything and everywhere, man," she said, dropping at my side. "Unless it's behind the crucifix or under the altar ..."

She looked at me, and I looked back at her. Slowly we turned toward the altar, which was covered with an embroidered white silk cloth. It was the only place we had not checked.

When I lifted the cloth off the back of the altar, it revealed a series of Mayan symbols.

"Do you understand any of this?" I asked skeptically.

"I don't have the translator, but from what I've learned these past weeks, I think it gives a date."

"A date?"

"Yes, it mentions the last day, of the last month, of the last *katun*, of the last *baktun*, as the moment in which the truth shall be known, and ..."

"And?"

Cassie brought the candle closer to the stone and half-closed her eyes.

"I'm not sure. I think it says something about the end of an era, or something like that."

"The famous end of the world predicted by the Maya?"

Cassie smiled wearily.

"In fact that was a misinterpretation on the part of some phony fortune tellers that got publicized by the media. December 21, 2012 merely announced the end of one cycle and the beginning of another."

"You mean some kind of Mayan 2000 effect?"

"Yeah, something like that." She winked. "Only, it's obvious the world hasn't ended."



“And why that specific date?”

“Who knows? The Mayan calendar is composed of a series of wheels which fit into one another like gears. The next one is always bigger than the one before. They rotated during a period of almost five thousand years of the so-called Long Count. This began on August 11 in the year 3114, B.C. There are no two days with the same name. And this one is very clear: it’s the last, of the last, of the last, of the last, of the last cycle. That is: the end of the Long Count of the Mayan Calendar, which as I said ended December 21 of the year 2012. But I’ve no idea why it’s engraved on this slab.”

We had taken the candelabra, the Bible and a golden chalice off the altar, and pulled away the cloth that covered it. The altar was now a bare massive rectangular rock, carved on all sides with Mayan hieroglyphs, except for the top, where a polished white marble slab gave it the look of a strange pre-Columbian kitchen bench.

“It reminds me of my grandmother’s kitchen,” I said in a whisper.

“Well, it looks to me like a Mayan sacrificial altar. I’d say it even has the little channel where the blood of the victim ran.”

“Get out of here!” I said, coming closer.

“Just kidding, dope!”

“Huh! Submarine archaeologist *and* comedian. You have a great future ahead of you.”

“I know,” she replied proudly, “my daddy used to say so.”

“So, have you discovered anything else of interest in the engravings?”

“Nothing, there’s more or less the same thing on all four sides.”

“And so?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. Maybe something did happen in December of 2012, and we didn’t realize. We could ask the Christ.” She smiled and pointed her thumb over her shoulder as she sat down on the steps of the altar. “He might know something.”

“Ahem ... in fact, there’s one place we haven’t checked yet.”

She looked first at one side and then the other. “Where?” she asked.

I stared at the marble where she was sitting.

“Oh, no! Not that!”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this!”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“You always say that when you’re about to do something very bad.

Like profaning an altar, for example.”

“We’re not profaning anything. Call it ... field work.”

Cassie’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“Field work? Are you serious? This is destroying private property, not to mention sacrilege!”

“I still haven’t broken anything,” I protested, with an innocent look.

“Then what are you planning to do with that huge candelabrum you’ve picked up?”

“Call it creative engineering.”

“Don’t be a jerk! You’re going to use it to lift the marble!”

“Not if you don’t help me.”

Cassie looked from side to side, as if searching for someone to share her indignation with.

“You’re absolutely insane! We’ll end up in jail because of your crazy ideas!”

“I can’t make you do it, Cassie,” I said getting close to her. “But it’s possible that what we’re looking for is under this. If we manage to find solid proof that the Templars were here, the professor’s death won’t have been in vain.”

“That’s foul play.”

“I know. Are you going to help me or not?”

She put her hands on her hips and shook her head.

“I still think it’s a very bad idea, although ...” she changed her tone, “deep down, I also know that if I don’t see what’s underneath this I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.”

“That’s my girl!” I put the edge of the candelabrum under a corner of the heavy marble slab. “And now ... let’s lift this slab before someone catches us.”

Trying to cause the least possible damage, we began to lever the stone until we heard a slight crack, like a mute complaint from the slab at being pushed out of its place.

“It’s moving.”

So it was. Almost imperceptibly, the rectangular white marble slab had given way. That was enough to make us redouble our efforts.

“Come on, girl!” I encouraged her with my teeth clenched. “Go for it, we’re nearly there!”

Finally, with Cassie practically hanging from one end of the

candelabrum, which fortunately turned out to be very tough, and me pushing with all my might, we managed to lift it enough to wedge in the Bible, the only thing at hand. From then on it was easier. We pushed together and finally managed to take the slab down without breaking it. We leaned it against the steps.

What we found then was even more disconcerting, at least as far as I was concerned, than the Mayan symbols on the sides.

I was looking at a series of circles linked to each other. They were filled with strange symbols, and with a discordant Templar cross carved right in the middle of the stone.

“What the hell?”

“It’s the calendar!” said Cassandra, thrilled.

“That gibberish is the Mayan calendar?”

“That’s it. The most perfect one ever known by man until a couple of centuries ago.”

“Personally I prefer the Pirelli one.”

“Don’t be a jerk! This one was incredibly precise, a mathematical and astronomical wonder. You could accurately date events billions of years in the past or the future.”

“Yeah ... yeah ... but how does this help us?”

“Well, it has a Templar cross in its center, and that wasn’t very common in Mayan calendars.”

“Yeah, I see it. But as you’d say ... how do we prove that we didn’t carve it ourselves?”

“True, unless...”

She stretched her hand and gently leaned on the carving. Then she turned her wrist softly and made the tiniest wheel of the calendar move, almost imperceptibly.

“It moved!”

I had become stone myself.

“Did you see, Ulysses?”

“I did, and I still don’t believe it ...”

“An articulated calendar! I didn’t even know they existed!” She was all excited. “This is already a phenomenal discovery!”

“Do you think so?”

“No doubt at all! It’s something unique!”

