

The Bronze Saga #2: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD
A Doc Savage novel by Mark and Karen Eidemiller

"That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:7 NKJV)

Prologue

A long time ago lived a magnificent Bronze King.

His castle stood tall and mighty, the highest point in the greatest metropolis of the world, and he ruled well with his five valiant princes. Together, they fought all manner of villain both common and fantastic, righting wrongs and punishing evildoers. They lived by their sacred Code, and helped their fellow man far and wide. They were loved by one and all wherever they went, their praises sung by poor man and rich man alike.

But then there came that fateful day that the Bronze King encountered the demon of Hell known as Wail. The battle was great, but the Bronze King lost the victory. Unable to accept defeat, his vanity and pride caused him to return to the field of battle without his weapons of war, and without his valiant princes. He fell into a trap placed by a mysterious foe, and was put into a deep sleep for fifty years. When he finally awoke, not a day had passed for him, but his kingdom and empire had fallen into disgrace. And the world that once sang his praises now looked upon him as a villain.

Downcast and confused, the Bronze King wandered about this strange new land until he crossed the path of Perry the Godly, who introduced him to the One True God, the King of Kings -- and gave him new life and new hope.

The Bronze King and Perry the Godly embarked upon a Quest to find the King's valiant princes. Yet of the five, only three lived, scattered throughout the land.

And the cruelest blow of all was that the one person closest to him, the Lady Patricia, cousin to the Bronze King, claimed herself as his enemy. She had given in to the lies of the evil Prince of the Power of the Air. She cherished her youth and beauty, and had taken a magic potion that kept her young. In order to deceive the people of the land, she invented a daughter, an heiress named Princess Penelope. The people accepted the deception, and the Lady Patricia could enjoy the pleasures of the flesh freely.

But, behold, the Bronze King saw through her deception, and confronted the Lady Patricia. The battle was swift, and the forces of evil would have won. But they were rescued by the brave Lady Dot -- granddaughter of Prince Monk -- and the dauntless Sir Gumball -- eldest son of Prince Monk.

The brave Lady Dot joined the Bronze King and Perry the Godly in their Quest, and they encountered many adventures. They found Prince Johnny, Prince Renny -- whom all had presumed to be dead -- and Prince Long Tom.

But the evil Lady Patricia had not given up against the Bronze King.

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In the village of Lincoln City by the Sea, two mighty forces came together. On the one side, the army of Lady Patricia. On the other, six brave warriors -- Princes Monk, Johnny, and Renny, Perry the Godly, and the Ladies Dot and Amy -- led by the Bronze King. Faced with overwhelming odds, they clashed in a mighty and magnificent battle. And the valiant six warriors led by the Bronze King triumphed over the manifold bullies of Lady Patricia.

Sorely wounded, the Lady Patricia returned to her kingdom, vowing to fight another day, while the valiant princes put the tragedies of the past behind them and planned a new kingdom dedicated to the future. Perry the Godly took the beautiful Lady Dot as his bride. And the Bronze King found a new direction to carry on the fight.

Chapter One

It was 3 am. Carolyn Montoya was running for her life.

After her doctor had diagnosed the 31-year-old mother of two as being in the early stage of diabetes, he prescribed exercise and a special diet to keep her from getting worse.

After ruling out several options, jogging worked best for her, and this unconventional hour was the best time for her.

It had several advantages. She enjoyed the privacy of jogging around the closed shops. She could avoid impulse buying -- and please her husband Carlo -- by harmlessly window shopping.

She pulled up alongside the COPPER PENNY boutique, which showcased Patricia Inc.'s fashions and products. Mrs. Montoya had shopped there once or twice, as she read the store's motto, "For the adventurous woman."

She didn't consider herself adventurous. She was a simple housewife content to give her husband and kids a good foundation and a good home, as her mother had tried to do for her and her sisters in Palo Verde.

She also didn't consider herself adventurous jogging alone at this hour, neither was she naive. She had her four-footed protector and running partner Siegfried keeping pace with her. She carried a fully-charged electronic stun gun in a holster on one hip, a canister of pepperfoam on the other, and had been taking kickboxing classes down at her husband's gym.

In the last year she had only been accosted once, by a drunk who would not take "no" to his request for money. His priorities changed very quickly after she 'kissed' him with her stun gun's 300,000 volt touch.

Since then, she felt confident that she could handle just about anything the neighborhood could dish out.

She would not have been so self-assured if she had seen the nondescript dark sedan slowly cruising down the street from behind her. And her suspicions would have peaked if she'd noticed the absence of licence plates, and the black hoods that obscured the faces of the car's three occupants.

Carolyn Montoya had just reached the Victoria's Secret shop. Jogging in place, she eyed the sexy fashions as her cassette player switched sides on her exercise accompaniment tape.

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The rear window of the sedan silently rolled down, and what appeared to be a thick section of metal pipe eased out. A moment later the pipe shuddered, and a puff of smoke appeared at the open end.

Carolyn Montoya would later report that there had been no advance warning prior to the explosion, that suddenly she and her German Shepherd were thrown to the sidewalk by the concussion, and by the time she had regained her wits and looked back in the direction of the blast two blocks away, the COPPER PENNY boutique was engulfed in flame.

The explosion shattered nearby windows and set off car alarms for a half-mile in all directions. And there had been no mention of the nondescript dark sedan with the three hooded occupants.

Chapter Two

Sometimes, you never know what God has in mind until you get there.

That's got to be the understatement of my life.

My name is Perry Liston. For many years I was a street preacher in Portland, Oregon. But then I met Doc Savage, and everything changed.

"Oak, Southwest First Avenue. Doors to my right," announced the disembodied voice within the MAX light-rail train.

"Is this our stop?" inquired the gorgeous creature at my side. The short-haired brunette was Dot, my bride of these few short weeks.

I shook my head and replied through an ear-to-ear grin, "Next one. Keep an eye out for the fountain on the right as we make the next curve."

Seeing the gyrating of the crowd on the crowded train car, I gripped Dot's hand a little firmer and indicated that we should maneuver towards the doors. The weather outside was comfortable, even though there was more rain this time of year than usual. Regardless of the climate, I knew there would be a crowd at Portland's Saturday Market, and I hoped a certain couple would be down there as well. Considering there was no rain today, it was a good bet they'd be there.

"Excited?" asked Dot with a smile, jerking to the left as the train shook and jolted from speed changes.

"Oh, yes," I replied with a sigh. "This is where I did much of my ministry. I need to be here."

"Like coming home," she commented. I smiled at her insight, and kissed her.

The MAX announcer spoke again, in a male voice with a slight Spanish accent. "Skidmore Fountain, doors to my right."

We were both overwhelmed by the number of people on either side of the tracks. I would have guessed hundreds, easily. The bell rang outside and the train whistle blew to warn people ahead to be far from the tracks.

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Dot tightened her grip on my hand and mumbled, "Geronimo," as the train slowed and stopped and the doors parted before us.

Although I had known what to expect, the sudden transition from the relative quiet of the MAX to the excitement of the Market was a shock. The sounds -- amplified by the superb acoustics below the Burnside Bridge -- hit us like a tsunami. We took a couple of steps away from the MAX, necessitated by both those getting on and getting off, and held tight until the light rail moved on. With the barrage lessened, I turned to Dot and said, "So, what do you think?"

"Very ... impressive," she answered weakly, still taking it all in.

We stood on the eastbound platform for a few seconds, as a westbound MAX came and went. By that time, we were becoming accustomed to the immensity of it all, and I was looking around for familiar faces.

I saw one.

With a grin and looking both ways, I led Dot across the tracks to the westbound platform. There, under the bridge, was one of the many street performers who gave character to the Market. He was a long-haired man sitting at the keyboard of an old upright piano. We listened to the melody he was playing, then I leaned in towards Dot and asked, "Sound familiar?"

She shook her head slowly, uncertainly, then stopped. "Yeah," she said cautiously. "That's the guy on your CD."

"Exactly."

In the protective shade under the bridge, gleaning every acoustical advantage from his piano, Paul Immanuel Owens was in a world of his own. His fingers moved across the keyboard with a familiarity that came from years of practice and dedication to his music. As he played a delicate tune, his countenance reflected peace and serenity. He was where he needed to be.

He finished the tune to scattered applause. A few people dropped money into his TIPS jar, or approached him for one of his cassettes or CD's. We waited a few moments before approaching. Paul and I made eye contact, and we drew near. He was just as friendly as last time, and I was amazed that he still remembered me. We exchanged greetings and I introduced him to Dot. She commented on his music, and he humbly accepted it. Knowing his busy schedule, we spoke quickly, summarizing the last year. I didn't reveal any secrets, but explained things away by saying that I had been 'traveling around the country,' which is how I met Dot. I commented on how many new CDs were in the worn suitcase Paul used as his display case. "We're going to walk around a bit, but I promise we'll be back. Save me one of everything, including the one I already have," I joked. "My old copy's nearly worn out after all these months."

He promised they'd be there, and we shook hands on it. As we moved on to leave Paul to his weekly concert, Dot told me she was anxious to do some serious shopping.

"Not quite yet, hon," I replied. "I want to check something out first."

The couple stood unashamed, their hands at their sides, offering hand-made, hand-folded gospel tracts. They were quiet and didn't move about, presenting the impression to some that they were performing as

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living statues. And the fact that they didn't press their tracts on those who came within range set them apart from the usual religious crowd. The short woman stood near the STOP sign at Naito Parkway and Ankeny, and the tall fat man stood across the street from Waterfront Park, facing those who crossed into Saturday Market. The man tried to make eye contact with as many as possible, and both of them had seraphic smiles on their faces.

Anyone who saw them knew exactly what they believed, expressed by the tee-shirts with the words JESUS SAVES FROM HELL on the front and REPENT OR PERISH on the back -- in letters large enough to be seen from almost a block away.

Dot and I moved around to a position where we could observe them without being spotted by the man. I tilted my head in their direction and asked, "See them?"

Dot squinted. "The ones with the shirts."

"Right."

"Gotta give 'em credit ... just standing like that with those tee-shirts is a bold move. I take it you know 'em?"

"Uh huh. Mark and Karen Eidemiller." I paused. "Watch, and learn."

We watched them for several minutes, observing how the public responded to their presence. Many people walked past them as if they didn't exist. Others gave them encouraging words, thanking them for their boldness, and the quiet way they witnessed. Others responded with hateful words, cursing and visually trying to elicit a negative response. But instead they got love, friendly smiles, and silence. And, in the midst of the crowds, there came the occasional person taking one of their fliers. A few even asked for them. The couple surrendered the tracts without pressure, rarely speaking unless spoken to, always smiling and being polite.

"Very cool," commented Dot, awestruck. "It doesn't matter to them if they take it or pass."

Suddenly, three teenage boys in black punk garb approached Mark via Waterfront Park. The lead punk took one of the offered tracts, then deliberately shredded it into several pieces and dropped it ceremoniously at the big man's feet. Then he grinned, but only for a moment. Mark's countenance didn't waver; his smile may have even grown a degree. The punk growled in frustration, then continued on with his fellows.

"Woah!" said Dot in awe.

"Mark and Karen have been out here for several years, and they've probably seen it all. Those punks wanted to push Mark's hot button -- get a Christian to screw up his witness so he can justify his own garbage." I paused. "I'll give you odds that Mark saw them coming. He was ready."

"He saw the punch and ducked it."

"More or less. Despite what we see, they're not idle; they're praying like crazy for each other, the people around them, and for the tracts that leave their hands."

"So when are we going to meet them?" she smirked.

"Now. Here's what I want you to do ..."

With only a sideways glance as she passed Karen, Dot walked over to Mark and gave him her most innocent smile. "Hi."

The big man had seen her coming. Shifting on his feet, he smiled back. "Hello."

"I'm looking a friend who might've come this way."

Mark's head tilted slightly. "I see a lot of people."

"Yeah, but he said you know him ... Perry Liston?"

Looking at her with a shocked expression, he said, "Perry? I was thinking about him just this morning."

I repressed a giggle at Mark's comment, mischievously slipping around from behind. My goal was to surprise him without causing him to react in his flesh. So timing was essential.

A moment later I was within arms reach, and made my move. Plucking one of the tracts from the fingers of his right hand, he responded as I hoped he would, by turning his head in my direction. His expression was momentary shock and surprise, followed by an explosive grin. "You snot!" he interjected.

I remained calm, commenting tongue-in-cheek, "You know, it's just too easy to take advantage of you."

Quickly stuffing his tracts into a tummy pack, he hugged me like a long-lost brother.

"Man, is it good to see you!" he said, emotionally. "We've been missing you."

I caught my breath. "Yeah, well ... I've been busy."

Glancing over at Dot, he commented, "I can guess. So who's your accomplice?" He angled his head in her direction.

I moved around to Dot and wrapped an arm around her waist. "Mark, I'd like you to meet Dot ... my wife."

Mark froze in astonishment for a moment. I could see his eyes misting over with emotion. "Thank You, Lord," he said softly, grinning. Then he lovingly wrapped his arms around us both while repeating, "Praise the Lord."

After a few moments, he released us and said excitedly, "You gotta meet Karen!" Then he headed in the direction of the corner where the short woman with the brown hair looked in our direction with a perplexed expression.

With Mark a few steps ahead of us, I leaned in and informed Dot, "She's blind."

"Karen, Perry's back in town," he eagerly announced as we approached. "And he's not alone."

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I spoke to announce my location. "Hi, Karen." With a grin that matched Mark's, she opened her arms for a hug, and I walked into it. A moment or two later, I introduced her to Dot.

"Alright!" she squealed joyfully. "Praise the Lord!" and gave Dot a hug that momentarily took her breath away.

While the women embraced, Mark leaned towards me. "Praise God you finally found someone," he said, his hand on my shoulder. I could feel the love radiating from my elder brother in Christ. "So what's going on? The last time I talked to Jack was around Christmastime, and you were involved in some sort of outreach in Vermont. Why Vermont?"

I knew this moment would come up eventually. "How 'bout if we talk over dinner?"

"We're open. Izzy's?"

I shook my head. "Too ... public."

"Public," he repeated, our eyes connecting. "You have a suggestion?"

"We've got a suite at the Marriott. Why don't we meet up when the Market closes and go there."

His eyes went wide. "A suite at the Marriott? What, did you get rich all of a sudden ..." He grinned mischievously. "... and are you willing to share the wealth?"

I chuckled and sidestepped the issue. "How about we meet you back here at five?"

Mark conceded. "We'll meet you over there." He pointed to a group of benches in Waterfront Park.

"Sounds good."

There was another round of old and new friends hugging, and we branched off in separate directions.

"Okay," I announced official-like as we wandered into the marketplace. "Let the shopping begin." The myriad smells of food quickly had us by the nose, so we got a 'elephant ear' pastry and some lemonade from one of several vendors, and nibbled while browsing.

Our first stop was to find something to put the rest of our intended purchases in. For that, we got a couple of brightly decorated handmade 'Betty Bag' packs. As we shopped, a few items were for us, such as a large bag of Kettle Korn and the complete set of Paul's CDs. But most of the items were gifts for others. Polar fleece hoods for Johnny and Monk. Some perfumed 'bath bombs' for Carrie, Lea, Amy, and Amanda. Some flavored jellies for Jack. Happy Hounds dog treats for Renny's basset hound and Amanda's hearing-ear dog, and a selection of 'Cute Buns' hair wraps for all the ladies. Some gel-based scented candles for Lea. A jar of eucalyptus herbal balm for Monk. And on and on it went.

I've never tired of seeing Saturday Market. It's the largest open-air craft market in the United States. During their open season, regardless of the weather, there's always the familiar and the bizarre. To state that the Market was filled with diverse and colorful characters was an understatement. Everywhere we looked, there were canters and artisans, musicians and just entertainers, tourists and vagabonds, performers and panhandlers.

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There was one entertainer named John, who appeared to be the shabby reincarnation of Elvis. He was tall and skinny, and wore thick-lensed glasses. I knew John from years back, and we ribbed one another for a few minutes before he spontaneously broke into a rendition of "Love Me Tender". His voice was rough, and his showmanship was clownish, but his heart was in the right place, and it was clear that he loved the attention.

As he serenaded us, I lovingly put my arm around my wife and held her close as I remembered the last time we heard that song. It was in a theme restaurant in San Francisco, just around the beginning of the year, during Dot's personal crisis that resulted in her acceptance of Jesus Christ into her life, and, incidentally, paving the way for us to get married. Ignoring everything else around us, I looked into her bright brown eyes and thanked God again for bringing her into my life.

Dropping a large tip into John's guitar case, I directed Dot away from the ersatz entertainer and headed west away from the Market. As we strolled, I couldn't help sharing stories and anecdotes from my years down on the streets. Good and bad, they all came together for God's glory.

We also observed how other religious and pseudo-religious groups were accepted in this very-public forum. Near the fountain at Ankeny Square were the Hare Krishnas dressed in their familiar salmon robes, hawking and attempting to sell their books.

We continued to talk as I took Dot up Burnside Avenue for a couple of blocks, then turned right. In the middle of the block, I stopped. Dot looked around, rather puzzled. I paused dramatically, then smiled and pointed across the street at what appeared to be an ordinary storefront. Then I introduced, "The Mission."

At first, Dot didn't make the connection. Then, as her eyes grew wider, she stared at the storefront with wonder, and gasped, "You don't mean THE Mission?"

"Uh huh," I acknowledged with a nod. "This is where it all began."

In that instant, this simple brick-and-mortar storefront took on a holy significance comparable to the empty tomb. This was where, over a year ago, I'd been preaching the night a confused, troubled bronze-skinned giant walked in off the streets. This was where he recognized the emptiness of sin within him and accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. This is where, over soup and sandwiches, I invited this homeless vagabond who identified himself as Clark Savage Jr. to stay at my home. And this is the place where Almighty God decreed would start the chain of events that would result in Ms. Dorothy Brooks from New York City becoming my bride. Beyond the imagination of mere mortals, to say the least.

Dot summed it up well. "Oh, wow," she said breathlessly.

"I don't believe in coincidences," I mused aloud, smiling. "And God is so good."

"Amen," she softly agreed, squeezing my hand.

Many people would never know the significance of this place in Portland's Skid Row. To many it would be an eyesore, something to be torn down and replaced with an office building. To others it would be a tool to use to survive, somewhere to get a meal and maybe a place to sleep, and maybe some clothes or a blanket. But for us, hugging and kissing and joyfully crying together while strangers walked past us, this ordinary storefront was the most graphic representation of how a loving God could change two lives forever.

It was indeed a very special place.

At precisely 5:00, the normal chaos of Saturday Market expanded geometrically, as the artisans and craftspeople packed things up to close for the day. Crews of volunteers and staff pushed heavy steel carts like possessed juggernauts. Vehicles of all types moved in as close as humanly possible, no matter how disruptive it became. The goal was 'get in, load it up, and get out.'

Having given Dot a heads-up on what to expect, we held onto each others' hand and ventured through this gauntlet. We sidestepped a couple of runaway carts, then swung around a pickup truck and froze moments ahead of an oncoming decal-laden van. We cut through Ankeny Square -- where they couldn't park -- to get to Naito Parkway, where we crossed into Waterfront Park. From one of the benches near the seawall, Mark Eidemiller waved at us.

Together, the four of us walked slowly away from Saturday Market, along the seawall. We'd hardly gone a dozen yards when Karen boldly asked, "Perry, Mark? Would you mind if Dot and I walked together?" There were no objections, so Dot came around to Karen's side and offered her elbow at Karen's suggestion. Dot laughed at something Karen whispered to her, and the ice was broken. Soon they were walking several paces ahead of us.

I commented to Mark, "She's still just as outgoing as ever."

Mark nodded and grinned, "Yep."

We walked along the waterfront for a few steps. Mark finally spoke. "I have to admit, you've roused my curiosity. You're gone for over a year, seemingly traveling across the country. You return, with a new wife no less. And you've obviously come into some bucks." He stopped and faced me. "So what happened?"

I walked over to the seawall and looked out. A few small boats cruised along the river, and I quickly prayed about what to say. Then I responded. "Mark, do you recognize the name Andrew Blodgett Mayfair?"

Mark thought a moment, then answered, "Sure ... Monk Mayfair. One of Doc Savage's team." He paused, then recited. "Let's see. There were five of them. Monk, of course ... Ham ... Renny ... Johnny ... and Long John."

"Long Tom," I corrected.

"Thanks!" Mark grinned sheepishly. "So what's with the history lesson?"

I faced Mark and looked him in the eye. "Monk Mayfair is my grandfather-in-law."

"So tell me a little about yourself," asked Karen. "How'd you meet Perry? How long have you been a Christian?"

"Well, the first part's a long story. And I've been a Christian since the Second of January."

"Oh, really? So what's your story?"

"Story?"

"Your testimony. How'd you come to know Christ?"

Dot was silent. Karen read her hesitation. "You've never told anybody your testimony, have you ... 'cause maybe it might reveal some things about your past you don't want anybody but God to know ... and you're a bit embarrassed?" She smiled. "Am I getting close?"

"On the nose," replied Dot with a smile. "Are you always this direct?"

"At times. Don't sweat it." They took a few more steps. "Tell you what, let me tell you a bit about how I came to know the Lord ..."

"Your wife is the granddaughter of Monk Mayfair?" softly exclaimed Mark.

"Yeah," I confirmed. Then I took the next step. "And there's more."

Noticing the distance between us and the ladies, we continued walking. Mark was quiet. I knew he was thinking things over. "More? What? Next thing you'll be telling me is that Doc Savage is still alive."

I knew he had intended it as tongue-in-cheek, and inwardly grinned at the truth of the statement. But I kept silent.

Suddenly, Mark was standing in front of me. His expression was incredulous fear. "I was joking, Perry. Tell me I was joking, okay?"

"You're not joking," I said straight-faced, slowly. I looked around us, and we moved back to the seawall. A pair of rollerbladers swept past us. We waited until they were out of range, then I started, "It all began when I was preaching down here at the Mission ..."

"Are the guys still behind us?" asked Karen.

"Yeah. Way behind us. Looks like they stopped."

Karen pointed ahead. "There should be some benches around here. Let's wait for them."

They moved to the wrought-iron benches and sat down. It wasn't the most comfortable, but it was better than standing. Dot rested the Betty Bag at her feet.

"You've been through a lot," observed Dot. "And blind to boot."

"You've been through a lot, too, haven't you."

"Yeah. You and I have a lot in common. Mine came to a head a few days before the end of the year. Perry and I were working together, and we were in San Francisco getting some information. One night, we ran into a youth gang terrorizing a couple. Perry decided to fight them, and I thought he was crazy."

"Sounds like Perry," commented Karen.

"To make a long story short, we used an ace up our sleeve and kicked their butts. But I got hurt." She paused, then continued wistfully. "Perry took care of me ... babied me like nobody ever had."

"Sounds like Perry," she repeated with a grin.

Dot's voice became hesitant, but she pressed on. "Then there was New Year's Eve. He told me he loved me. We kissed. When he took me back to my hotel room, I ... we ... almost ..."

Karen tactfully interrupted her. "I can guess. Unmarried, and not yet a Christian."

She sighed. "Exactly. Anyhow, we didn't. The next morning, we had a chance to talk, and Perry told me about Christ. I had a lot to think about, so I went for a walk ... and ran into an old boyfriend."

"Not good," moaned Karen. "I think I can guess what happened next."

"You're probably right. Anyhow, I was real messed up from that, and went on a run that night. I ran into one of the gang members from the previous night -- the only girl in the group -- and we had a rematch." Dot paused, her throat tightening, and her head drooped.

Sensing the difficulty for Dot to continue, Karen reached an arm around and gave Dot a sideways hug of reassurance. "It's okay," she said softly.

Dot turned to face Karen, and her voice blurted out in a hoarse whisper. "I-I almost killed her!"

"But you didn't," said Karen firmly. "Because God wouldn't allow it."

They sat in silence for a moment, then Dot continued. "I didn't know then what I had almost done. I just felt dirty, unworthy to be loved by anyone. I returned to my hotel room. Perry had been there all night, praying and waiting for me. I didn't want his love. I didn't deserve it. I yelled at him, tried pushing him away, tried hating him, but he just ... kept on loving me. And it finally got through. Through Perry, I saw the love of God and the forgiveness of God." Tears streamed down her face as she relived the moment. "And we prayed."

"Praise God," concluded Karen with another warm sideways hug. As Dot leaned into it, she knew she and Karen would be good friends.

"Since then? Well ..." She held out the hand with the wedding band on it.

Karen felt the movement, followed the arm, and felt the ring. "Very nice. Simple. Feels like lettering, though."

"It is. The band has the word JESUS formed in it. Perry and I both wanted it to be a good witness as well as a reminder."

"Copycat."

Dot was startled, until Karen held up her own ring. They were identical. They both started laughing.

We stood side-by-side at the seawall, watching a tug pull a bargeload of timber up the river. Mark sighed heavily. "If I didn't know you so well, I'd say you were on drugs."

"And I'd agree with you." I paused. "Sometimes, if it wasn't for Dot, I'd think this was all some sort of dream."

"But it's not. And you have unlimited financing now? Cool."

I nodded. "I just gave you the headlines. Wait 'till you hear the details. Plus we've got the pictures to prove it. But that's up in our suite."

Mark suddenly looked back at the ladies. "Looks like they're waiting for us."

"They're probably wondering what we're up to. Let's go."

The two men walked over to the bench. "Had a good time?" asked Mark.

"Uh huh," replied Karen, standing and reaching for his hand. "Exchanging stories."

"Mark, you've got a very special lady here," commented Dot with admiration.

"So do you, Perry," added Karen. "So what were you two talking about?"

"A preview of coming events," replied Mark.

We continued to our hotel suite. Mark was predictably stunned at the opulence of it all, and the view of the eastside from the sitting room. After a few minutes, we started going through the story again, starting from where I first met Clark. At one point we decided to opt for delivered pizza rather than dinner in the restaurant, enjoying the fellowship. I brought out the videotape of the wedding, and couldn't help cracking up watching Mark wide-eyed and slack-jawed. He was so overcome that I had to describe some of the details for Karen's benefit.

"We had it at Monk's place by the lake -- great view, by the way! -- and flew the guests in. Everything was extremely low-key because of the select names who attended. If the media knew that the surviving members of Doc Savage's crew were gathering in one place, they would've had a field day. And they would've gone absolutely rabid if they knew that Doc Savage himself was the Best Man, with Renny Renwick -- presumed dead -- in attendance."

"That goes without saying," commented Mark. "I can't believe my eyes. That's Doc Savage?"

I nodded. "It was a toss-up as to who was the happiest -- Clark or Monk."

"Granddad was practically floating off the ground as he walked me down the aisle," added Dot.

"I thought I saw Jack there. Was that your mom next to him?"

"Yes."

"How did she take to this unique cast of characters?" asked Karen.

"Actually, quite well. She was thrilled when she found out I was going to get married again."

"She didn't know about my family until the actual day of the wedding, when they all met," said Dot. "We'd kept things mum to avoid any potential 'leaks.'"

"But when she did find out ... wow. She took to them like she knew them all her life."

"Personally, I think the neatest thing was seeing your mom and my grandma swapping recipes."

"Wish we'd been there," lamented Mark. "But we understand."

"Are you two going to be settling down in the area?" asked Karen.

Perry shook his head. "We're having a couple of custom RV's built. One for us, one for Clark. Then we'll be hitting the road again, like the old range riders."

"Cool," replied Mark. "So ... when do we meet the famous Doc Savage?"

Perry grinned. "Let's see how things go once we've got the RV's built. I can talk to Clark, but I don't think he'll have any objections. I'll keep you posted on our timetable."

And on it went until about 10:00. Mark had asked us to church in the morning, and we accepted. Breaking things up, I led in a prayer and Dot and I were soon alone again.

I woke to the sound of my cell phone bleeping for attention. Glancing over, I saw the empty spot on Dot's side of the bed, and heard the sound of water running in the shower. Swinging my legs to the floor, I answered the phone.

"Perry here."

"Perry, it's Mark."

"If this is your idea of a wake up call for church -"

"No, it's not. Sorry to call you this early, but I thought you'd want to hear this."

"Okay. What's up?"

"Last night, both Karen and I had a dream about you."

I started to pay attention now. "Really? How so?"

"There were specific images, and it was clear that you were there." He paused. "It involved you skydiving over an island."

Skydiving, I thought? No. Couldn't be. I reflexively gasped, and my mouth went slack. "At ... night?" I stammered.

"We had the same dream," concluded Mark.

"Yeah," I replied incredulously. "But I've never had an interest in skydiving."

I heard a chuckle from the other end of the phone. "Well, brother, I'd say you'd better get one soon. Looks like God's setting you up for something important."

"Yeah," I said half-heartedly.

"We'll see you at church, and I'll see what I can do to help."

"Okay. Later," I mumbled absentmindedly, and ended the call.

Skydiving? The most interest I had in skydiving came from a few action movies I had seen over the years. But I had never imagined myself actually jumping out of a plane. But I couldn't deny the fact that Mark's conclusion was correct, and that God was confirming His will through the three of us to show the seriousness of it.

Just then, Dot came out of the bathroom. A towel was wrapped around her, and she was rubbing another towel through her hair.

"Who was on the phone, hon?" she asked, slightly muffled by the towel.

"Mark."

She sensed my tone. "Is everything all right?"

I shook my head and smiled at her. "Yes, yes. He was ... telling me about a dream he had."

"It's funny you should mention dreams. I had an interesting one last night. You and I were skydiving over an island and ... Perry, why are you looking at me that way? What did I do?"

Chapter Three

It was not very impressive. After all, it was only a couple of pieces of wood, a 6x6 plank with a crossbeam about a quarter of the way from the top.

There, amidst the silence, came a single voice, singing softly:

"Set my spirit free, that I might worship Thee ... Set my spirit free, that I might praise Your name ...
Let all bondage go, and let deliverance flow ...
Set my spirit free, to worship Thee."

"Y'know, Doc, I just realized something," came Renny Renwick's familiar voice from behind. "I don't think I've ever heard you sing until just now. You're not half-bad." The big man approached his friend,

who was sitting Indian-style before the cross, and held out a hand. Clark reached up and took it, and Renny pulled him to his feet. "Sorry to bust in, Doc, but Monk's here, and he looks as excited as a kid at Disneyland."

"Thank you, Renny," replied Clark, dusting off his pants and stretching.

"I tried to get you on the radio, but you'd switched it off. Sam said you were probably up here, so I thought I'd see if you were okay."

"Yes, I'm fine, thank you. Just spending a few minutes alone."

Clark took the lead down the path towards the construction site.

"Hey, Doc?" asked Renny as they walked. "I know you're a Christian and all, but I don't understand why you put this cross up here before anything else."

Clark stopped and turned back to look his close friend in the face. "There's a verse in the Bible that says, 'Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.' The last time we built something here, it was without God's blessing, and it failed tragically. It has to be different this time, or else we're doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. Besides, this is a matter of giving honor to whom honor is due." He smiled. "Make sense?"

"Sorta. It's like dedicating it to God."

"Exactly." Clark smiled and the two men continued down the path into the clearing. "Where's Monk?"

"Admin Trailer Two."

As they walked through the construction site, Clark panned the scene and smiled. It was good to see something new, something good, being built there.

Johnny's archaeology crew hadn't found much: just some mementos and a few personal items. Over the years, the area had ironically become a dumping ground for drug paraphernalia and other garbage. Still, they were very thorough, taking a full month to examine the Crime College and surrounding area. Dot was there also, with her ever-present camcorder, documenting the survey. She also recorded the final act - the demolition job that reduced the College to rubble, amidst the wild cheering at the end of an era.

Over the next week, the debris had been hauled away, sorted, and some recycled for landfill. Two groups out of California had tried bidding for the debris, with the intent to sell it as historical memorabilia, as had been done with ash produced by Mt. St. Helens' volcanic eruption in 1980. Monk personally responded to their morbid capitalism by promising to use some of the debris on their heads if they dared show their faces again.