“Then why cover it with a two-hundred-pound slab?”

“Who knows?” She arched her brows. “Perhaps the priest didn’t know what it meant and found it uncomfortable to put the chalice ...”

“... or else he wanted to hide it.”

“Hide it? Why?” She stared at me. “Aren’t you a bit paranoid?”

“Maybe. But ... would you do something for me?” I took a moment to clear my mind. “Do you think you could enter that date of the end of the world of December 2012 in this calendar of yours?”

After ten minutes of scrutiny, Cassandra leaned on the biggest wheel of the calendar. With a great deal of effort she made it turn until she was happy with the result. Then she did the same with the next wheel and then the next, until finally she had placed the five circles in what she thought was the right position.

“And now what?” she said, stepping back.

“No idea. Shall we try with *Open Sesame*?”

“I only hope I haven’t triggered the end of the world,” she said, only half-joking.

There followed a few seconds of absolute silence.

“Oh, well, we had to try,” I said at last.

Cassie took my arm. “Hey, it wasn’t a bad idea. It would’ve worked for Indiana Jones.”

“True. From now on I’ll stick to Swedish experimental films.”

“Never mind, sweetie. This discovery is worth it all by itself.”

“Yeah, I’ll have to bear that cross ...” As I said this I had a sudden suspicion.

I went back to the altar. With all my frustration to give me strength, I pushed hard on the Templar cross in the center of the calendar.

Immediately there was a dull rumble of stone on stone behind us. When we turned around, the slab with the inscription MILITES TEMPLI had vanished. In its place there was a dark hole that disappeared into the shadowy underground.

“Virgin Mary Mother of God ...” cried Cassie.

“Wait a minute, I’ll get some light,” I said.

I grabbed some candles from the chapel of the black Virgin and brought them to the edge of the hole.

Obviously, I was expecting to see the remains of an ancient Templar Knight. I was certainly not prepared for what the trembling flame of the candle illuminated.

“Jesus Christ!” Cassie said. “Not again!” Clearly, she wasn’t either.

A chill ran down my spine when I saw a series of stone steps that began about three feet below and vanished in the dark.

"This doesn't look like a tomb."

"I'm not going in there," said Cassie. "I've had enough."

"Okay, I understand. You stay here."

"Are *you* going down?"

"What else can I do? We've gotten this far."

"Seriously, you don't even have a flashlight."

"The candles will be enough."

"And if they blow out?"

"I'll use my super powers and fly out with my cape in the wind, using my x-ray vision."

"Don't be a smartass, I'm serious."

"And what do you want me to do? Stay here?"

"I don't know. Something else."

I took her hand. "Look, Cassie, I understand that you're not keen about going down those stairs, but I have to. I want to."

"Then I'm coming with you."

"Are you sure?"

"No way. But I'm the archaeologist here, and ... well, we'll have more chances with four candles than with two."

With the utmost care, I climbed down to the beginning of the stairs with a red candle in each hand. I went down the first few steps to make way for Cassandra, who was right behind me.

"What do you think this can be?" I whispered when I felt her at my back.

"Who knows? Maybe a crypt, or a storage room. How should I know?"

"Maybe we'll find a wine cellar with vintage wines from 1300."

"Or a bowling alley. Come on, start going down and let's find out."

The candles did not shed much light, so I felt every step with my foot before stepping on it to know where I was going. The ceiling, on the other hand, could be seen perfectly well because it was only a couple of inches

above the top of my head. By the light of the flames I could see a coarse surface, blackened by smoke and very far from the impressive decoration of the “art gallery” under the pyramid in Yaxchilan.

“Doesn’t look as if they worked very hard here,” I commented. I was going down as carefully as I could.

“I’ve noticed,” said Cassie behind me. “They seem to have done just enough for it to be useful. No artifice or decoration, very ... monastic.”

Having descended only a few feet, I sensed the end of the tunnel.

“I think the stairs end right ahead.”

“Do they?” she asked happily. “What do you see?”

“I don’t know yet. In a minute you’ll see for yourself.”

Three more steps and I was on level ground. Cassie, her reluctance forgotten, pushed me aside to study the place we had arrived at.

“I can’t see a thing.”

I noticed an elongated shadow on the wall. “Wait ...” I said.

I went closer and found with pleasure that it was an old wood torch. Even without oil I hoped it would still burn. I put one candle on the ground and managed to light it after several attempts.

“*Voilà!*”

“Where did you get that from?”

“It was right next to the entrance and ... look, there’s another one.”

She took it, and twenty seconds later there was enough light to give us an overall view of where we were.

It was only then that we realized we were in the antechamber of a man-made cave. It was a little over thirty feet long by fifteen wide, and I could touch the ceiling with the tips of my fingers. The walls were coarsely carved, lacking any sort of ornament. This meant the shock was greater when we discovered a carved pedestal of the same stone, at the other end of the cave. It served as an altar, in front of a big wooden cross. On top of the altar was a simple stone coffer I recognized at once.

It was the one the Maya had so faithfully drawn on the ceiling of the “art gallery” in the ill-fated pyramid of Yaxchilan. The one that the Templars had apparently taken with them after leaving their earthly treasures behind in the mud of the water hole. What, according to Cassie’s translation of the explanatory glyphs, the Maya priests had called the Sacred Treasure.

The white limestone of the coffer took on a yellowish sheen under the light of the oil torches. It seemed to have an eerie light of its own, in comparison with the dark rock of the crypt.

“Do you recognize it?” I asked in a whisper.

Cassie stepped forward, shone the torch right on top of it and passed her hand over its rugged surface.

“It’s the same as ...” she murmured.

“I’d say so. It’s the same coffer in the paintings at Yaxchilan.”

Cassandra got on her knees beside it and studied the markings with great interest.

“Except that this is not a coffer,” she said in the same awed voice. Turning to me, she added, “it’s an ossuary.”

“An ossuary?”

“It’s a stone urn where they keep the bones of the dead.”

“So after all, it does turn out to be a tomb?”

“It seems so,” she replied, and concentrated again on the stone ark, a foot and a half tall.