He scratched his chin beneath his full beard. He had shaved last year when they found Johnny teaching in a small college in Vermont, but had grown it back since then. It was a subtle physical change, to say the least, but one that successfully disguised himself from others. He had to remind himself, the possibility of being revealed to the public as Doc Savage was a minor danger, but an ever-present one.

The work site was like a retreat to him. It was a place to contemplate on the work God had done in his life, and to use his talents toward creating something good for mankind from what had caused so much trouble to mankind. To that end, Clark tried to be as involved as possible in the construction of the Savage

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Institute, in everything from hauling debris to driving graders and bulldozers. It felt good to get dirty, he thought as he smiled to himself.

"Ivan?" called someone from their right. A man in foreman's coveralls and hard hat walked swiftly to intercept them. They stopped and let him close the gap.

"Yes, Samuel," replied Renny. "What is the matter?"

Samuel Connery, foreman in charge of operations, took a moment to remove his hard hat and run his hand through curly black hair slicked with sweat. "Sorry to bother ya, Boss, but I've got something over on section five that needs your approval."

Connery was a capable foreman, in high demand. But his expertise was in dealing with the public, and that made him perfect for the position, while Renny was the true overseer of the project. The native-born New Worker was very personable, and was well-respected among the workers. He and his wife, Marie, had three kids, and Connery had expressed a strong interest in being among the first few to register with the Savage Institute upon its completion. In fact, a portion of his pay went into a special account personally matched by Renny, which would guarantee tuition for Connery's children, a bonus for a job well done.

"Sure, Sam," replied Renny, placing a large hand on the man's shoulder. "Go ahead -- I'll be right behind you."

As Connery walked away, Renny turned to Clark and shrugged. "Can't say I didn't ask for it, Doc. You go on ahead ... give me a call if you need me." Then Renny's face broke into a grin, a detail that reminded Clark just how much his friend had changed over the decades, and he followed after Connery.

"Right." Clark nodded and continued to the cluster of administrative office trailers on the outskirts of the work site.

He stopped at the foot of the steps of Admin Trailer Two, and looked back at the viewpoint where the cross stood. Very soon after the College had been demolished, God had directed him to single-handedly establish the overlook as a place of solitude, as a place for prayer and meditation. And he was inspired to use wood from the debris of the College itself to form the cross. Now, to see that cross looking down on the site of the Savage Institute, Clark couldn't help stand in awe of what God had brought him -- all of them -- through to this point. Where there had been separation, now there was unity. Where there was no hope, now there was hope.

He had been given a second chance.

With a smile, he said softly, "Thank You."

Opening the door at the top of the metal stairs, a rush of refrigerated air slapped his skin simultaneously with the excited squeal of the simian chemist.

"Doc! Doc! It's about time you got here!" He looked past the bronze giant. "Where's Renny?"

"Sam called him away. He said to go ahead without him." Clark held up an index finger and chided softly, "And Monk, you've just got to stop calling me Doc, especially when we're in public. I'm supposed to be Clark Dent ... okay?"

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Monk's hands flew up, touching the ceiling, then flopped down in frustration. "I'm sorry, Daawww-Clark," he caught himself. "I'm just used'ta callin' you Doc, Doc."

Clark smiled and let it slide. "Keep at it, old friend. What do you have?"

"Did you watch the news last night?"

He shook his head briefly. "No. Why?"

"Remember that news crew that came here a couple'a days ago? Well, our story hit the air last night. And somethin' else." He started moving into the next office. "C'mon!"

Entering another room deeper within the trailer, Monk closed the door behind them. The room was an audio-visual theater, equipped for watching videotapes or DVD, satellite broadcasts, or computer-generated presentations. Several chairs faced a large-screen high-definition tv.

Monk snatched up a remote control as the two men sat.

"Our story's the last one up, but I thought you might wanna see the headlines," he said ominously, aiming the remote and punching PLAY.

The professionally-dressed male newscaster read from the off-screen teleprompter. "In national news, two early morning blazes in California caused an estimated \$150,000 in damages. For more on that we take you to Dawn Avery. Dawn?"

The image changed to the harsh view of a fire in progress. The caption at the bottom identified it as a popular very-high-class neighborhood in Los Angeles.

"They call themselves Apex, and they strike by night," narrated the female reporter. "The police are baffled, and are -- so far -- powerless to stop their advance in their self-proclaimed war against the exploitation of women. Two nights ago, they claimed responsibility for the devastation of this block in fashionable Beverly Hills, and this one --" The picture shifted to a second blaze in another location. "-- in San Diego. Their methods are consistent: they strike without warning, randomly, causing massive destruction without loss of life."

"Police continue to refuse comment, but, in the last six months, Apex has claimed responsibility for no less than 73 separate attacks, causing estimated losses in the millions of dollars." She paused. "They target establishments which exploit women, including those in the adult entertainment industry, as well as those in the cosmetics and fashion industry." She paused again. "Speaking on behalf of the cosmetics industry, Patricia Inc. President Penelope Savage decried these attacks."

The picture switched to a scene of Pat, standing behind a row of microphones and looking naturally gorgeous. Clark's eyebrow raised in interest as she spoke. "These people are little more than terrorists and vandals -- common thugs and hoods, deceived into thinking they can intimidate us. Their efforts against us are no more than wasted effort. I, for one, will not give in to these tactics, and will do everything in my power to bring them to justice!"

Monk uttered a gagging sound by way of responding to her comment, and Clark shushed him.

After a few more statements along the same lines, the image cut back to a tall black girl. The caption below her identified her as the reporter Dawn Avery. "It should be noted that Patricia Inc.'s operations

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have suffered the most from Apex, with an estimated total damage in the millions, and that market analysts have shown a sharp downward trend in Patricia Inc. stock." She paused. "In Beverly Hills, this is Dawn Avery."

The anchorman smiled. "Thank you, Dawn." He paused, and continued with the news.

They waited for a moment, then Monk muted the sound with the remote. "Very interesting," commented Clark. "It appears that she, too, has her enemies."

"Uh huh. Sorry 'bout my comment earlier, but she's got a lotta nerve talkin' about justice!" He paused. "Gotta admit, though, what first came to mind when she was talkin' was that bit in Psalms about the rain fallin' on the just and unjust alike. Looks like Patty's in the middle of monsoon season."

Clark nodded without comment.

"Lemme push this thing ahead to our story." He manipulated the remote, and restored the sound.

"Earlier in our broadcast, we reported on the troubles experienced by Penelope Savage, daughter of cosmetics matriarch Patricia Savage. In a related story, the name of Clark Savage Jr. has once more come into the spotlight through an adventurous endeavor by one of his former associates. For more, we take you to Karleen Bush. Karleen?"

The picture changed to the reporter. Clark recognized her from her visit to the work site several days ago.

"I'm standing near a construction site in upstate New York. Behind me used to be the infamous Crime College, where numerous civil rights atrocities were committed during the 1930's and 1940's, by the so-called adventurer and inventor Clark Savage Jr., also known as 'Doc' Savage. The building had remained on this land for almost fifty years, undisturbed, visited only by gang members and drug users ... until three weeks ago."

The picture shifted to a distant image of a familiar building being demolished in a cascade of brick and mortar. Clark felt a moment of nostalgic sadness at the loss of the College.

"Dottie let us use her videotape," explained Monk aside.

The reporter voice-overed the pictures. "In a spectacular display, the Crime College was demolished to make way for a project called The Savage Institute."

The image shifted to a press conference. Monk was making his way to the row of microphones. In the trailer, the simian chemist shifted in his chair and looked away from the screen. "That was so embarrassing. You know I'm not a public speaker. If Ham wuz alive, he'd never let me live it down."

"You looked fine," placated Clark.

"Heading the project is Andrew Mayfair," continued the reporter. "Mayfair was one of Savage's closest associates prior to the expose of Savage's infamous deeds. Known as 'Monk,' he is now one of the only two survivors of Savage's team. In a press briefing, he outlined the work he was undertaking."

Monk spoke from the makeshift podium. "Look, I wanna get this out in the open so's you can't say we're up to no good, okay? The Crime College is ancient history. We're puttin' up a new school here, to teach

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kids the right things, the right way. To help the world, like we used to do. You guys all got the handouts? Good! Anyhow, since Doc ain't around anymore, we're namin' it in his memory. Like I said, we got nuthin' to hide here. And that's all I gotta say." He grinned like a drunken baboon. "Now shove off, ya mugs -- I got work t'do!"

In the trailer, Monk simply grunted disapprovingly.

On the television, as Monk turned and walked away, the reporter continued her narrative. "This ambitious project is expected to cost over fifty million dollars, and be completed by mid-2002. It's being funded through private as well as public sources, and will be open to students as soon as the beginning of the 2002 academic year." She addressed the anchorman, and the story ended.

"And right now, we've got over a hundred letters from families wantin' to be the first ones in the door," beamed Monk. "Ain't it great?"

"That it is, brother," replied Clark as the news story returned to the anchorman. "That it is."

Monk jabbed the STOP button, and the screen went dark.

"I'm pleased that they treated it so positively."

"Yeah," replied Monk, leaning back in his chair. "Karleen's a good kid, and she doesn't buy all the crap they laid on us back then. I like her."

Clark stood. "Perhaps now others will dismiss the College as old news."

"I hope."

Their attention was suddenly directed to the sound of someone coming up the stairs and entering the trailer. A few moments later, they heard Renny yelling, "Clark, Monk ... guys, you in here?"

"Back here, Renny!" called Clark.

The door opened. "Monk, your son just radioed the helipad. He's about five minutes from landing, and he wanted to know if you'd be ready."

"What's the rush?" asked Monk.

Renny's face broke into an ear-to-ear grin. "Your wife doesn't want you late for dinner!"

Monk rolled his eyes up into his head. Then he looked at the bearded engineer and countered, "Lissen, smart guy. Lea tells me she's gettin' a TTY so she can talk to Amanda, so I'd watch myself."

Renny gave his old friend a sour look, then the two of them broke into simultaneous laughter. Off to the side, Clark watched the display and reflected that onreyness never grew old.

The three men went outside and walked to the helipad. Because of the remoteness of the location, it seemed more practical to bring some supplies in by cargo helicopter than by truck. Although still in its infancy, the concrete slab and trailer that served as control shack and maintenance shed met their needs. They watched as a Boeing V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor airplane appeared overhead. Smoothly changing from horizontal to vertical flight, it descended gracefully and landed easily on the pad. After shutting down the

engines, the side door opened, and a man stepped down to the ground. He wore jeans and a worn brown leather bomber jacket. A cowboy hat the same hue as the jacket rested casually on his head. He sauntered over to them.

"Afternoon, guys," he greeted with a grin. "Dad, you ready?"

"Sure, son," replied Monk. "What's so blasted important that you gotta tell everyone about dinner."

Clark 'Gumball' Mayfair replied with a single word: "Lasagne."

With a look of culinary lust in his eyes, Monk turned to the other two and quickly said, "Well, guys, gotta go!" And started ambling swiftly towards the Osprey.

Gumball turned to Clark. "Doc, I really want to thank you again for this," he said, meeting the bronze man's eyes. "I'd been wanting to start a executive charter service once my tour of duty was over, but I never thought I'd have an Osprey to work with."

Clark shrugged off the thanks. "Actually, much of the idea was your dad's. I'd wanted to get you something to show my thanks for helping us out last year, and it was your dad who told me about your plans for the charter business. I hope it works well for you."

The pilot held out a hand. "Well, if you every need me ... for anything ... I'm yours."

As the two men shook hands, Monk stuck his head out of the doorway. "Shake a leg, son! Dinner's waiting!"

With another grin, the younger Mayfair said, "See you later. Renny?"

The engineer nodded and held out a hand. "Take it easy, kid."

Clark and Renny watched from a safe distance, as Gumball returned to the aircraft and prepared for takeoff. They waved back at Monk, in the co-pilot's seat, and soon the Osprey was smoothly lifting up into the air. It cleared the trees, shifting to horizontal flight, banking easily and flying out of sight. Clark and Renny walked back to the construction site.

Chapter Four

The people sitting around the table in the conference room were very quiet. Terror has that effect on people.

It wasn't a fear of death, but a fear of extinction.

The large double doors opened, startling a young man in a brown suit. Pausing momentarily to scan the room, she stood like an operatic diva alone on stage, commanding the attention of everyone else. She was fashionably stunning in a retro-1940's dress and beehive hairdo, yet her countenance lent itself to Medusa herself. She received very few glances as she walked the length of the table and sat down in the executive throne.

The meeting was inevitable, but not welcomed. It was to discuss the state of the company. And everyone around that table knew it wouldn't be good news.

"All right," said Pat Savage, in her persona of Penelope. Her tone was like ice. "Let's begin. Hiram?"

Hiram Baker, a veteran to Patricia, Inc., turned to his notebook computer and recited in a monotone, "Over the past six months, the company has suffered the loss of thirty-four of our West Coast operations, broken down as follows: twenty-one COPPER PENNY boutiques ... six factories ... five chemical substations ... and two semi-truck trailers demolished while en route to our distributors." He paused and took a deep breath. "Loss due to damage is estimated at \$13.4 million dollars. Projected losses due to decreased revenue could be as much as a billion by the end of the calendar year."

She appeared to be taking the headlines well, but those who knew what to look for saw the tension in her arms and jaw. She didn't comment on Hiram's data, but looked to a man off to her right. "Ted?"

He consulted his notes. "Without the factories to process the chemicals, we've had to trim back on our suppliers. Since our shortfalls have only occurred on the West Coast, we could redirect some of the supplies to our East Coast facilities to make up the difference. However, this will mean increased funding to distribution." He nodded to another man, presumably his counterpart in the distribution field, who nodded back an acknowledgment.

Pat\Penelope paused a moment, then looked at a long-haired woman on her left. "Margaret?"

"Throughout our West Coast processing plants, we've had to shift employees from destroyed plants to form a third shift at some of the other facilities. This keeps us busy, but the unions are starting to breathe down our necks. We've increased security around the remaining plants, but there's still a sense of fear. We've redirected funding from expansion to cover the rebuilding, but it's slow going."

There was another pause. "Kwan?"

A handsome Eurasian man met Pat's eyes briefly. "Due to the fact that two of our shipments were ambushed, there's also been a sense of fear among the drivers. There's increased unrest among the unions, and there's rumors of a walkout if things don't improve quickly. We're trying to compensate by increasing the East Coast operations, as Ted has mentioned, and we're considering independent drivers to take up the slack."

She turned to another woman. "Tasha?"

"As expected, sales are down from the last quarter, primarily in our Copper Penny boutiques. We're still doing well at the retail level. Apex seems not to be targeting, for example, Big-Z stores just because our products are sold through them. However, as I said, our West Coast boutiques are suffering. We've increased security at those stores, but there's still a lot of scared people around there. Both the employees and the customers are expressing concerns that Apex will strike at a time when the store is occupied, rather than after hours. It's an irrational fear, to be sure, but a real one." She paused, then delivered the bottom line. "Our estimations put sales down 31%, with very little hope of increase before this Apex matter ends."

She looked at another man. "Ron."

He smiled broadly. "Advertising and PR are doing well. We've been working round the clock to alleviate fears and assure shoppers that the remaining stores are safe. The press has been favorable towards us, even sympathetic."

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She looked over the group, then nodded. "Very well," she said slowly. "Hiram, how soon can we be back to where we started?"

"The major factor is Apex. As long as they're around and doing us damage, the longer and harder it will be. If Apex were to cease today, we could be back on top in six months."

She dreaded having to ask. "And if not?"

The veteran closed his notebook computer and replied soberly but directly. "The company will be forced into bankruptcy within nine months."

There was a long, nervous silence. "Ladies and gentlemen, bankruptcy is not an option," she said with determination. "We will survive this, and we will be back on top. Thank you ... dismissed."

Silently and swiftly, everyone left the room.

Pat breathed heavily and looked out the picture window at the San Francisco skyline. Then she reached over to an intercom and pressed a button. "Daniel, would you please come in here?"