“Judging by all the trouble they took to bring it here, it must’ve been someone very important in the Order of the Temple.”

Cassie was silent, absorbed in the ossuary and the strange markings that decorated it.

“Have you noticed this drawing?” I said, pointing at the silhouette of a fish. It was simple, as if it had been drawn by a child. “The man must’ve been a fisherman or something.”

Cassie looked at the engraving, biting her lip. It was something I had seen her do before when she was nervous.

“Ulysses, this fish and these concentric circles here, you see them?, are the symbols the early Christians used to recognize each other as such.”

“I thought the Christian emblem was the cross.”

“The cross wasn’t adopted by the Church until much later. The fish, on the other hand, referred to the first disciples of Christ as “fishers of men.”“

“Do you mean to say that the bones of some early Christian are in this



ossuary and that's why they brought it here?"

"Not only that. I'm practically sure these small markings round the cover are writing. To be exact, I'd say they're Arameic words."

"Wait a minute," I said feeling a sudden chill. "Wasn't that the language spoken in Palestine two thousand years ago?"

"That's right. So here we have an ossuary carved in ancient Judea, in the first years of Christianity. And it was brought to America together with the Order's treasure. And while they left the gold and the jewels behind at the bottom of a *cenote*, they brought this here and protected it as their most valuable relic."

"Are you thinking that ..."

"It could be one of the closest disciples of Jesus? I'd be lying if I said no. Why else would they take so much trouble?"

I felt my heart shrink as I said it, "So ... you think this could very well be the remains of one of the apostles?"

Cassandra took my hand, moved.

"I've never considered myself a Catholic," she said, "I'd rather say I'm agnostic. But this ... overwhelms me. To tell you the truth I'm quite intimidated."

"If it's any consolation, that makes two of us."

We remained like that, hand in hand, with the torches sizzling in the solitude of the crypt.

"Let's open it," she whispered.

I turned to look at her in surprise.

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure about violating the tomb of a saint? Are you kidding me? I'm scared shitless, but I'm an archaeologist and it's in my blood. Since we made it this far, I can't leave without taking a look inside."

"Okay," I said and squeezed her hand, "I won't be the one to stop you."

We found some cracks in the wall to fit the torches. With infinite care, we grabbed the heavy stone cover, lifted it slowly and put it down against the wall on one side of the pedestal. Then we took the torches again. Watching so that not a spark fell into the ossuary, we bent over it, trembling with excitement.

A rank smell assaulted my nostrils when I looked into the dark urn, forcing me to retreat. Cassie disregarded it. She brought the torch closer and studied the inside carefully, in silence. She leaned closer.

“Ulysses.” She sounded as if she could not breathe. “Can you ... bring your torch a little closer?”

I did so, but instead of looking into the ossuary, I noticed Cassie’s face. She was growing more and more nervous as she examined the contents of the vessel. She turned whiter than paper, took a step back and looked at me without appearing to see me. She dropped the torch and stumbled back until she reached the wall. She leaned against it and slid down until she was sitting on the ground.

“My God ...” I heard her gasp from the shadows. “Oh ... my ... God ...”

Puzzled by Cassie's reaction, I looked toward the ossuary and shone the torch into the dark rectangle.

The first thing I glimpsed in the reflection of the flame was a polished skull. Its empty orbits were looking up, as if they still held eyes that could see. The lower part of the jaw was separated from the skull, and it still had all its teeth. The skull was set upon the sternum, with the ribs radiating from it. These were all in perfect condition, with the exception of one on the right side, which appeared partially broken. The bones of the limbs were also all there: humerus, ulna, and radius, ending in the carpals and metacarpals. These, incredibly kept their original position, so that they still looked like hands.

It was here that I noticed something odd. Where the wrist would have been in the perfect order of the whitened bones, the area where the ulna and radius joined, was an ochre stain round a tremendous wound. This had splintered and torn apart those bones. Spellbound, regardless of whether I disturbed the remains in the process, I brought the torch closer. In the other wrist I could see exactly the same laceration.

Suddenly hit by an unlikely suspicion, I checked what had been the feet of the deceased. My wildest foresight was confirmed. There, on the bridges of both feet, were the same marks of what was undoubtedly rust.

"It can't be ..." I stammered, overwhelmed.

As if to dissipate any trace of doubt, my eyes went back to the skull. Upon closer observation it revealed a series of small incisions around its whole perimeter. They were irregular and of different depth, just like the ones that would appear if that head had been brutally crowned with a ring of thorns.

Now the two of us were sitting on the ground with our backs to the wall. Even under the orange light of the torches, Cassie's face was livid, much as my own must have been at that moment. I felt like an invisible hand was pressing on my chest. I had difficulty in breathing, just like when diving I had used more air than I should have.

A whirl of thoughts, feelings and fears were running through me from

head to toe, so that there was no way I could think calmly. I wanted to convince myself that what I had seen there was just a mix-up, perhaps some kind of ancient joke planned by someone with a medieval evil mind. Or perhaps all that was just a mistake made by some illiterate monks seven hundred years ago.

But deep down inside, I was sure that what lay in that ossuary was nothing less than the skeleton of the most influential man in the history of humanity, whose presence in that stone urn contradicted the New Testament and the supposed divinity of the one who called himself the Son of God. In other words, it uprooted the deepest foundations upon which Christianity, the Church, Faith and a good part of the inhabitants of this planet were based.

“And now what do we do?” asked Cassie finally.

I was so dazed that I had no way of answering coherently.

“I have no idea ...” I said at last. “I simply don’t know. You’re the archaeologist, what do you usually do in a situation ... like this?”

I did not look at her but I could imagine her expression.

“You mean when you discover the remains of the supposedly immortal Son of God, who ascended to the heavens three days after he died, safe in an urn?”

“Come on, there must be a standard procedure to follow, or something, right?”

“A standard procedure? This is the greatest archeological discovery in history, and there’s no saying what the repercussions throughout the world will be. Nothing like this has ever happened before, not even anything remotely like it.”