Within thirty seconds, a side door to the conference room opened, and a handsome black man glided in. Dressed in black with gold jewelry, he seated himself in a chair near Pat.

"This looks bad, Pat," he commented in a low voice. "Very bad."

Pat pivoted, her face exposing the frustration and anger she'd been hiding from the rest of her staff. "How do they know, Daniel? How do they know where to strike? My God, they even got our trucks! Is there somebody on the inside?" She paced the room. "Daniel, what about that Woodward person ... Jillian Woodward. When she resigned, she wasn't very subtle about her feelings. Could she be in on this?"

He leaned back slightly in the chair. "I don't know, Pat."

She pressed. "But you two had a thing going at one time, didn't you?"

"Sure, we went out a few times, but that's been years ago. I haven't seen her since she quit." He paused, smiling. "Besides, she's a scientist, not a terrorist."

Pat ignored his comment. "That doesn't matter. You two were close. Check her out for me, will you? Where is she living nowadays? What is she doing? Where is she working?" She turned and put her arms around his neck, smiling seductively. "You'll do it for me, won't you, Danny? Besides, you're the least likely to be suspected as my spy."

He leaned in, and they kissed for several moments. "All right, I'll try. But I think you're wasting our time."

"Thank you, Danny," she replied, giving him a loving look.

"Anytime." He walked to the side door, but stopped and looked back with a grin. "Hey, cheer up! If all else fails, we can start looking for pots of gold at the ends of rainbows."

She grinned in return at his remark. Yet, after the door had closed behind him, standing in the empty conference room, something in the back of her mind started nagging at her. "Gold?" she mused to herself, and sat down at the table.

Franklin's seemingly-glib comment haunted her like an old familiar song.

Alone in her bedroom, back on Caroline Island, she couldn't sleep. Donning her robe against the night chill, she walked onto the wide terrace. The terrace, as well as her own home, had been constructed on the tallest hill of the island, ending in a mesa-like formation. Standing at the stone wall that circled the edge of the mesa, she could look out upon the island. This was her island, her domain. She was mistress of all she surveyed. It gave her a good feeling, a powerful feeling.

But tonight she was disturbed.

In the quiet, she spoke the name of that disturbance. "Hidalgo. The Valley of the Vanished."

She remembered that seemingly-magical land in Central America, lost within the mountains like the mythical Shangri-La, home to generations of surviving Mayans. "Does it yet exist?" she mused aloud, then her eyes narrowed as truth came to her. "Of course it does ... that's where he's getting his funding for that Institute of his. He's somehow found a way to tap into the gold supply again. There's got to be millions ... billions? ... trillions? And he's using it for some stupid goody-goody school. It's not fair." Thinking of all that gold, just asking to be taken, agitated her. She paced along the wall, talking to herself. "It's just not fair. Why should my cousin be allowed to prosper while I face bankruptcy? It should be mine."

She stopped, and looked out at the heavens. "WHY CAN'T IT BE MINE?" she shouted, then lowered the volume. "I know the way there, I know the people there. All I need to do is turn on the charm."

Then, for the first time since Apex entered her life, she laughed.

Then she started planning.

Daniel Franklin would've felt comfortable driving his company car to the rendezvous, since Pat was back on the island. But for the sake of security, he proceeded normally, switching to an older-model station wagon at a parking garage in the city. Confident of himself, he drove to an apartment complex in a small suburb. The sign said ROLLING HILLS APARTMENTS, serving mostly senior citizens. He pulled around back and into a carport next to an aquamarine 1968 Pontiac LeMans. He hadn't seen anyone, and felt he hadn't been seen by anyone. He climbed out of the wagon and strolled down a stone walkway to Unit 31, where he used his passkey to let himself in. The faint smell of freshly ground coffee beans greeted his nostrils, and he heard someone in the kitchen.

"It's me, Jill," he announced.

"Coffee'll be ready in a few minutes, Danny," a female voice replied.

He rounded the corner into the kitchen and smiled. The attractive woman was dressed in a Seattle Mariners sweatshirt and bluejeans. Although the outfit was a tad on the baggy side, it still revealed a

dynamite figure. Her hair was pulled back and loosely tied, and her attractive face was the color of Jamaican tan. The only thing that was out of place was the Glock 9mm automatic pistol setting on the counter-top. Repressing his disgust, he came up from behind the woman, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing her smooth neck. She hummed a quick note of pleasure and said, "Glad you're here, baby. Been missin' you."

"Missed you, too," he agreed, then angled his head towards the pistol. "Do you have to bring that here?"

She took it in stride. "Sorry, hon, but I hardly go anywhere without it nowadays. When you're wanted in three states, paranoia kinda comes with the territory."

She turned to face him and wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him tight and meeting his kiss. They separated after a few moments, and attended to the coffee. He took down a pair of mugs from the cabinet, and placed them where she could pour. The apartment was sparsely decorated. It was more a meeting place than a home. He took his mug into the living room, sitting sideways at one end of the couch. She followed a minute later, and sat at the opposite end, facing him. Franklin noticed that she still carried the gun, and placed it on the coffee table within easy reach.

"So what's the buzz from the top?" she inquired.

"Well, you're definitely making a dent in the organization," he commented. "There was a staff meeting Monday, and guess who was the topic of the hour?"

"And ...," asked Jill eagerly.

"Your strikes have made an impact on just about every aspect of the company. Stress levels are high, and everyone's afraid they'll be next on your hit list. The two key factors are her ability to rebuild -- which is going to take quite a chunk o' change -- and if Apex packs up and bugs somebody else. Bottom line, if things continue, she's six months away from total bankruptcy."

She whooped and clapped her hands together. "Good! She's starting to hurt like we've hurt!"

Franklin changed the subject. "Have you seen the press coverage?"

"Have I ever," she exclaimed. "All the major networks, the cover of Newsweek, and even a topic on Dirk Hunter's show last week. But none of them have a clue. NOW wants to bestow sainthood on us 'cause we've taken out the porno shops. And the reporters and the cops are watchin' the Copper Penny boutiques day and night, just waitin' to catch us in the act."

Franklin smiled and changed the subject. "How's the crew managing?"

"As well as possible. It's a motley crew in every sense of the word. But they continue because they have a cause to follow, and that's good enough for now. Individually, Jodie's been taking to the younger ones like a mother hen, especially Jade, Pooh, and Lizzy. But I keep worrying about Janie and Janice."

"The lesbians, right?"

"Yeah, but it's more than just that. They're loose cannons in every sense of the term. The only reason why I keep 'em around is that they're the best female weapons experts the Corps ever kicked out, and -- just between us -- I'd rather have them where I can keep an eye on them, rather than have them on the loose."

"Better with you than against you, right?"

She nodded. "Exactly. Besides, they've turned pyrotechnics into an art form. They're good ... very good." She stood up and refilled her coffee. She brought the pot and topped Franklin's cup. "So what does Miz Penelope plan to do about us?"

"I'm not entirely sure. She's starting to take an interest in Central America."

There was a puzzled look on her face. "What's in Central America?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. But something tells me she's planning some sort of expedition." He paused. "How's your group set for traveling if they have to?"

"We're not. Are you sure about her going to Central America?"

He shrugged again. "Like I said. But I do plan to find out. And as soon as I know, I'll call you."

"Okay. I'll bring it up to the group, and start getting ready. Just in case."

Jill stood and walked around the room. "All we want to do is let her hear our story, Danny ... give Miz Penelope a look at what her actions have done. Maybe let her see Jodie's face without the hood for an hour or so."

Franklin shuddered. "That'll impress her."

She came around the back of the couch and slid her hands down his chest. "What'say we go into the other room, Danny?" she cooed into his ear.

"Anything you say, baby," he replied.

She walked slowly, seductively, towards the bedroom, with Franklin close behind.

The outside of the warehouse looked deserted. The windows were boarded up, and graffiti covered most of the outside walls. The company name -- CARLUCCI AND SON PRODUCE -- was barely recognizable, buried under countless hues of spray paint.

The LeMans cruised into a parking spot near the rear door, and Jill Woodward slid her slim legs to the pitted asphalt. She looked around casually once or twice, her eyes alert to any change in the environment, and smiled; the neighborhood was well deserted, and it would be hours before the gangs made their rounds. She walked up to the door; it would take a close examination to see the fact that a thick steel plate lay behind the ancient wooden panel. Sweeping aside a piece of newspaper that had blown onto her foot, she held a magnetic key close to a section of the door. A moment later there was a satisfying click, and she pushed the door open -- just in time to receive a three-pistol greeting, leveled at her head.

The trio of cyclopean dogs of war met her eye-to-eye, and Jill could see their handlers just waiting for her to give them a reason to loose them. She froze, calculating some sort of defense. Her hand was too far away from the Glock to make a difference, and they had her outnumbered. Her eyes darted from one face to the next, and she shifted her jaw. Then she exercised her only available option.

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She stepped inside, and, with practiced calm, closed the door behind her. Then, her eyes narrowed, she calmly told the center shooter, "You're too close."

Her arms remaining at her sides, she continued in a casual tone: "All it would take is for me to lean in six inches, grab your arm, then pull you in front of me and make you my shield. While Dana and Lisa are deciding whether to shoot around you or through you, I've grabbed your gun hand, and used your own pistol against them. Finally, while you're still in shock over what's happened, I snap your neck and step over your dead body."

Never taking her eyes from Woodward's face, the center shooter moved cautiously back three steps.

Woodward smiled. "Much better, Tracy," she said. "At ease, ladies."

The three women lowered their weapons and relaxed.

"Want me to bring the car in, boss?" asked a plump brown-haired woman.

"Sure." She handed her the keys. "Thanks, Rhonda."

As Woodward walked through the cavernous warehouse, she surveyed her people. The term 'her people' seemed to be a bit incongruous for this bunch of street kids, ex-housewives, and oddballs rejected from society. But to Dr. Jillian Woodward, late of Patricia Inc.'s Research and Development Branch, they were the next best thing to a family unit.

Right now most of them were biding their time, seeking to improve themselves as they waited for the next opportunity to use the skills they were developing.

Jeannie and Kristi were tinkering under the hood of the black sedan they used for most of their drive-by hits. Cherry, Roberta and Geraldine were in the area dubbed the Exercise Yard -- a few mats and some homemade gear -- working out; Geraldine lifted weights while the other two sparred in a loose martial-arts kata. Janie and Janice -- her two loose cannons -- were at the makeshift workbenches, maintaining the group's weapons. Still others sat around a large-screen television set, watching with interest a video on combat techniques of the SEALS; Jill noted that Rosa and Dusti were taking notes. The rest were in the corner of the warehouse used for living quarters -- such as they were -- and the kitchen.

She knew each and every one of them by name. She knew why they were here, and most of their stories of how they came to know her. Many of them laughed when people called them terrorists -- they were far from that -- but they were the best she had.

And she cared about them.

As she acknowledged waves, nods, and assorted greetings, she spotted Tracy standing off at the side, looking depressed. Approaching from behind, she surprised her for a moment with a comforting arm around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Jill," the blond-haired girl immediately apologized, staring at the floor. "I haven't learned a thing."

"Yes, you have!" encouraged the black woman. "You've learned where you shouldn't be. That's what these situations are for, to expose our weak spots now, rather than in the field where lives might be lost."

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You're learning ... just keep at it." Tracy smiled and they hugged. Changing tactics, she clapped the younger girl on the back. "I'm going to call a meeting. Let's get everybody over by the tv."

"Okay, Jill," she said, electrified.

While Tracy rounded up the others, Woodward headed straight for the television. "Iris, kill the tape," she instructed a demure redhead holding the remote control. They exchanged a smile, and the black woman stood in front of the large screen, and waited as the others gathered around.

Looking at the faces of these, 'her people,' she felt a strong sense of pride and humility. When most of them were assembled, she raised her arms with fists high, and they quieted.

"LADIES!" she yelled to get their attention. "I have just left a meeting with my inside contact, and I am happy to say that Miz Penelope Savage is starting to feel our heat!"

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause. Jill waited a moment, then held up a hand for silence.

"If things go on the way they are, in six months Patricia Inc. will be EXTINCT!"

More cheers. Woodward waited several seconds before calling for quiet. They deserved this moment of hope, she thought.

She paused a few moments, commanding their attention, before continuing. "There's something else afoot," she said ominously. "My contact has informed me that Miz Penelope has been taking an interest in Central America. Why, we don't know. But if she does, I want us to be ready." Having tweaked their imaginations, she paused, slowly panning the crowd. "Don't ask me for details, 'cause I don't have any ... yet. But assuming that she is planning on going to Central America sometimes soon, she may put herself into a position away from her security staff, where we can ... seize her."

She got down to planning. "If she goes, she'll be taking her precious Osprey." Moving back and forth before the television, she picked out a few faces from the crowd. "Alana, Bonnie, Emma, Rachel. What can we get our hands on in the way of aircraft?"

A tall, amazon-like brunette stood. "Right now, nothing. And before we consider flying into Central America, we're gonna need to know more about what kinda terrain's ahead. That tilt-rotor Osprey of hers'll go just about anywhere and land on a dime. So I say we focus on gettin' us a few helicopters with a high flight ceiling and a decent range, rather than fixed-wing aircraft." She sat on the arm of the couch.

"Thanks, Bonnie," replied Woodward, nodding. "Alana?"

Another woman stepped forward. Underneath a mop of brown hair and a distinct nose, she bore a striking resemblance to a younger Ringo Starr, and the large sunglasses only emphasized her features. "Bonnie's got the right idea. I can get us couple of Hueys. No weapons, but we can improvise if we need to."

Another woman spoke up. "I've got an uncle in the Florida Keys that refurbishes twin-rotor helicopters. I can give him a call and see what he's got."

"Good," answered Woodward.

A couple more offered their contributions, in the form of fuel and landing areas for refueling, including one inside of Central America. Woodward was pleased at the contributions.

"Excellent. Okay, let's take inventory. How are the weapons -- Janice, Janie, Phyllis?"

The fatigue-dressed Janice stepped forward, and listed firearms from automatic weapons to handguns. She tag-teamed Janie with a low-five, and she listed explosives and related munitions, including ammunition. The silver-haired Phyllis listed off the rest of the weapons -- from tranquilizer guns to clubs and knives.

Woodward nodded. "Until I hear from my source, we'll assume things will be going down soon. Any questions?"

Someone raised a hand. "Do you want to abort tonight's mission?" "No. Keep the pressure on. But don't waste what we have. Any more questions?" Silence. "Very good. Dismissed."

Renewed in spirit, the crowd disbursed. Woodward got Bonnie Clayton's attention, and they met a few minutes later in an office Jill was using. As the black woman flopped into a chair behind the desk, Clayton looked at her with a concerned expression.

"How're you doin', Jill?" she asked.

She met the brunette's eyes, and gave her a half smile. "Good. This is encouraging."

Clayton sat in another chair. "So what's up?"

"I've been wondering what's in Central America that's got her attention. Worse case scenario: drugs. And drugs usually mean troops, somebody to protect 'em." She looked the other woman in the face. "How would they stand up against us -- honest opinion?"

Clayton had done some mercenary work, so she understood exactly what Woodward was asking. "They're okay in a low-key, covert situation. But out in the open against the type of troops that ..." She shook her head.

"Agreed," Woodward sighed. "So if there's the possibility of fighting actual troops, we'll need something to even the odds. Any ideas?"

She slowly nodded. "I can think of a couple. Let me see what I can come up with, and I'll get back to you. How soon do you need it?"

"The sooner the better. At least by the time I talk to my contact again."

"Okay. I'll see what I can come up with by tomorrow evening."

"Good. Thanks."

"Anytime."

Daniel Franklin strolled into his quarters in the house on Caroline Island. He put his jacket into the closet and picked up the remote for his stereo. Settling into a recliner chair, he punched the play button on the

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remote and picked up a notebook from the side table. As he adjusted the volume on the Rembrandt Brown CD, he reviewed his notes on Pat's endeavor.

ITEM: during Pat's trips away from the island, he had entered her room and checked out changes in her wardrobe. There were several outfits missing, all which were ideal for camping. (jungle?)