“Then ... you’re determined to go public?”

She looked surprised.

“Of course I’m going public! If we can confirm that these are the remains of Jesus, the whole world has a right to know. Or do you think otherwise?”

“No, I guess not,” I said, thoughtful. “But the possible consequences bother me.”

She got up, obviously upset by my reservations.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those who believe people are stupid and it’s best to keep them fooled and happy rather than having them face reality?”

“Absolutely not, Cassie, don’t get me wrong. It’s just that ...” I shook my head, trying to get rid of some thoughts. “Forget it, I guess you’re right.”

She gave me a hand up.

“Then, there’s nothing to discuss. Now we have to decide. Are we going to leave empty-handed and come back with a formal excavation permit, with the risk of finding the crypt empty, or are we going to gather up the bones and take them to a safe place?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but the voice I heard was not mine. It was a totally unknown one which now boomed from behind us.

“Good afternoon,” it said with controlled irritation. “Have you found what you were looking for?”

Startled, we turned around slowly. We saw a man dressed like a priest who was looking at us with indignation while he held an oil lamp aloft. He must have been about sixty judging by the many wrinkles that furrowed his marked Amerindian features. He looked basically kind, but his eyes were so intensely black and deeply-set that they seemed to pierce us.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that question?” he retorted, cold as ice.

“My name is Ulysses Vidal, and this is Cassandra Brooks. We are ... amateur archaeologists.”

“Very well, *Señor* Vidal and *Señorita* Brooks, can you explain to me what you’re doing here?”

“Well ... you see,” said Cassie, shyly, “we knocked on the main door for quite a while. Then as nobody answered, and we found a door open, we decided to come in.”

The priest directed his light at Cassie.

“To begin with, this is breaking and entering,” he said dryly. “But what I’m asking is: what are you doing down here?”

I was going to speak, but Cassie beat me to it.

“We were admiring the inside of the church when, by chance ...”

“By chance?” he interrupted.

“Yes, of course by chance. We ... thought one of the floor slabs was moving and we were curious. We lifted it and ended up here, then ...”

“*Señorita* Brooks,” he interrupted her again in the same sullen tone, “do you honestly believe I’m going to swallow all those lies?”

It was clear that we were getting nowhere like this.

“The truth is,” I said, “that we discovered the Mayan inscriptions on the altar and the calendar under the marble. But I give you my word that we’re not tomb raiders. It was just curiosity.”

“And don’t you know that curiosity killed the cat?”

A chill went down my spine. I sensed a veiled threat in his comment.

“Don’t worry, I’m not threatening you,” he added soothingly, as if he had read my mind. “But I’m still waiting to hear something other than a lie.”

“Well, you might not believe it,” said Cassie, “but that’s more or less the truth. We had no idea what was down here.”

“Then is it a habit of yours to profane churches?”

“Look, I don’t know who you are, but I can guarantee ...”

“*Padre* Ramón Díaz.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m Father Ramón Díaz,” he repeated. “Now you know who I am.”

“Then, I guarantee you Mr. Díaz, that ...”

“*Padre* Díaz, please.”

Cassie breathed out heavily with a worried face.

“Look, I know it’s hard to believe, but three hours ago we were quietly walking through the Museum of Archeology. We came across a Mayan sculpture found in this town a century ago and drove here to take a look before our plane leaves for Spain.”

“And that’s when you entered my church without permission, dismantled the altar, violated the crypt and profaned a tomb.”

“Did you know there was a tomb here?”

“Don’t change the subject, young man.”

“Wait a minute ...” I insisted. I was beginning to see things more clearly. “You knew, but ... do you also know who is in the urn?”

The priest’s face tightened.

“This conversation is over, so please oblige me by leaving right away. The police are on their way and if you don’t leave immediately, I foresee a long stay in a Guatemalan prison.”

“Fuck, he knows!” cried Cassie.

“I have no idea what you think I know, *Señorita* Brooks,” he said brusquely, “and I don’t care. But I’d beg you to mind your language in this place, and leave at once.”

There was only one more card to play. I thought, what the heck!”

“Look, *Padre*,” I said trying to sooth him, “we’re aware of what we’ve done and we apologize for it.” I decided to be honest and see what would happen. “The ultimate reason why we’re here is because we’ve been traveling the world for the past few weeks, tracing an ancient treasure. A treasure we thought was lost, by the way. Three days ago, in the search for this treasure, we lost a dear friend, and as a kind of homage to him, we were trying to unravel a mystery connected with a jade statuette of the god Quetzalcoatl. It brought us to your church by chance. We thought we’d find answers in this

village but we never,” I glanced at the still open ossuary and its lid leaning against the wall, “... ever imagined we were going to find *that* answer.”

The priest’s face seemed to relax a little. He went up to the ossuary with reverence.

“Please close it,” he said in a milder tone.

Cassie and I exchanged glances. Leaving the torches on the ground, we picked up the stone lid carefully and placed it once more over the urn.

Once the ossuary was covered he said, “And now, I beg you to get out of here and never come back to this place.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“What did you say?” he asked in disbelief.

“I said I don’t think we’re leaving.”

“Ulysses, the police ...” I heard Cassie whisper.

I am very bad at playing poker, but I suspected that he was bluffing about the police.

“Don’t worry, Cassie. There’s no police coming.”

The priest did not say anything. He kept silent while all the time his eyes seemed to bore through me.

“And they’re not coming, because the last thing *Padre* Díaz wants is for anybody else to find out about this place. Especially not the local police.” Now I looked at him defiantly. “Am I wrong, *Padre*?”

He said nothing for a long time, studying me carefully, trying to guess my intentions as well as calculating the options he had for throwing us out by force.

“What is it that you really want?” he asked finally.

“Just answers.”

The priest took a deep breath, lowering the oil lamp.

“All right, you win,” he said, wearily. He turned around toward the stair, sure that we would follow. “Come with me to my office.”

We helped him replace the slab that covered the stairs, then he gestured us to go with him to a small chamber beside the chapel. There was only an old dark worn-out wooden table with several folders piled on it, some chairs of the same wood and a crucifix on the wall for all decoration in the Spartan room.

He motioned us to sit. Still without having said a word since we came out of the crypt, he sat down himself. He leaned on the table and studied us



again, this time in the warm light that came in through a large window that opened to the cloister.

“Answers ...” he said, without taking his eyes off us. “Do you think you are worthy of them just because you broke into my church and found the crypt?”

“No,” Cassie said, “I don’t think we deserve them ... but there are millions of people who do. All those who pray every day to a god who became a man, died and was resurrected. And they believe every word of a book that, so it seems, doesn’t tell the whole truth.”

The priest frowned.

“And you are going to be the ones who decide what is true and what is not?”

“We’re not going to decide anything. We just want to know the facts.”

*Padre Díaz* leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling.

“*The facts.*” He said it as if he found something amusing in the word. “What is it you think you know about the facts?”

“To begin with, under the floor of this church there’s an ossuary brought by the Templars at the beginning of the fourteenth century. It was their most precious treasure, and at the same time their most terrible secret. You know as well as I do that in it lie the remains of the man you have right there,” I said, pointing at the crucifix on the wall, “nailed to a cross.”

The priest stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“I see ... and you two are dying to spread the news to the world. Am I wrong?”

“Is there a reason why we shouldn’t?”

“There are times when telling the truth doesn’t turn out as well as expected.”

“For who? For the people, or just for your business?”

“Business?”

“Yes. The second oldest business in the world, and no doubt the most profitable. I don’t know of any other two-thousand-year-old *business* still going so strong.”

Instead of getting angry, the priest gave me an ironic smile.

“You don’t seem much like a believer.”

“Agnostic.”

“Ah, then you do have faith,” he said, and spread his hands wide.

“I believe in a God that I am unable to understand. And I’m aware that

I never will understand Him, because if I did, He wouldn't be a real God. He would just be an illusion created by my limited intellect. It's like air: if you believe you can hold it in your hand, then it's not air."

"Hmm, I see you've devoted quite some time to thinking about it."

"I've had a lot of free time. Just like any priest."

I had sounded more bitter than I had intended.

"I'd say you don't have any love for either the Catholic Church or her representatives."

"You're very clever."

"And don't you think you might be wrong when you generalize about an institution which includes hundreds of thousands of people? An institution which essentially wishes to do good?"

"That's funny," I said with a forced smile, "coming from someone who's keeping the truth about the faith he preaches hidden in the cellar."

The priest twitched in his chair.

"And do you think that gives you the right to judge me?"

"Unlike you people, I don't think I'm in possession of the truth. I'm not blaming you either. But down there I've seen that the version you preach about the death and resurrection of Jesus is false. You've been hiding the truth for twenty centuries, all so as not to lose customers."

*Padre Díaz* stood up and walked to the window of his office. He let the afternoon sun warm his face.

"What do you know about the Templars?" he asked without turning.

Cassie and I exchanged brief surprised looks. He glanced at us from the corner of his eye and nodded.

"I'm going to tell you a story," he said and gazed back through the glass. "In the year 1118, after the conquest of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, Hugh de Payens created the Order of the Poor Soldiers of Christ, in order to protect Christian pilgrims who were traveling there. He immediately asked if he could set up his headquarters upon the remains of Solomon's Temple, in what today is the Esplanade of the Mosques. He hoped secretly to find some relic in the cellars of those ruins that would increase the prestige of the new Order. Unfortunately, after several years of searching, what they found in the underground corridors of the Jews' legendary temple was something much more disturbing and dangerous."

"The ossuary," said Cassandra.

"Imagine," he went on as if he had not heard, "the tremendous impact

that this discovery must have made on those men. They were fearful of God, they had risked their lives to recover the Holy Places. Their whole existence was centered on the Christian religion and their own blind faith in what was written in the Bible. It says so in Corinthians 15:14: *And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.*”

He paused again and heaved a sigh.

“In fact,” he went on, “during the first years they refused to accept any new members to the Order, which at that time only consisted of nine knights. They needed to “reconstruct” their faith in God and the Church. In the end they adopted certain philosophical ideas from Jewish rites and esoteric cults. In this way they managed to save their own beliefs and accept Christ’s mortal condition, without his divinity being affected.”

“And how did they manage that?” I interrupted. “Playing games with semantics?”

He looked at me with a certain sadness in his eyes.

“Is that what you believe? That we’re cynics?”

“You said it, not me.”

The priest took a pause and passed his hand along the back of his neck.

“Those philosophical thoughts I was referring to, the ones the Templars found in Judea, were no less than the Gnostic Gospels. The same ones that the Emperor Constantine, in the year 325, at the Council of Nicea, refused to allow in the version of the Bible we know today.”

“I don’t understand,” said Cassie. “Gnostic Gospels? Emperor Constantine? The Bible we know today? Was there another one?”

“The fact is, *Señorita*, that until that moment there was nothing that could be called the Bible. It wasn’t until this Roman Emperor decided to make Christianity the official religion of the Empire that a selection of the writings of prophets, martyrs and apostles was put together, under his direction, to create what we now call the New Testament.”

“The Emperor of Rome did that?” she asked in disbelief.

“That’s right. Following the advice of counselors and priests, he decided, for example, which gospels would be included and which would not only be excluded but forbidden as heretical. Hasn’t it ever struck you that of the thirteen apostles, only the versions of four of them saw the light?”

“You mean to say the twelve apostles,” I corrected him.

“No, I meant thirteen. Mary Magdalene was one of them, if not the most important.”

“The prostitute?” said Cassie, shocked.

The priest sighed condescendingly.

“In fact, *Señorita* Brooks, Mary Magdalene was Jesus of Nazareth’s wife.”

Cassie was struck as numb as Lot’s wife, but with her jaw hanging from the shock and her eyes open wider still.