ITEM: Pat's own handgun, a heavy Frontier Single Action six-shooter she'd kept in immaculate condition, was missing from her room. Another box, containing a holster, cleaning tools, and ammunition, was also gone from its place.

ITEM: he had discovered various books in her room, on Central America, and an ancient treatise on Mayan culture written by a Professor William Harper Littlejohn.

ITEM: additional drums of fuel were being delivered to the Osprey's hangar, along with refueling equipment. The only way she'd need that would be if she'd be some distance from the last gas station.

ITEM: weapons and ammunition, including explosives, had been transported to the hangar, along with other gear. (battle? combat?)

ITEM: in the hangar, behind closed doors, Pat met with Ron Balboa and Hal Mason, two of her guards. After the meeting, he tried to find out what was discussed, and they were both very tight-lipped and politely told him it was "top secret". (FYI -- Balboa and Mason, according to their personnel files, had been recruited from the U.S. Special Forces. They were very good soldiers.)

Over the next few days he observed them requisitioning additional clothing and personal supplies, and duffle bags to carry them in.

ITEM: also in the hangar, behind closed doors, Pat met with her pilots, John Sykes and Emma Hall. He tried questioning them as he had the two guards, with the same response. Pat had them all sworn to secrecy, and he knew she was able to back it up.

Franklin looked up from the notes and laughed.

His mind flashed back to that night all those months ago, in her bedroom. She had been drinking a little too much that night, and her tongue ... among other things ... was loose. She was blabbering about her past, and someplace in Central America. A wonderful place where Mayans still lived, and gold flowed like water. It was an interesting dream, but he didn't really take it seriously until after Apex started coming into the picture.

They were damaging Pat's company, but their petty attempts weren't making a dent. He suspected that Jill had a hand in it, and so he worked his way back into her life, her good graces ... and her arms. Playing the naive little lover, he was able to give Jill inside information into key facilities.

Pat was feeling the heat now. And she was hungry for money. So he reminded her of this mysterious place in Central America, hoping she would take it from there.

And it worked. She had taken the bait. And he could see the proof that she was walking into the trap.

He got up and sat down before his personal computer. While it booted up, he touched a lever and opened a panel in the side of the desk, revealing additional electronics. He pressed a couple of buttons, waited, then beamed a wide grin.

"I got you, babe," he cooed.

He remembered last year's hijacking of the Osprey, and the steps he had taken to plant a special GPS tracking device within the aircraft's body. His intent was to prevent another such incident by allowing him to follow and locate the Osprey wherever it went, to be able to report such information to the authorities and merit his mistress' appreciation. But that little independent move was now going to change history.

He checked the display and smiled. Soon it'll all be mine, he thought.

The moon was high over the island when Franklin came to Pat's room.

He wasn't really surprised at the two half-filled duffle bags. Pat, dressed casually in tee-shirt and shorts, came out of the closet with a couple of items. She smiled at him as she added them to one of the bags.

"Hi, Danny," she said.

"Looks like you're running away from home," he quipped, taking on a naive tone. "This is more than an overnighiter, isn't it? I wish you'd let me come along. I'm worried."

She picked up an envelope from her desk and walked over to him. "Don't be worried; I'll be fine. I'll keep in touch, and hope to be back within a couple of weeks. And I need you here, Danny. It's important. In this envelope are specific instructions for you." The concerned look on her face seemed out of place to Franklin, as he took the thin envelope. "I really need your help on this."

He feigned indignity. "On what? You didn't think I'd notice all the activity around the Osprey's hangar. With all this secrecy, you'd think you were planning to invade Kuwait! That's not like you ... at least, not with me."

She gave him a motherly look and said, "I know, and I'm sorry. But this is big ... really big, on a need-to-know basis. But I can tell you that, if everything goes off without a hitch, we'll be financially secure beyond our wildest dreams." She changed the subject. "Now here's where I need you. You won't be able to contact me, but I'll contact you. This envelope contains the radio frequency I'll call you on, once a day at noon. There's also another envelope in here with specific instructions for you. Follow them precisely to the letter -- this is imperative to my plans."

He turned the envelope over as if the outside held some key to the mystery. Then he looked at her and nodded. "Okay, Pat. I'll take care of it. You're leaving in the morning?"

She nodded, and closed the distance between their bodies. "So tonight is for us," she said softly, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him passionately.

The sun was barely above the horizon as the Osprey lifted gracefully into the morning Mediterranean sky.

Wearing a silken bathrobe, Franklin stood on the balcony and waved dutifully as it disappeared into the distance. After a few moments, he smiled and casually strolled back into the house, making his way back to his quarters.

Not bothering to lock his door this time, he went straight to his personal computer, tapped a key and entered his password to bypass the screen saver.

Cracking his knuckles like a piano maestro, he sat down and got to work. The program on the screen showed several active windows. The largest was a map of the world, with a blinking icon moving slowly in one section. He boxed in the icon with his mouse, and keyed in a few instructions. Another window appeared, giving a detailed readout on the icon -- latitude and longitude, altitude, direction and speed, elapsed time and distance from point of origin, and estimated fuel expenditure. The figures recalculated every few seconds.

Franklin smiled wickedly and whispered, "Gotcha."

He watched the display for a few minutes to make sure everything was functioning properly, then retrieved his cell phone and tapped in a sequence of satellite-relayed numbers.

A few moments later, Jill Woodward's voice answered, "Operator Seven."

"This is the Game Warden, ma'am," he replied, using an official-sounding bass voice. "The eagle has left the nest."

"Thank you." A click ended the call.

Franklin put the phone down and picked up the envelope. "Okay, let's see what she wants me to do."

Bonnie Clayton hurried to her boss' side in response to her abrupt summons. "Yeah, Jill! What's up?"

"She's airborne!" the black woman announced with a grin. "Pass the word: we break camp in one hour."

"Florida?"

"Florida."

Chapter Five

Pat's eyes snapped opened as she woke from her nap. Instinctively looking to her watch, she noticed that several hours had passed. We must be very close, she thought, as she unfastened her seat belt and stretched.

"Mornin', boss," greeted Ron Balboa. He and Hal Mason were engaged in a game of chess. "Sleep well?"

She managed a smile. "Yes ... thank you," she lied, moving to the Osprey's lavatory. As she splashed water on her face, she tried to press past the images of her dream. She took a couple of deep breaths and returned to her seat in the cabin.

She cracked open Johnny's book on Mayan culture. Very helpful, she thought. Then her eyes landed on a word, and she froze. She blinked hard a couple of times and stared at the word.

Sacrifice.

Suddenly the images of her dream returned to her. Scenes of human sacrifice.

The first scene was of an old man, unfamiliar to her, and a young boy. By the look of the clothing and location, she guessed it to be centuries in the past, somewhere in the Middle Eastern desert. The old man was leading the young boy, his son (although how she knew that she hadn't a clue) up a winding mountain trail. On their pack animal was wood and materials for building an altar for burnt offerings. They barely spoke a word as they worked, finding the place, and assembling the sacrificial altar. Then the strangest thing happened, as the old man bound the hands and feet of the young boy, and placed him across the altar. He was going to sacrifice his son! The boy could've easily overpowered the old man, but he allowed himself to be placed in position. Her heart beat faster as the old man took out the knife that would take the peaceful boy's life, and raised it for the killing stroke.

She never saw the knife fall.

The next scene was stranger still, and terrified her. It was she who was on her back, bound hand and foot upon a stone altar. Thrashing about, she saw that she was at the top of the golden pyramid in the Valley of the Vanished, as she had recalled it. She struggled, but was unable to get free. Then there was a Mayan priest in full ceremonial garb standing at her side, a golden dagger in his upraised hands, poised to take her life. She screamed and struggled, but it had no effect on the executioner.

But then the scene swiftly changed. It was she who held the knife high now, and it was her cousin laid upon the altar. However, he didn't struggle as she did, but lay still as the boy did, waiting patiently. She thought he had been drugged, but the look on his face showed he was completely cognizant of the situation, his expression incomprehensibly peaceful. Then her hands -- with the knife -- came down in a single decisive thrust which plunged the blade deep into her cousin's chest. There was a sickening thunk, and the appearance of blood. Her cousin didn't make a sound, but shuddered once and simply died.

That final image echoed in her mind, as she woke from her dream.

"Boss!" she heard, snapping her back to reality.

"Yes?" she responded to the call from the cockpit.

"We're approaching the chasm you told us about," called Sykes.

Pat's adrenalin kicked in. She quickly moved forward, and recognized the familiar rock formations. "Yes! Good! The winds are going to get rough, but stay the course." As if on cue, the airplane abruptly shuddered with turbulence.

Without saying another word, Pat moved back to the cabin. The chess set had been upset by the last jolt, and the two guards were hastily rounding up the pieces. "Get into your seats now!" she ordered. "And strap in!"

The two men abandoned their round-up and took their places. The aircraft took another jolt, and they were driven into their chairs.

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Seconds passed. The Osprey shook and shifted like a drunken man, and the only sounds were between the pilot and co-pilot as they coordinated their flight, and the roar of the winds around them. Balboa looked out his window at the sheer walls of the chasm and released a few surprised profanities. It was like being in a monstrous carnival ride, or a human Lotto ball.

Then it was over as swiftly as it had arrived. For a few moments, everyone concentrated on the exchange from the cockpit, hoping not to hear anything wrong. Finally, the report came back. "We made it! How's everybody back here?"

Everyone acknowledged the fact that they had survived their ordeal.

Pat released her harness and moved forward. As she did, the two guards also unstrapped and finished their recovery of the chess set, now widely scattered about the area.

The chasm had opened into an egg-shaped valley encompassed by high mountains with snow-dusted peaks.

"Okay," announced Pat. "We're here! It's a sure bet we're being watched, so let's keep it nice and friendly. Maintain a casual speed, and let's circle around a bit just to let them know we're not an immediate threat to them."

The flight crew acknowledged the order, and brought the Osprey into a high circle near the edge of the valley, giving them all a chance to get a good look at their destination.

The Valley of the Vanished hadn't changed since she had last been here. No surprise there, considering how many centuries they had existed here. The beauty of the area was breathtaking, and she could see the distinct signs of civilization below. She spotted the palace, where several figures stood observing them. And there was the golden pyramid -- tall and majestic in the sunlight.

"There," she pointed. "Do you think you can set us down on that flat area next to the pyramid?"

"There seems to be enough room," replied Sykes. "Yes."

"Good." She put a hand on his shoulder. "And ... make sure we have plenty of room between us and the pyramid. That thing is sacred to these people, and they wouldn't think well of us if we did anything to it."

"No, ma'am," he agreed. "I'll give us plenty of elbow room."

Leaving the crew to their task, Pat walked back to the cabin. "We're getting set to land," she announced as she strapped into her seat.

Skillful hands maneuvered the Osprey into a lazy arc, bringing them over the golden icon. They hovered briefly as the engines tilted into position, then descended slowly and cautiously onto the mesa. They hesitated just before touchdown, then landed with slight bounce.

The two pilots glanced at each other, then gave a spontaneous high-five.

Pat addressed the group, "Okay. The next move's up to them. Let's see what they do. Stay cool, but be ready for anything."

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The guards were already at work. Mason was scanning the area with binoculars while Balboa loaded a pair of automatic rifles.

"They seem to be mighty curious at us, ma'am," observed Mason. "They're closing in from all sides, but I think they're too scared to get close."

"I'm not surprised. I'd guess that most of the people out there have never seen an airplane in their lives. Any movement from the palace?"

"If you mean the fancy building off by itself, yes. Now it looks like a delegation of sorts is moving in our direction. It's a small group, with a lady in the lead. Grey hair under a headdress that looks like royalty."

"Good. Does she show any fear?"

"No, ma'am. None that I can see."

Pat smiled. Her estimation of the situation was correct, and Monja was queen. "Very good. Prepare to open the door and lower the steps. Do not give any indication of hostility."

"Should we stick close as a show of force?" asked Balboa.

Pat thought a moment, then shook her head. "No, I don't think we'll need it. But ... if you hear me yell or scream, you know what to do."

"Yes, ma'am," they chimed in unison.

Pat straightened herself, and walked to the door. On cue, it was opened, and the steps extended. She stood at the top of the steps and looked out at the pyramid and the ornate items at the edge of the mesa. She was glad their landing hadn't damaged anything, as she gracefully stepped down onto the mesa. Glancing about her, she saw that she had the attention of several hundred natives from the nearby village.

The delegation approached from her right. She could see the face of the woman in the lead, and confirmed it as Monja. The years had taken their toll on her, but she was still very beautiful. Her long flowing hair -- once jet black -- was now the color of silken silver.

She approached with quiet dignity, raised a hand in salute, and addressed her in English. "I bring you greetings. I am Queen Monja, ruler of this Valley."

Pat returned the gesture. "I also bring you greetings, daughter of Chaac. I am Patricia Savage, cousin of Clark Savage, Jr." She hoped that the name-dropping would give her credibility.

Monja's expression became curious. "I remember you. But that was many years ago. You ... you are still young?"

She smiled in response. "I can explain, but not here. I am glad you remember me."

"Why do you come to the Valley of the Vanished, Patricia?" Her tone suddenly took on a strong degree of concern. "Is Doc well?"

She was right about Monja's feelings for her cousin. She nodded sadly. "Physically, yes. But there is more. We should talk in private."

Monja hesitated a moment, then said, "Very well. We will go to the palace. In the meantime, you are welcome." She noticed others in the airplane. "These are your friends?"

"They work for me. They are loyal to me. They mean no harm."

"As long as this is so, they are welcome. They may join us."

She turned to the guards and pilot crew. "Okay, you heard her. Leave the guns in the plane; I don't think we'll need them. Then follow us. Keep a low profile." They responded with nods and words of acknowledgment.

Pat turned back to Monja. "They will be right behind us. Thank you for your hospitality."

With Queen Monja and Pat in the lead, the group secured the Osprey and moved away from the mesa, heading down the wide pathway to the palace. There was much jungle growth about, and many people followed them out of curiosity. Pat was amazed at how beautiful everyone around here looked. Due to the natural preserving elements around them, and the lack of the pollution of the 'civilized world,' she regretfully concluded that her cosmetics would find very few takers.

Monja was a prime example. Her face showed very few wrinkles, and she could've passed for twenty years younger than her advanced years. Pat admired that. No wonder Doc had found her such a prize, she mused, as they reached the clearing around the palace.

Monja motioned to a man in her entourage, who was instantly at her side. She gave him several instructions in Mayan -- unintelligible to Pat -- and returned to his place in the ranks.

Monja explained, "I have instructed Running Elk to escort your servants to suitable quarters in the palace. He speaks English."

"Thank you." She relayed the instructions to the guards and flight crew, who followed the Mayan into the palace.

"Patricia," said Monja. "If it well with you, we can walk about while you tell me what you have come here for."

"That would be fine."

As they walked about the area, Pat unveiled her story. "I'm afraid to say that Doc is ... not well. He has changed much in the years since you saw him last."

"Yes. There had been many years of silence, and we had wondered if he had crossed over to the other side. When we heard his voice after so long, we rejoiced greatly."

"Yes," Pat acknowledged. "But there is more. Doc had been in ... hiding ... for many years. I don't know what happened to him during all those years, but his mind had been changed. Before we knew it, he tried to kill our President and assume control of the United States. Many people died that day. It was very tragic." She lowered her head, taking on an appropriately saddened expression. "He's somehow been deceived, and seeks to conquer the world if he cannot be stopped."

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Monja had frozen in step, her features pale with shock. "This is horrible! How can I help?"

Pat was thrilled to see that her scheme was working. She continued, "He's been using the gold from this Valley to fund his nefarious plans. This is why I'm here, to persuade you to stop the flow of gold, and lure him here. I feel that, if we could hold him to reason with him, he could be persuaded to end his mad scheme."

"Yes. There is compassion in your words, Patricia. I agree with you, he would not hurt us here. How can we help?"

"He will be calling here soon, possibly requesting more gold. Refuse him, and tell him that he must come to the Valley at once."

"I will instruct my people in what you say," nodded the Mayan queen. "We will succeed in this."

Carrying a glass of port wine, Franklin returned to his room and checked the display on his computer. It took him only a few moments to realize that the icon representing the Osprey had stopped in a remote location within the mountains of Central America. Refueling? he thought, and dismissed it. His next thought was that the Osprey had crashed, but he dismissed both the thought and the panic that accompanied it.

"She's there," he concluded with a grin, and reached for his cell phone.

Woodward answered, "Operator Seven."

He assumed the same bass voice as before. "This is the Game Warden. The eagle has taken roost."

"Where are you located?" she asked, and he could hear the excitement in her tone.

He slowly read off the coordinates from the computer screen, and repeated them once for good measure. "Do you copy, Operator Seven?"

"Yes, I do. Thank you very much." And she disconnected the call.

Franklin leaned back in his office chair and lifted his glass to the screen. "To success!"

Woodward sat on the bunk at the rear of the RV, with a map stretched across a small table. After a couple of calculations, she made a pencil mark on the map. Sliding past the table, she made her way forward, quietly passing a couple of women fast asleep in chairs. The passenger seat at the very front was unoccupied, and she took it.

"Was that your contact, Jill?" asked Bonnie Clayton. Her hair had been formed into a long braid, and the end curled over her left shoulder.

"Yes," she replied, swiveling to face the road ahead. They had made excellent time, and were somewhere between El Paso and Austin, having passed through three states already. "Pat's Osprey has landed. The

coordinates put her in a mountainous area of Central America. I'll show you on the map when we make camp."

"Okay. You going to contact Alana?"

She nodded. "Uh huh. I'll let her know we'll meet her in Tampa day after tomorrow."

Woodward sat back and relaxed in the seat, looking out at the Texas landscape.

There'd been a slight controversy over how best to transport the women, their equipment, and the weapons they'd be needing, coast-to-coast, with the least risk of police intrusion.

In the end, they couldn't dispute the logic of a convoy. They had passenger cars, pickups, heavy trucks, and the used RV that was being used as their command center, and it was an ironic reflection of themselves -- a rag-tag bunch of misfits on a quest.

As her eyelids grew heavy, she smiled with relief that Danny had finally called her. She'd missed him, she thought. He'd been a real encouragement in her life, and might make good husband material once this was all over. She rested her head on the back of the chair, and her breathing slowly relaxed.

Clayton glanced over at her friend, and smiled. "Sleep well, Jill."

Chapter Six

Monk was walking from the kitchen to the living room when the phone rang. Lea was in town, so he grabbed the phone.

"Andrew Mayfair?" a male voice asked. "Monk Mayfair?"

"Yeah," he growled. "Watcha want?"

"Please listen closely," the voice said in an even monotone. "The Valley of the Vanished is in danger. I repeat, the Valley of the Vanished is in danger." Click.

"Oh, terrific ... another crank call," he commented, hanging up the phone. As he walked away, he froze in mid-step, then looked back at the telephone. "Blazes," he whispered, then picked up the phone again.

Three minutes later, he dialed another number; it rang several times before being answered. "Clark speaking."

"Doc? It's Monk. Lissen -- I just got a weird phone call. Mysterious caller, enigmatic message, the whole shebang. Nothin' we haven't heard before. But he said that the Valley of the Vanished was in danger."

There was a pause, then Clark asked, "Could you trace the call?"

"Naw. Both Caller ID and Last Number Redial came up empty. Could've been a cell phone outside'a the country."

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"The last I knew, very few people outside of us were conscious of the existence of the Valley," commented Clark. "Is this still true?"

"Yeah," Monk replied. "I've never heard it brought up apart from the team, and I don't think any of us would try to trick you with ... with ... unless ...?"

Clark had arrived at the same conclusion. "Pat?"

"I don't know," he sighed. "Remember that news story I showed ya? Seems like Patty'd be a little busy right now, don'tcha think?"

"Agreed. But, then again, there is the temptation of the gold."

"Holy cow! I think you've got a point." He paused. "Doc, you better give 'em a buzz and see what you can find out."

"That I shall," replied Clark. "I'll get back to you."

It was a decades-old ritual, passed down through the generations of his family line. John Blue Corn was the latest one to wear the mantle of responsibility.

The tanned Mayan native looked to the sky and smiled as he walked to the special hut. Behind him and to his right was his youngest son, Harvest Moon, following respectfully. The hut at the end of the path held a mystic holiness that made the monotony bearable, even pleasurable. It contained the sacred shortwave radio that the great Clark Savage, Jr. had brought in the days of his grandfathers, that connected their Valley with the Man of Bronze. He beamed with pride. He had been the first one to speak to him after fifty years of silence, and had been blessed with the honor of relaying the news to the people. It was a great time of rejoicing.

He entered the hut and sat down before the radio. His son sat on the floor next to the wall, attentively watching his father switch on the apparatus. John Blue Corn closed his eyes. The whine of the ancient machine, and the hiss of the static, was like music to the Mayan's ears. To him, it was the sound of heaven visiting this small room.

Then the heavens opened, and father and son heard the voice. His eyes snapping open wide, John Blue Corn took the microphone in his hand. With his thumb poised over the TRANSMIT key, he turned to his son and commanded, "Run like the wind, and tell the Queen -- Doc Savage calls!"

There was no hesitation as the boy burst from the hut and down the pathway.

Alone, John Blue Corn looked at the microphone. He had been told to expect this call, and had been told precisely what words to say. But they did not tell him that it would hurt so. After a moment, he pressed the key down and spoke clearly in his native language. "We acknowledge you, Clark Savage Jr. Please stand by." Releasing the key, he sighed a labored breath, and waited.

Seconds later, the bronze-haired woman who appeared from the skies stopped at the doorway. She had been running. He reported to her, "He waits. Shall I continue?"

"Yes," she answered, slightly out of breath. "Do exactly as you have been told."

The native sadly nodded, and spoke into the microphone with clear precision. "Clark Savage, Jr. Please be informed, there will be no gold. The contract between you and the people of the Valley has been dissolved by order of Queen Monja. You will have to reestablish the contract in person." He paused. "Do you understand?"

There was silence for several seconds. Then came the response: "I understand. I will come."

"There will be no further radio contact," said the native. "Over and out."

He released the key on the microphone, and switched off the shortwave radio without waiting for a response. Hiding his pain behind a facade of formality, he turned to the woman and announced, "It is accomplished."

She smiled at him. "You have done well."

John Blue Corn silently disagreed with her.

Clark switched off the shortwave set. There was no point in trying to reestablish contact; they had made their declaration clear. He took a deep breath and released it in a heavy sigh, leaned back in the seat and crossed his arms.

If a curious passer-by had chanced upon the camper van at that time, they would've considered its sole occupant to be slightly eccentric, talking to himself like that. But Clark was praying. Ever since becoming a Christian, he found his most productive times, where he could concentrate on matters and commune in the Lord, were in the privacy of the camper van. There he could speak aloud, as man to man, where there was no need for emotional restraint before one's Creator.

"Lord, I don't understand why she's doing this to me?" he asked, throwing up his hands. "She was the one who chose to abuse the silphium as she has, yet she blames me for the consequences!" He sighed heavily. "But that's a moot point now. Somehow she's persuaded them to withhold the gold from us, to lure me to the Valley of the Vanished. Of course it's a trap, but what choice do I have but to walk into it? On the one hand, if I choose not to go there at all, the Institute will never be completed. However, if I go there alone, she's certain to take me prisoner, and fulfill her evil desires. Is that what You want, Lord?" He paused, seeking an answer. "Considering the last time we ... clashed ... it's highly unlikely she would be there alone. More likely is that she would bring reinforcements, guards or other troops."

He lapsed into silence for several minutes. Then he looked up at the ceiling and declared, "I don't want to! I don't want to endanger anyone else as a result of my affairs. But the only way to go there with any possible hope of success is to go there with an equal or superior force or with an equal or superior advantage. And not knowing what she has with her, who's to say what is the number of her force? Besides, that means that others have to be involved. I really don't want to include them, subject them to potential danger. But ... I have no choice."

His head suddenly echoed with Bible verses: 'Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed.' 'The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.' 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.' 'Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the

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humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because He cares for you.'

That last verse caused Clark to groan within himself, as his mind flashed back to a time over a year ago. "Okay, Lord," he surrendered. "You've made Your point."

Then more verses came to mind: 'Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.'

Clark understood. "For me to go into the Valley of the Vanished without some sort of backup would be suicide, and that's not what You have in mind. Very well ... my job is to ask, Your job is to make it work. 'In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.'"

Just then, a knock came to the door of the camper van. "Clark, it's Renny."

Clark opened the door and stepped down. He stretched his big frame in the open air.

"You've been cooped up inside of there for some time. What's up?"

"It appears that Pat may be in the Valley of the Vanished, and has somehow persuaded them to stop the flow of gold."

His expression was pained. "Holy cow! So what does she want now?"

"Me, it seems," he replied. "Alone."

"It's a trap, Doc!" the big man exclaimed.

Clark was calm. "Yes, I know. Therefore the best course of action is that I come in directly, alone, while a backup group enters covertly and deals with the threat."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"All of us ... whoever's interested." He shrugged his shoulders. "What about you?"

There was hesitation in the big man. "I'll join you in the planning, but I don't think Amanda would do well with me being part of the actual action. I'm sorry."

Clark placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Don't be, old friend. Times have changed, and our priorities with them. But I will need your help in the planning stage."

"You've got it! Y'know, when I was on the run, I found a couple of superfirers in an old cache. I'll see if I can find them, and if they're usable."

Clark nodded. "Good. We'll take all we can get. We're also going to need a way of bringing us together during the planning stage."

Renny nodded. "Yeah. No headquarters and scattered about the country." He paused, then his eyes opened wide. "But I think I might have an idea. Y'ever heard of telephone conferencing?"

He nodded. "When we were looking for you, Johnny and I arranged one with Monk."

"If you're interested, I know someone who can set up one on this scale."

Clark nodded. "Continue."

"Her name's Nancy, and she's part of the crew that set up the electronics for the admin trailers. You remember how Long Tom could take one look at an electronics nightmare and instinctively know how to straighten it out?"

Clark nodded appreciatively. "He was the best."

"Well, it looks like Nancy's cut from the same mold. She takes to electronics like a duck takes to water." He suddenly broke into a grin. "Anyhow, she's working her way through college, and she could use the money. She's a great kid, and I'll vouch for her."

Clark nodded. "Very well. I should know how many are going to be in on this by tomorrow. Have her come by the trailer after that."

"Will do."

"Mr. Dent? I'm Nancy," she greeted, accompanied by a grin. She stood 5'5" and didn't look like she could tip the scales over 100 pounds. Her wiry frame was topped with a mound of dark brown hair, perfectly accenting her brown eyes. She wore jeans and a denim shirt, and the headphones of her Walkman had been lowered to behind her neck. She carried a hard-side tool bag, and Clark could see that she was stronger than she appeared.

Clark asked her into the admin trailer, and they walked back to the inner room with the large-screen television. "What did Ivan tell you?" he asked as they sat.

"Just that you wanted to put together a phone conference, and you needed somebody to make it work."

"Good. We'll be receiving signals from seven locations: besides ourselves, there are two in Oregon, one in Oklahoma, one in Vermont, and one in Tennessee."

She nodded. "Piece of cake," she said eagerly.

For the next twenty minutes, they talked about the project. She was attentive, asking an occasional clarifying question, and making notes on a steno pad across her skinny lap. Clark could see that she had a passion for her profession, which he respected and admired.

Once they were done, Clark issued her a debit card on the Institute's account, which would more than cover the cost of her expenses. Overflowing with enthusiasm, she stood and shook Clark's massive hand, then left the trailer with her steno pad.

Chapter Seven

Something was disturbingly wrong here.

Ever since the five of them had arrived in the Valley of the Vanished, they had been treated like royalty. They were presented with native clothing, and Monja had provided them with several natives to act as guides and interpreters.

But what disturbed her most was the attitude of the natives themselves. She had known hospitality from all over the world, but these people went beyond that. They ... loved the strangers from the sky, regardless of knowing who and what they were all about. It was eerie. She was used to the adoration of the public, the love of the people, but this was different. The people in the 'outside world' did so for a reason, to get something. But these people didn't seem to have that motivation. They had nothing to gain. And that's what made it the more perplexing to her.

The others enjoyed the attention, and were taking well to the natives. All but Balboa had adopted the local clothing. That was fine, she agreed, as she looked up at the sky in the direction of the mouth of the chasm. Show yourself, Doc, she thought with impatience.

"Is there something wrong?" asked Grape Vine, her guide. She looked down at his concerned face and tried to smile. She couldn't, so turned her head and dismissed things with a curt, "No. I'm fine."

"Very good, mistress," he acknowledged.

As she continued walking, she noticed a group of children playing. So innocent, she mused. So untouched by the rest of the world. She thought of her own childhood, those many decades ago in Canada with her father. She smiled at the memories.

Suddenly, a brown-faced little boy spotted her and ran to her. He lifted his arms to her, and she didn't need a translator for his intent. She bent down and picked him up. He wrapped his small arms around her neck and gave her a big hug. She paused at the unabashed show of affection, and tried to return the hug. When she did it was a poor effort at best.

The boy's action attracted the attention of the other children, who mobbed Pat and wanted to hug the bronze-haired fair-skinned woman. She found that resistance was futile, so went down to one knee in order to accommodate them all.

Their love brought pain back to Pat, as she reflected on her own inability to bear children. The silphium had been the primary reason, she had told herself. But there were other factors involved that she didn't like to admit. The silphium had made her appear to be half her proper age, but it didn't change the facts of nature. She was now simply too far beyond child-bearing years. Too far gone.

Suddenly feeling a wave of cold from inside, she broke free of the children and quickly moved clear of them. They tried to follow her, but soon tired of the chase.

Twilight came over the Valley of the Vanished. And for Pat, it brought frustration.

Before returning to the palace, she had contacted Daniel from the Osprey. He regretted reporting yet another attack by Apex, on a boutique in Baja. Mumbling curses under her breath, she made her way up the stairs to the second floor, and the room next to Monja's. She quickly entered her room and closed the

door behind her.

Drawing a dried reed from a cylindrical holder, she touched it to one of the flames and applied it to the oil lamp on the table in the middle of the room. She felt an admiration for the ingenuity of these simple people, who had taken animal waste and plants and produced a clean flammable gas to provide light, as she walked over to the window and waited for the inevitable knock from her hostess.

Entertainment in the Valley was woefully limited to conversation, some games, music, and a surprising number of reading groups. And every evening since their arrival, Monja had visited her room desiring conversation.

The Mayan Queen had gone on at length about her family, the children she had given birth to, and the joy they had brought to her life. In her own defense, Pat had tried to convey the feelings of satisfaction she had in being the head of a large business, but it just didn't get through to the Mayan queen. In the end, she broke her own vow of silence, and told her of her daughter Caroline, and the distance between them. Monja could see the pain it caused Pat, and diplomatically changed the subject.

Eventually, the conversation came back to Doc. The conversation ALWAYS came back to Doc. Even when Monja asked about life on the outside, Pat had to be creative in order to perpetuate her tale about her 'uncontrollable' cousin.

It was evident that she still cared a great deal for him after all these years. During the years that Doc had been missing, Monja had been able to let go of him and move on with her life. When her father died, she took over the mantle of leadership. She married, gave birth to children, and eventually became a widow.

Then came the call from Doc. Monja spoke about it as if it had been the Second Coming of Christ. It gave the people hope. It gave her hope that somehow, someday, they would be together again. And now, with him on his way, she was literally bursting with excitement.

Pat turned from the window as the darkness overcame the land, and tried to focus on coming up with a way of keeping the queen from putting a crimp in her plans.

There was a rap on the door. "Come in, Monja," she answered.

Dressed in a dark, floor-length robe and carrying an oil lamp, Monja walked into the room. She placed the lamp near the one Pat had lit, and the two women sat in a pair of luxurious chairs. The topic once more turned to Doc, but Pat was ready. A few minutes in, she stated, "I don't know if I mentioned it, but he has somehow made himself young. He looks about as old as I do."