“That,” he continued, “is only one of the many secrets they decided to hide at the Council. Such as for example, that it was Jesus who asked Judas to betray him so that he could become a martyr for the cause. Or that his message was much more complex and at the same time more humane than the newly created church was interested in. The Gospels that are not mentioned in the Bible show a mortal Christ, idealistic, combative, and transcendent. Of course this was the opposite of what Constantine was looking for. He wanted a flock of the submissive faithful, obedient to any commandment from the incontestable new leader of the Christian Church, that is to say Constantine himself. They chose the gospels they thought more favorable to them, both in terms of their message and their simplicity. People loved (and still love) legends of mythical characters with supernatural powers, a simple message and a promise of salvation. And that is exactly what they received.”

“But ...” I hesitated. “In that case why doesn’t anybody know any of this? Is there proof of what you’re saying?”

“Of course. Are you familiar with the Epistle of Eugnostos? The texts of the Nag Hammadi library found in Egypt in 1945? Or the Gospel of Judas, discovered in the hands of an antique dealer?” He waited for an answer then gave up, looking resigned. “No, of course not. The only people who are interested are the ones who want to keep them anonymous.”

He looked very tired. “So, *Señor* Vidal, there is the proof you ask for. But all the same, the harm is already done.”

“Well, if you don’t believe in it yourself, how can you wear that cassock and not expect to be called a cynic?”

I was expecting a more offended reaction, but he simply gave a slight nod.

“I understand what you’re thinking,” he said slowly. “But let me finish telling you the whole story.”

The priest breathed deeply and looked toward the window again, with his hands at his back.

“It wasn’t till then,” he continued where he had left off, “that those knights were able to come to terms with their faith and face the world once again. They decided to move the ossuary secretly to Paris (although they left proof of it in an engraving which is still kept in the cathedral at Chartres). They had two aims. One was to keep it safe from the infidels, the other was to use it to put pressure on the Vatican. Perhaps thanks to this, the Order was granted a papal benediction at the Council of Troyes in 1128, only ten years after its institution, something totally unheard of at that time.”

He turned to face us.

“Two hundred years later, in the year 1307, under pressure from a king of France who was anxious to gain the riches of the Temple, Pope Clement V dissolved the Order. The Knights Templar were forced to escape. They took with them their most powerful weapon, but at the same time their heaviest burden and all the responsibility it implied. That is the reason they came to these lands, to what was then the Mayan kingdom. Here they were welcomed as envoys of Quetzalcoatl himself and allowed to create their own community here in Tecpán.”

“And what happened to those Templar Knights?” asked Cassie.

“They simply died of old age. The few buildings they had managed to erect had become unidentifiable ruins by the time the Spaniards arrived here almost two centuries later. When it was decided that a new church had to be raised here in the village, it was deliberately built on the same site. The octagonal cupola was reconstructed, and part of the symbology of the Order was included in certain places in the temple.”

“You mean to say that when the Spaniards arrived here in fifteen hundred and something, there were Templars with them? You just said they’d been disbanded two hundred years before.”

The priest smiled.

“No, *Señorita* Brooks, the Templars didn’t come with the Spaniards. The fact is that they were still here, in a manner of speaking, when Columbus set foot on America.”

“Did they give up celibacy?” she asked, amused.

He shook his head. “Not at all. They simply converted some of the natives to Christianity and took their sons as disciples. They introduced them into the ways of the Order. They were aware that, sooner or later, the Europeans would come to these lands just as they had, so they established a clandestine Order formed exclusively of native Maya. Their sole purpose was

to preserve a secret which until today was unknown to the rest of the world.”

*Padre Díaz* stood in the middle of the room, deep in his own thoughts.

“All that sounds fine,” I said, seeing he had concluded his story, “but I don’t see what it has to do with whether we reveal the truth about what we discovered in the crypt.”

“The reasons why the Order decided at the time to keep the body of Christ hidden,” he said wearily, “are just as valid nowadays as they were nine hundred years ago. Man, since the dawn of time, has always needed certainties, which is to say a God, to give his own existence some meaning. The Church, with all its many flaws, is what allows Christians to have access to a faith that keeps them hopeful for a better life. Through it, many of them are helped to bear their innumerable misfortunes by trusting in an almighty God who will some day reward them with Paradise.”

He walked back to his chair and sat down. “If one day those believers should discover that this omnipotent God could not or would not bring his own son back to life, what hope would remain to them of earning the Kingdom of Heaven? If we take away hope from any man or woman who might be oppressed, disinherited, or suffering in any way, we shall turn them into desperate creatures. Desperate, and therefore inhuman.”

“You’re taking it for granted,” I objected, “that a non-religious person has to be a monster. You’ve got the wrong idea. I don’t know any atheist who’s grown horns and smells of sulfur.”

“*Señor Vidal*, you are probably talking about wealthy and mentally healthy people, who think they don’t need a God, am I right?” He paused, then when we made no comment went on, “I, on the other hand, am referring to the millions of faithful that fill the churches searching for comfort, because their reality is cruel and unfair. Tell me, *Señor Vidal*, would you be capable of appearing before a lost mission in the Congo jungle, or right here for that matter, in some little village on the high plains, and explaining to the poor people whose only hope is a better life than this that they should stop praying, that God doesn’t exist, and that their own existence, as well as being miserable, is futile and lacking in meaning?” His black eyes shone with passion. “For you and your atheist friends, this is easy. They can choose the life they wish to follow, who to marry, or simply what to eat for lunch.” He pointed out of the window. “Those people out there, on the other hand, simply can’t.”

I was disarmed. I could not find the right words.

“Human beings are stronger than you clerics think,” I said trying to sound convinced. “You are so patronizing that you don’t allow people to grow and think for themselves. The real problem is that you don’t believe in humans and their capacity to accept the truth.”

He shook his head as if he had just heard a bad joke.

“Accept the truth? Are you really serious? Not even you, refined and self-sufficient westerners, so self-satisfied, are capable of facing the real truth of your hedonistic existences. You need useless distractions, empty idols or drugs to help you escape from yourselves. And yet you spend more on psychiatrists and antidepressants than the rest of the world does on vaccines and antibiotics. If the culture that’s supposed to have reached the peak of civilization can’t keep its members sane except by leaving them permanently alienated, how do you think the ones being hit in the face and stomach by reality day after day are supposed to manage?”