There was sudden silence. Pat observed Monja's face, and saw the emotion. After a few moments, her voice filled with disappointment, she openly voiced her own conclusions. "He is young? If this is so, then why should he desire an old woman as myself?" She looked at Pat. "Do you know how this happened?"

"I've heard rumors of a special chemical he took that stopped him from aging, but that may be nothing more than hearsay." She shrugged innocently. "I haven't been able to talk to him to ask him."

"Your youth, Pat ... how did you retain it?" she asked, searching.

Pat was ready. "An herb called silphium, used for many years."

"Would-would this silphium work on me?"

"I honestly don't know," she replied.

"Then would you allow me to try it?" she asked boldly.

"I suppose so," she replied, hesitantly. "But there is no guarantee that it will have any effect on you. Realize, I've been using it for years."

"Would you allow me to try it? Please?" she repeated.

"All right," Pat conceded on cue. "But please don't get your hopes up, okay?"

A light returned to Monja's eyes. "Thank you, Pat! How soon can I try it?"

Pat thought a moment. "Well, I will have to go to my airplane. It will take a few minutes."

"I will wait here," Monja responded, barely able to stay seated.

Fifteen minutes later, Pat came back into the room with a small black case. With practiced familiarity, she removed the items and prepared the dosage of silphium. She held up a steel item. "This is a device which uses compressed air to inject the solution into the bloodstream instead of puncturing the skin. It doesn't hurt, but I will need to inject it into the main artery of your neck."

Obediently, she brushed the silver hair away from her neck and waited. Pat located the artery and pressed the nozzle against it. The apparatus hissed as the silphium entered her bloodstream. As she disassembled the device, Monja felt her neck.

"How do you feel?" asked Pat.

"I feel ... a little dizzy. But I am fine. When will I see any results?"

Pat chuckled. "As I said, there is no telling what the results will be, nor even if there will be results. I warned you not to get your hopes up. Now it would probably be good idea if you went to bed. In the morning we shall see."

Monja rose, a little wobbly, and smiled embarrassingly. She gave Pat a sisterly hug, then took her lamp and left the room.

Pat finished dissembling and cleaning the hypo-spray device, and put the bag on the dresser where her clothes were. Spotting her copy of Johnny's book on Mayan culture, she picked it up and had a seat next to the lamp.

The light of the morning had barely arrived when Pat heard the scream from next door. A moment later, the door burst open without warning. "Pat, Pat! Look at me!" she said excitedly.

It was Monja, and Pat instantly understood her excitement.

She was younger. Way younger.

At first glance, she looked forty or fifty years younger. Her silver hair had regained its jet black color, and all traces of wrinkles had vanished. Pat was amazed that the silphium had made such a profound effect on the woman.

She stood at the foot of Pat's bed and breathlessly explained, "I had a fitful time sleeping. When I awoke and looked at myself in the mirror, this is what I saw. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes, it is," answered Pat cautiously. "How do you feel?"

"I feel fine. My heart is beating very fast, but I am so excited ..."

"I've got to think this over," she said to herself, then turned to Monja. "Your people are going to be very pleased."

"I must tell my children," she said excitedly.

"You better get dressed first," Pat suggested. "I'll meet you downstairs."

Monja glanced down at her robe and giggled. "Yes. This is fine for an old woman ... but not for a young one," she said with a grin. "Thank you, my friend Pat. Thank you."

As the door closed behind the queen, and Pat swung her legs out of bed, she shook her head with amazement.

She'd never known the silphium to have such an ... extreme effect on her. Could it be the environment? The isolation of the Valley to the effects of pollution? After all, this place's all-organic, all natural, and their lifestyle is monastic. But could it be more than that?

Then the answer hit her like a bolt of lightning. The dosage!

Over the decades, she'd developed an intolerance to the silphium, and so had compensated by gradually increasing the dosage. What Monja had been given was far greater than Pat's initial doses. It was that megadose, combined with the virgin environment of the Valley, that had produced this result in her.

"Very interesting," she mused aloud. "I wonder if I could market this?"

Monja's intent had been to first tell her family of the change in her: "They will be thrilled to know that their mother is young again."

However, that was not how it ended.

Both she and Pat knew that Monja just couldn't walk up to the houses of her sons and daughters and announce that she was young again. They would never believe her. So she first had to convince her closest servants that she was who she said she was. Once they understood -- more or less -- they summoned her family and their spouses to the palace for the great unveiling.

Her five surviving children, their four spouses, and her seven grandchildren were initially shocked, with some disbelief. But then she easily presented them with details of their life that only she would know. Her

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daughters -- Esther, Ruth, and the pregnant Miriam -- were overjoyed at their mother's good fortune. But her two surviving sons -- Mordecai, the first-born, and Matthias -- were more skeptical of the goodness of the transformation. Although she did not fully understand the Mayan language, Pat could still grasp the doubt of their conversation, and kept a safe distance from the family meeting.

Sitting before the computer currently dedicated to Nancy's switchboard program, Clark was still fascinated by this era's technology, surpassing even the marvels he himself had created decades ago.

He felt Renny's feet climbing the steps outside the admin trailer. As the big man came into the room, he said, "Okay, we're ready. I've given express orders that we're not to be disturbed unless a tornado was heading this way."

Clark started making the calls. The numbers had been pre-entered into the system, so it was a simple matter of establishing the connection. One by one they came into the mix: Monk and Lea on Line 1, Perry and Dot on Line 2, Johnny on Line 3, Gumball on Line 4, and Amy on Line 5. Connections were scrambled and made secure. Greetings and small talk were exchanged. Clark looked over the switchboard, and nodded.

Dot and I sat at the table in our hotel room. A speakerphone was plugged into my cell phone. It was just after sunrise; Clark wasn't wasting time.

Clark's distinct booming voice cut through the small talk. "Your attention, please. May I suggest that, before we proceed, we have a quick word of prayer."

We joined in with the chorus of amens and other sounds of agreement. Clark paused, then offered petition for God to bring us all into one accord, and give us wisdom. There was another chorus of amens as he finished.

"Over the last few hours, either Monk or myself have contacted you individually on this matter, providing you with as many details as we can present. However, in order to bring us all up to speed, I'd like to provide a quick overview of the situation to date.

"Let me first start by explaining what the Valley of the Vanished is, and its significance.

"Hundreds of years ago, at the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the ancestors who settled the Valley were a clan of the highest class of Mayans, the royalty. They fled from the Spanish soldiers, and have existed there for centuries, set apart from the rest of the world. There have been a few from the outside who have gotten through, including our group ... and, before us, my father. He helped them, and they showed their thanks by providing him -- and us -- with an inexhaustible supply of gold. We were also made official members of their people."

"Don't I know it," commented Monk with a groan. "My knees still ache when I think of climbing that pyramid on 'em to seal the deal." There were sympathetic noises from Johnny and Renny.

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Clark continued. "During my hibernation, when things were falling apart on the outside, Ham had the foresight to enact some changes in the way the gold could be accessed. He believed that I would return some day. Perry and I found his notes, and restored contact with the Valley last year."

He paused. "Two days ago, Monk received a mysterious phone call stating that the Valley was in danger. I contacted the Valley at the prescribed time, and was informed that the contract between myself and the people of the Valley had been dissolved by order of ... Queen Monja."

"Monja's queen now?" exclaimed Johnny.

Clark continued. "I was informed that I would have to reestablish the contract in person. Now, this is obviously a snare to lure me outside of the United States. The most likely suspect in this is my cousin Pat. It's already been established that she harbors a great deal of hate towards me, and would like nothing better than to see me dead." He paused. "The Valley would offer an ideal opportunity to do this. Also, the gold of the Valley would be a strong temptation, to refill her coffers in light of the current reign of terror by Apex against her company and others. With these two facts in mind, it seems most likely that Pat is behind this."

"I also did some snoopin'," added Monk. "I called around, tryin' to get a message to Patty -- um, Penelope. One secretary in L.A. said she was out of the country. Another in New York let it slip that she was going to be gone for a couple of weeks. It may not be conclusive evidence, but it sure helps the case."

"Agreed," replied Clark. "So I think that we can safely assume that Pat is behind this, and she's somehow deceived or persuaded Monja into siding against me."

"Our plan is for Gumball and I to fly in with the Osprey. That direct action will divert attention away from a second group, who will enter the Valley covertly. This second group will determine the nature of the threat, and neutralize it."

I tapped the star key on my cell as a signal, like raising a hand for attention.

"Yes, Perry?" he acknowledged.

"Define 'neutralize'."

"Non-lethal, of course. But we're rushing things a bit. I need to know who will be participating in this mission."

"I'm in," said Monk.

"Don't have much choice, do I -- considerin' I'm your ride," added Gumball.

"I'm afraid I'll have to pass," said Johnny, punctuating his statement with a sneeze. "Flu bug."

"I'm out, too," added Renny, looking over at Clark apologetically. "Amanda needs me."

I looked over at Dot. We made eye contact and she nodded her head. "We're in," I said.

"I'll see what Father may have left behind to help us," said Amy. "I will do all I can."

"Very well. Thank you," concluded Clark. "Since Gumball and I have the easy part, so to speak, we should concentrate on the actions of the covert team. Gumball tells me that the term SOG is usable here -- Special Operations Group."

"What ways are there of getting into the Valley?" asked Dot.

"It's extremely limited. More than likely, we would all be riding in the Osprey, then the SOG would separate at some point along the way."

Dot leaned towards the speakerphone. "Granddad, you'd be the only one of the SOG that would know the terrain. Can you brief the rest of us?"

"Sure thing, Dottie," he squeaked back. "In fact, I've been sketchin' out some rough maps for ya to study."

"Next question," I spoke up. "Once we're in the Valley, we'll need to be able to move about unseen. Any suggestions?"

"We'll come up with something," hedged Clark, sensing we were moving off-track. "Remember, this is a planning session, where we get things out in the open, determine what we have and what we need. We can work on the problems as we go."

He paused and shifted gears. "Now, presuming that Pat has a small army accompanying her, we will also need a way to neutralize them."

"Well, we've always got the anaesthetic gas," said Monk. "But it's real limited against a large group. We'd have to catch them just right in order for it to be effective."

"Can you modify it?" asked Amy. "Compress it, perhaps, or make it last longer in the air?"

"I think so, but I'd have to check into it first." He paused. "Even if I can do it, I'm real limited with regards to production facilities."

"Okay. Renny has been able to find an old superfirer, but that's it. So we're limited when it comes to personal weaponry."

"What about hand-to-hand?" asked Dot.

"Too open to make it practical, unless you're trained jungle fighters," answered Renny.

"So we'll need some non-lethal firepower to use against unknown numbers," observed Clark. "Amy, wasn't Long Tom working on that?"

"Yes," she replied, thoughtfully. "But many of them are impractical due to a lack of production facilities. Working alone, it could take weeks."

Clark summarized, "So we need production facilities. Any ideas?"

Dot whispered into my ear. I grinned. "Clark," I said. "What about our man in New York?"

"An excellent idea. For the rest of you, we're talking about Douglas Martin. He worked in Ham's old law firm while Ham was alive, and now he's a senior partner. He also has ties to the intelligence community."

"CIA? NSA?" asked Gumball.

"Anything's possible," he answered. "We've discovered he's a man of many talents. Let me get him on the line. Please stand by."

There was sudden silence from the speakerphone. Dot stood and stretched. "So ... what do you think?" she asked.

I looked at her. "Not sure yet. I'm a preacher, not a commando; the only warfare I'm used to is more spiritual than physical."

"You'll do fine. Remember, the battle is the Lord's."

I nodded. "True."

A few minutes later, Clark came back on the line. "I apologize for the long delay, but I was explaining what the situation was, and what we needed. He has a friend he believes can handle our needs. Martin should be calling me back soon. When he does, I'll include him in the mix."

We passed the time with small talk. We expressed our sympathy at Johnny's flu, and our expectation at the construction of the Institute. There was no 'if' while we talked about the building; we were fully confident that God had His blessing on this project, and He would cause it to happen, regardless on any 'setback.'

Clark suddenly said, "Martin's calling. I'm going to join him to us."

There was a pause while Clark brought Douglas Martin into the conference call.

"Douglas?" said Clark. "You're in and secure."

Martin's voice, tinged with age but full of life, came through the speakerphone. "My great thanks to you all for allowing me to participate in your endeavor." He paused. "Mr. Mayfair? It's an honor to meet you once more. And Mr. Renwick, what a pleasure to speak to you at last."

"Ditto. I hear you helped them track me down," said Renny.

"That I did, sir. I trust that there are no hard feelings."

"Naw. Besides, if they hadn't found me, they would'a never found Long Tom."

"Yes. My condolences, by the way, on your loss. Especially to you, Miss Roberts."

"Thank you," replied Amy cordially.

"You've contacted the armorer?" asked Clark.

"Yes, and he will help you. His name is Mitchell Drake, and he runs a company called Waverly Arms; it operates out of Miami, Florida. It may appear to be a small company, but they are quite capable of exceeding your needs. I gave Mitch your cell phone number, Clark. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. Did you tell him who I am?"

"No, sir! He will know you only as Clark Dent, a friend and client of mine."

"Thank you, Douglas. When will he be calling?"

"Knowing him, I'd say within the hour."

"Very good. Thank you."

Martin's voice was rejuvenated. "The pleasure is all mine. It feels marvelous to be of use once more beyond my legal expertise. Good luck in your endeavor, and please don't hesitate to call."

We all gave our encouragements, thanks, and farewells. Then he disconnected from the conference call.

"There you have it," concluded Clark. "I would say we're on our way. Please consider what you have and what you will need, and I'll contact you individually as soon as possible."

Dot and I gave our goodbyes and disconnected.

Monk was looking out at the lake when the cordless phone in his hand rang.

"Clark?" he said expectantly.

"Yes, Monk. I had a most fascinating talk with Mr. Drake. He is indeed who we are looking for, and his facilities will be more than sufficient."

"Great!" he exclaimed. "I've also got some good news. I found my notes for the anaesthetic gas, and there IS a way of expanding its capabilities. All I need is a good chem lab to make it work."

Clark's tone lowered. "I believe that time is of the essence. I've already spoken to your son, and he's willing to transport us all to their facilities in Florida, arriving by this evening. Can you be ready?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll start packing. Have him give me a call when he's near."

"Will do. See you later."

Monk looked down at the well-worn leather flight bag he had recovered from storage, and carried it into the bedroom. As he packed, he suddenly noticed his wife standing in the doorway. He looked at her and gave her a toothy grin, then returned to his task. A few moments later he stopped and looked at her again. She was very quiet, a dead giveaway.

"You're worried about me," he said, more statement than question.

"And why shouldn't I?" Her soft features mirrored her pain. "You're not a spring chicken anymore, Andy. And if Pat is behind this, she won't make the same mistakes she did in Lincoln City."

Monk walked over to her, took her in a tender embrace, and kissed her. "I'll be all right. I won't be alone."

Lea was quiet. "Do you still love her?"

Monk's expression turned to surprise. "Is that what this is about?" he exclaimed. Then he looked her in the eyes and said softly, "Lea, you are the only woman in my life. You've put up with me all these years. You're the mother of our kids. Pat's not even in your league."

He gave her a squeeze. "Just don't do anything stupid. You know I look awful in black," she commented with a smile.

"Okay, Clark. We'll be there by ten."

I hung up the cell, and walked into the bedroom. Dot was packing. Approaching her from behind, I wrapped my arms around her, and she leaned into the embrace. "We meet Gumball this morning at Portland Airport, then on to sunny Florida." I softened my tone. "Sorry about cutting the honeymoon short."

"He needs us," she replied, placing a hand on my forearm. "We can't stay away."

I kissed the side of her head and loosed my grip around her. As she continued packing, I walked back into the front room. Picking up the telephone, I called down to the lobby and informed them that we would be checking out within the hour, asking for a taxi to be waiting to take us to the airport.

Standing at the window, watching as the sun tried desperately to penetrate the overcast pall, I paused a moment, then picked up my cell phone. The tones of the buttons caught Dot's attention. "Who're you calling?" she casually asked.