The obvious truth of the priest’s words was taking its toll. Despite this I still did not want to give in.

“What do you think, Cassie,” I asked, looking at her for support. “You’re very quiet.”

Her emerald eyes were full of sadness as she looked at me.

“I ... I have to agree with *Padre* Díaz’s words. I hate to admit it, just like you, but I don’t believe we have the right to expose the ossuary. The pathetic hope of happiness for millions of people is at stake. I can’t take the responsibility of risking it for the sake of a pile of bones.”

The priest’s expression softened. He joined his hands.

“One day,” he said without a shadow of doubt in his voice, “the truth about the mortality of Jesus Christ will be revealed to all Christians. But for now, unfortunately, that moment hasn’t arrived. The body of the Son of God will have to stay hidden in a dark crypt, until there’s light in the mind of man and he is able to face himself in the mirror without looking away.”

“The 21<sup>st</sup> December of 2012 was the chosen date, wasn’t it?” I asked before I could think.

The priest smiled wanly.

“It was ... but it’s clear that the world isn’t ready for the truth. I’m afraid we’ll have to wait a long time yet. Who knows, perhaps until the end of another Long Count of five thousand years.”

Much to my chagrin, I understood that *Padre* Díaz was right.

Whenever you ask someone what they wish for, the answer is always

the same: happiness.

Nobody asks for the truth.

*The truth shall make you free* ... where had I read that? Maybe in the Bible ... it would be ironic.

And there I was, sitting silently in front of an enigmatic village priest, a few feet away from the greatest find in history. I was aware that if I chose to, I could change the world by revealing what had happened that afternoon in a humble church in a small village in Guatemala.

But I was not going to.

Even without being consciously aware of it, I had decided that the secret of that real treasure would be safe with me.

Time was running out. There was no sense in prolonging a discussion in which I had already been won over. So, with nothing more to say, I breathed deeply and nodded.

"I'm not at all sure, *Padre Díaz*, that you are entirely in the right. But, if I were in the wrong, I know I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

I stood up and offered him my hand across the table.

"And that's why I won't reveal anything of what I've seen or heard here. I give you my word."

The priest shook my hand and then Cassie's. She had repeated my promise.

"You are good people," he solemnly declared. "May God bless you both."

There seemed to be nothing more left to say. Realizing we had just enough time left to catch our flight, we took our leave from the priest, much in shock thanks to the turn events had taken.

We were already on our way to the exit, when I thought of one last question I just had to ask.

I turned back to look him squarely and blurted out, "*Padre Díaz*, are you one of them?"

"One of them?"

"Are you a Templar Knight?"

The priest, far from being surprised, laughed heartily.

"*Señor Vidal*, the Templars disappeared almost seven hundred years ago." But he added with an impish grin, "I am just a humble Parish priest ... and this is an unimportant little church."



## Epilogue

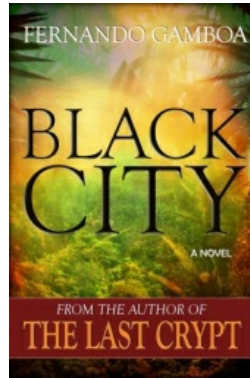
The dull rumble of the engines that slowly drove the Airbus 320 down the tarmac at La Aurora Airport centered my attention while I absent-mindedly watched the glare off Pacaya Volcano through the window. It had been active for the past couple of days, furiously expelling lava and ashes in all directions, forcing the local authorities to evacuate a dozen villages and hamlets in its vicinity.

I had the morning edition of *La Prensa Libre* on my lap. As Cassandra had fallen asleep next to me, holding tight onto the bag with the gold cross, I decided to ease my mind with the transitory banality of the daily news. I was trying not to think of the unbelievable events of that same afternoon. I began to leaf through the pages, back to front as I normally did. I frowned at the Lakers bad form in the Regular Season, and finally reached the current events page. I was astounded when I read a short notice at the bottom left hand corner of the page:

### **UNHEARD-OF!**

*Three days after the brutal guerrilla attack against a group of United States archaeologists, accused by the EZLN of really being raiders of the Mayan archeological heritage, in the ruins of Yaxchilan (Chiapas, Mexico) and which was thought to have left no survivors, one man, a Spanish citizen by name of Eduardo Castillo, was found yesterday by a group of Lacandon hunters. He was wandering in the jungle near the ancient Maya city. At present, Mr. Castillo is in Tenosique General Hospital, recovering from different kinds of wounds which he must have received during the fight against the guerrillas.*

If you enjoyed *The Last Crypt...* you will love the sequel



## **BLACK CITY**

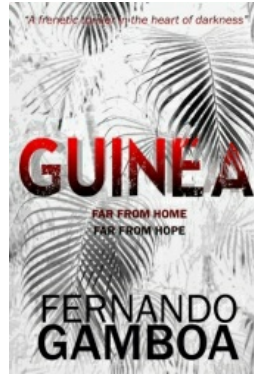
### **Ulysses Vidal Adventures series Book 2**

An ancient mystery.

An impossible place.

An unimaginable adventure.

Professor Castillo's daughter has mysteriously disappeared in the Amazon jungle. Determined to find her, he begs Ulysses and Cassie to go with him. Unable to dissuade him and not wanting him to go on his own, they both accept to help their old friend in his crazy attempt at her rescue. The three embark on an incredible journey to a place which should not exist. A journey nobody has ever returned from

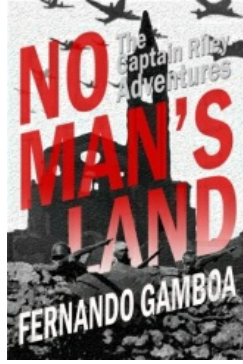


## **GUINEA**

### **A frenetic adventure in the heart of darkness**

Sarah Malik, a young anthropologist from Boston sent to Equatorial Guinea by UNICEF, is arbitrarily detained at a road checkpoint and sentenced to death in a parody of a trial. Escaping miraculously, she is forced to begin a desperate flight through the jungle with the help of the local people and particularly that of Gabriel Biné, a Guinean fugitive like herself. He will become her guardian angel, her friend, her lover... and her nemesis.

GUINEA is a shocking adventure thriller set in the heart of Africa. A heart-stopping odyssey with an unforgettable ending.

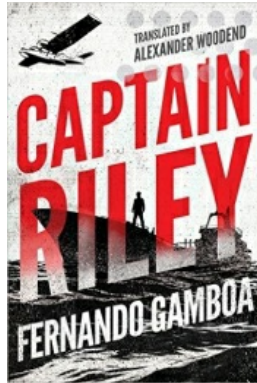


## **NO MAN'S LAND**

### **The Captain Riley Chronicles**

NO MAN'S LAND takes place at the end of August of 1937, in the days prior to the Battle of Belchite in the Spanish Civil War, but is in no way a novel of war.

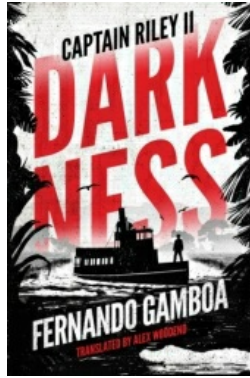
It is a thrilling tale of adventure full of humor, starring Alex Riley and his loyal friend Joaquín Alcántara, volunteers in the Lincoln Batallion, who unintentionally find themselves mixed up in a daring rescue mission under the very noses of Franco's Army



## **CAPTAIN RILEY**

### **The Captain Riley Adventures Book 1**

It's 1941, and Captain Alexander M. Riley and his crew of deep-sea treasure hunters believe they're setting off on yet another adventure—to find a mysterious artifact off the coast of Morocco for an enigmatic millionaire with questionable motives. Part-time smugglers, world travellers, and expats who have fought causes both valiant and doomed, Riley and his crew soon find themselves in the crosshairs of a deal much more dangerous than the one they bargained for. From Spain to Morocco to an Atlantic crossing that leads to Washington, DC, Captain Riley must sail his ship, the *Pingarrón*, straight through the eye of a ruthless squall and into a conspiracy that goes by the name Operation Apocalypse—a storm that only he and his crew can navigate.



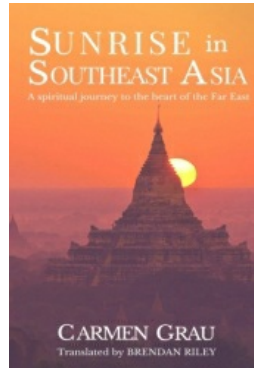
## **DARKNESS**

### **The Captain Riley Adventures Book 2**

From European shores to the heart of the African jungle, Captain Riley's *Pingarrón* embarks on new action-packed adventures.

On their last mission, Captain Riley, his loyal crew, and his girlfriend, Carmen, bravely averted a global disaster. Now, while World War II rages on, they hope that they are on more solid ground working for the US Navy. But when a job goes awry, the team finds itself taking a treacherous journey deep into the Belgian Congo. There, within the jungle, they will come face-to-face with wild animals, cannibals, and dark forces that shroud a decades-old mystery. They defeated the terrifying Operation Apocalypse that nearly destroyed them, but can they survive this?

## ALSO RECOMMENDED



### [SUNRISE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA](#)

Departing Barcelona, Spain on January 2, 2000, Carmen Grau spent the first seven months of the new millennium on a challenging personal, spiritual, and intellectual journey of cultural exploration.

Using Bangkok as her jumping off place, Carmen visited all the countries of the Indochinese peninsula—Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Burma—and then moved on to Malaysia, as well as Sumatra and Java in Indonesia. She also made brief visits to Hong Kong, Macau, and Singapore.

While visiting many cities and famous destinations Carmen also made the point of traveling slowly, often trying to leave the beaten path, and have close, personal encounters with the people, languages, and cultures of these lands that remain, as she describes in vivid detail, mysterious, exotic, baffling, and enchanting.

Her rich, extensive, and engaging travelogue describes her time in more than sixty different locations, cycling the streets of Vientiane, walking through the quiet Burmese countryside, learning to scuba dive in Malaysia and make traditional wood carvings in Sumatra, and often venturing to unfrequented, out of the way places. **Sunrise in Southeast Asia** is Carmen's bestselling account of this adventurous journey through Indochina and beyond.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear reader,

I hope you have enjoyed this novel. And if it is so I would appreciate your commentary to Amazon so that other readers may know and share your evaluation. This is very important in order to be able to continue offering my work at such a reasonable price. It will only take you a minute of your time.

If you decide to write a review on Amazon I invite you to let me know, writing me to: [gamboauthor@gmail.com](mailto:gamboauthor@gmail.com)

As a bonus you will receive, for free, *THE TRUTH BEHIND THE LAST CRYPT*. This is a 90 page compilation of reports and documents that deal with some of the mysteries presented in the novel.

Finally, I would like to stress the fact that *The Last Crypt* is a fictional novel. In no way do I pretend to suggest that the story told is the truth.

*The Last Crypt* is fiction and so it must be taken.

Thank you for reading me and see you in the next adventure!

Should you want to know more you may find me at:

[www.gamboabooks.com](http://www.gamboabooks.com)

[www.facebook.com/UlyssesVidalAdventureSeries](https://www.facebook.com/UlyssesVidalAdventureSeries)

[Twitter](#) & [Facebook](#)



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This novel has been made possible thanks to the collaboration of volunteer friends and readers all over the world. I wish to thank my translator, Christy Cox, for her talent and efforts, and author Carmen Grau for her infinite patience with me, and accurate corrections and editing. And of course, I want to thank my parents, Fernando and Candelaria, as well as my sister, Eva, for their unconditional support all these years.

Most of all I wish to thank the thousands of readers all around the world, because they have turned this novel into the success it is today.

To all of you my most heartfelt thanks.

**FERNANDO GAMBOA**