"Mark," I replied, pressing the send button. "We're going to need prayer coverage."

"Yeah?" came the groggy voice after three rings.

"Mark, it's Perry."

"Perry, do you know what time it is?"

"Yes."

He sensed the sobriety in my voice. "What's wrong?"

"Dot and I are leaving Portland this morning. We're going on a ... a mission."

"And you need prayer coverage," he deduced. "What's the scoop?"

"Remember when I told you about where our funding comes from?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, it looks like Pat is there. And she's setting a trap for Clark."

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There was a long whooshing sound on the other end. "Oh, boy. I've been seeing her on the news lately, and I've thought about you two."

"Anyhow, we're heading for some training and supplying in Florida, then into Central America. We're the strike team. If everything works, we'll sneak in and catch them off guard. God willing, nobody'll get hurt."

"Say no more," interrupted Mark. "Let's pray."

I closed my eyes and Mark led the prayer for protection and guidance. Afterward, I thanked him, and promised that I would contact him once we were safe again.

"Thanks. Relax, brother ... you'll be covered."

"Thanks, Mark. Bye."

I ended the connection, thought a moment, then dialed another number. "Jack ... ?"

That evening, as Pat settled into her bed, she wasn't as comfortable as last night.

There was a force of Mayan guards patrolling the palace, protecting Pat and her people from those who saw Monja's transformation as 'sorcery', 'witchcraft', or 'black magic'. They had made their point very clear, declaring that 'this act was a predecessor to bad times for the village', that it would 'bring destruction to the people', and that 'only through purging it from the Valley could peace return.'

Therefore the palace was guarded while they slept. And also the Osprey, a potential target for vandals. They were all safe and sound ... just like prisoners.

She heard footsteps approaching, and she reached for the six-shooter she had loaded and ready. It would only take one fanatic getting past the guards, she thought.

And yet, she had to remind herself, it wasn't the whole village that had turned against her, but just a few dangerous radicals. Most of the people were with either cautiously neutral, or had seen the transformation as a 'good omen', a 'sign from heaven for increased prosperity'.

Hearing the footsteps waning away, she retracted her arm under the covers, relaxed and closed her eyes.

"KILL THE WITCH FROM THE SKIES!!!" suddenly yelled several voices from outside the window -- and in English, no less. This was for HER ears to hear.

In an instant, Pat's eyes were wide open, her sidearm was in her hand, and she had rolled out of her bed and crouched catlike on the floor. Her breathing came in short gasps. Moving carefully, she quickly scrambled to the window and peered over the sill. She expected to see pitchforks and the glow of torches, like some old monster movie. But all she could see was the night, and the jungle. But she knew her enemies were out there, too.

She crouched there for several minutes, until her legs started to ache. Then and only then did she slip back under the covers, returning the pistol to its holster.

But she knew that sleep would not come easily this evening.

Chapter Eight

The sun was just starting to set as the Osprey cruised along above the Florida Everglades.

"Son, you've gotten us lost," grouched Monk. "Are you sure this's where we oughta be?"

"Aw, stop whinin', Dad," he replied wearily. "I'm just following Drake's instructions to Doc: head on this course and send out a beacon signal on this frequency. Now sit down and -" He was interrupted by a flash of light ahead. Instantly getting his second wind, he pointed at the source. "Hey, look at that!"

Monk was flabbergasted at the sight. "Blazes! It's a helipad -- a lighted helipad!"

"The signal was so they'd know when we were close enough to turn on the lights. Sure," realized Gumball.

Clark had heard the exchange, and had moved into the cockpit. "Good flying. Take us down." Then he put a hand on Monk's shoulder. "You riding here or in the back?" With a grin, the simian chemist slid his frame into the co-pilot's seat.

Clark smiled and walked back into the passenger compartment. "Buckle in," he announced.

Adjusting his recently-acquired genuine New York City taxi driver's cap, Gumball circled the mysterious swampland helipad and started whistling a John Philip Sousa march. Subconsciously picking up the tempo, he shifted the tilt of the rotors and executed a neat landing. "All ashore that's going ashore," he called out.

Shortly, the six of us stood on the lighted helipad, looking up at the skies and the swampland that surrounded us. Apart from the sounds of the animals beyond the helipad, all was silence.

Then a disembodied voice broke the silence. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Mitchell Drake, Director of this facility. I know you have all had a long flight, so, if you would please move to any of the numbered triangles, we'll clear you through Security."

As we surrounded Triangle #6, a three-sided column rose up before us. Each facet contained a camera lens, microphone, and speaker. "One at a time, please approach any of the cameras and state your full name -- surname first, Christian name, and initial. Also include any nicknames or preferences on how you wish to be addressed."

We looked at each another, hesitating. Then Clark walked over to the pillar and clearly spoke, "Dent, Clark R. No nickname."

The first step having been taken, the rest of us easily followed suit.

"Mayfair, Andrew B. No nickname."

"Mayfair, Clark L. My friends call me Gumball."

"Liston, Perry E."

"Liston, Dorothy M. I prefer Dot."

"Roberts, Amy P."

There was a pause, then Drake said, "Thank you. Now, if you'll please hang on, we'll be on our way."

Monk looked around for an aircraft or boat. "How?" he asked suspiciously. "I don't see nobody comin' for us."

"They're not, Mr. Mayfair," answered the disembodied voice calmly. "You're coming to us."

On cue, pie-shaped wedges suddenly slid above us like the fingers of a monstrous hand. For a moment we all had doubts to the sanity of our decision.

Drake addressed our concerns. "There's really nothing to fear. Just relax and enjoy the ride."

"Ride, he says," I commented sarcastically under my breath.

The illumination from the helipad's floodlights came up to compensate for the increasing darkness, and compressors started circulating our air. The sudden shudder under our feet in the next moment was not surprising. "We're submerging," stated Clark.

Monk sided over to Clark and quipped, "Just like old times, huh? Sure glad John Sunlight became Polar Bear Chow, or I'd be sweatin' bullets right about now."

Seconds passed in silence. We looked at one another with concern. I could sense that many of us were engaged in silent prayer. Finally our movement halted with another shudder. We were far underground. Mechanisms ominously clunked and slid into place, and we heard the splashing of water around our little bubble.

"It's an airlock," commented Dot.

"A really big airlock," I emphasized.

"You useta do this kinda stuff on a regular basis, right, Dad?" asked Gumball, warily looking about.

Monk grinned back and nodded. But before he could say anything, the sections of our bubble split open and retracted into the floor. The helipad lights were replaced by illumination generated from the walls.

The room we were in reminded me of a hangar bay aboard an aircraft carrier, with curved walls and a high ceiling. I could hardly believe we were underground. There were doors evenly spaced around the wall, large enough to accommodate huge vehicles.

Above one of the doors a light pulsed a steady, very visible orange.

Drake's voice said from overhead speakers, "Head for the orange light. I'll meet you there."

We walked across the floor of the hangar. But before we reached our objective, the garage door-sized opening quietly disappeared into the wall above it, and a vehicle rolled through. It resembled a jeep with its open top and sides, and contained several bench seats, like the trolleys used at studio tours.

There were two people in the front seat of the vehicle. One, the driver, was a young man in his 20's, dressed in a white one-piece coverall uniform. He remained at the wheel while the other man stepped out and addressed us.

"Good evening. I'm Mitchell Drake." He was a ruggedly-handsome black man in his 50's, made obvious by the amount of grey accentuating his military crewcut. The black coverall uniform had a built-in shoulder holster complete with automatic pistol, and a triangular badge over his left breast identified him only as '1'. "I apologize for the extraordinary precautions in your arrival, but I'm sure you see how necessary they are. Now, if you would all climb aboard, we'll go to my office."

We got into the cart, and Drake ordered the driver to proceed. With a mild lurch, we circled around and eased back through the door. As we moved along wide corridors, I had to remind myself that we were far below the Florida Everglades. People, dressed in all manner of attire, walked near the walls while we joined the flow of electric carts. I thought it unusual that, even at this late hour, there was so much activity. But I accepted it, as I accepted the fact that most of the people we passed carried sidearms.

Our route took us down a lesser-traveled 'street' ending in a cul-de-sac and a set of doors. The nameplate to the left of the center door identified Drake by name and position.

Drake climbed out of our transport, holding a device looking somewhat like a cell phone. Aiming it casually at the doors, it signaled for them to open, and us to enter.

My first impression of Drake's office was that it was a schizophrenia design, half living room and half high-tech command center.

On our left, the wall curved outward, encompassing video displays and unfamiliar electronic components. An impressive horseshoe-shaped desk of oak and metal faced away from the wall, and I could see individual display screens integrated into its surface.

On the right was the living room portion: couches, chairs, miscellaneous tables, and the like. Floor lamps created a very homey atmosphere, perfect for a casual discussion.

Drake went behind the desk for a moment, grabbed a steno-sized portfolio, then joined us in the living room area. I sat to his left, and noticed that the portfolio was not what it appeared to be. I commented, "Digital input tablet, Mr. Drake?"

"Yes, Mr. Liston," he replied.

I WAS impressed. The compact device he balanced on his lap was very likely an interface with whatever they used for computers here.

He held a pen with a rubber tip which served as a stylus, and addressed Clark first. "Over the phone, you spoke of an endeavor you're taking into the jungles of Central America. Is that correct?"

Clark nodded. "Yes. We'll be facing an unconfirmed but probable force of unknown size and strength. We have the ideas for neutralizing whatever we encounter, but lack the production facilities."

Drake nodded and looked around at us. "How many of you know this area, and how well?"

Clark answered, "Mr. Mayfair and I have been there before, but that was quite a few years ago."

"So you'll also need reconnaissance capability, as a way of gauging your opposition's nature, strength and capability."

"Precisely."

"I'll show you what we have," he said, making a note on the tablet. "Now what do you need my production facilities for?"

Monk spoke up. "I've got a knockout gas that I want to make some modifications to, then produce in sufficient quantities to cover any contingency."

"We also have a weapon of our own design which we would like to replicate," added Clark. "That includes specialized ammunition."

Drake's face broke into a grin. "You must be referring to the famous Doc Savage Superfirer," he said to Clark, then added to Monk, "And I presume the 'sleeping gas' is your anaesthetic gas?" He paused while the shock passed. "Gentlemen, please don't be surprised. Mr. Mayfair -- your reputation as a chemist and adventurer under the great Doc Savage is the stuff of legends. In fact, you might be interested to know that we have one of the Superfirers in our own armory." He paused, and smiled. "In any case, it would be my great pleasure to help you in any way I can."

Monk continued boldly. "Okay, Drake. Then I take it you've got the facilities to handle the gas?"

"And the talent." That was a dare.

Monk countered with a cocky tilt of the head, "They better be good. I'm a tough act to follow."

Drake met his gaze and smiled confidently. "What would you say if I told you that we have Dr. Katherine Egan on our staff?"

Monk froze and his jaw dropped. "Katie? You've got Katie Egan here?" Drake nodded slowly. "Katie's one of the top chemists in the world!" He conceding to the black man with a grin. "Okay, Drake -- I'm impressed. And you might as well call me Monk."

Drake cracked the air with a hearty laugh. "Thank you, Monk. And I'm sure Kate will be equally impressed with you."

"Mr. Drake," said Clark. "What would you say to the possibility of improving upon the Superfirer?"

His words took Drake by surprise. "What you're asking is like trying to improve upon the Mona Lisa. But I'll give it some thought." He made a note on the tablet and looked at the rest of us. "Is there anything else you require?"

Gumball spoke up. "Yeah. Our overall strategy is to have me fly everybody in the Osprey, then split an SOG off somewhere before we stop. We're not sure how we're going to do that, but it's going to mean modifications to my plane. What'cha say?"

Drake replied, "I'm sure you'll be pleased at what our fabrication group is capable of."

Amy raised her hand. "My father was working on several ideas in regards to non-lethal weaponry. I brought notes and plans, and would like to see if I can work on them here."

"Indeed. I'll make sure our top electronics lab is at your disposal."

I motioned to Drake to get his attention. "Dot and I are going to be part of the SOG. While Dot's competent with firearms, I'm not. Y'got anywhere I can practice?"

Drake nodded. "Certainly. We have several shooting ranges, including target and combat. We'll show you what we have, and you can take your pick."

For the next fifteen minutes, we threw out ideas, made requests, and exchanged information. Drake kept silent, save to offer feedback or suggestions, or probe for details, and note the information.

Then when we had exhausted ourselves, he nodded with satisfaction and said, "Since the hour is late, I assume you'll probably wish to begin things in the morning. I've prepared a place for you; it has a central gathering hall with adjacent sleeping quarters. I'm sure you'll find them to your liking. And I'll have everything ready for you in the morning. Is that acceptable?"

We all voiced our approval.

"I've taken the liberty of summoning transportation to take you to your quarters," he announced. "It should be here momentarily."

Five minutes later, a small convoy of electric carts hummed away, leaving Drake standing alone in the doorway of his office.

The countenance of the tall black man was peaceful as he stood there. Then a tear appeared in the corner of his eye, which he wiped away with the edge of his index finger.

"All right," he softly sighed with a smile.

The sudden chirping coming from his desk tore his attention away from his thoughts, and he returned once more to his work.

The quarters Drake had provided were as elaborate as everything else we had seen. The main room was rectangular, with a kitchen area at one end and a living room area at the other. In between, a circular table with a bench seat could serve equally for dining or discussion. The main door was on the end by the kitchen, and three doors split off from each of the longer walls, leading into individual sleeping quarters. Our bags were waiting for us, transported from the Osprey.

After making a cursory check for listening devices and other bugs, we settled into our new surroundings. We talked about our feelings towards this place, expressing our amazement and confirming our hopes that this place would serve our needs well.

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Stifling a yawn, Monk suggested a word of prayer before turning in. Gumball politely bowed out, heading straight to one of the sleeping quarters, while the rest of us gathered about the center table.

Early the next morning, we were surprised to find some things on our table, along with a note from Drake explaining what each item was. We were each given a visitor badge, which was to be worn at all times outside of our quarters.

The electronic devices lined up next to the badges were identical to the one Drake had used to open his office doors; the note identified them as commlocks, and I was fascinated by them. They could function as communicators as well as access 'keys' to limited areas of the installation. The screen on the commlocks could also project a map of the installation, as well as show where we were in proximity to it.

After scarfing down a quick breakfast, we eagerly scattered to begin our work.

"Monk Mayfair?" exclaimed the stout middle-aged woman in the lab coat. "My God, man, that is you! When Mitch told me you were here, I thought he was playing one of his practical jokes." She stood there and stared at him, grimacing. "I thought you'd died off years ago."

Monk grinned. "To tell you the truth, Katie, I was dead. Or as close as I could get without assuming room temperature. Remind me and I'll tell you all about it."

She hesitated, unsure of what to say. "Okay, Monk. Whatever you say. Mitch told me that this job has top priority -- what's the emergency?"

"I wanna make some adjustments to my anaesthetic gas, for a mission a few of us are goin' on in a few days. And I've come up with a new compound I wanna work on. It's called Paradox."

"Mission?" she looked concerned. "I thought you got out of the business."

"This one's personal, Katie," he said soberly with a sideways look, ending the discussion.

And with that the two chemists got down to business.

"I'll tell ya, Katie," said Monk, looking over their supplies. "Drake impressed the socks offa me when he told me you wuz workin' here. I'm glad you're here, Katie. Nobody can hold a candle to ya."

"Ditto, Monk." She smiled at him. "I'm going to enjoy working with you, too."

Gumball walked into the hangar and saw two men and a woman going over his Osprey with fascination. When he got close enough, he said, "Ahem!" They quickly turned in his direction.

One man, an older fellow with a sandy crewcut, said, "Mayfair?"

"Yes, sir."

He jerked a thumb at the Osprey. "This your bird?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where do you get off with a prize like this?"

"Birthday present, sir," he replied with a grin. "Problem, sir?"

The man shook his head. "Nope. Name's Rich Danielson. Call me Lefty."

"You the head of this crew?"

He nodded, then introduced the others. The one on his left was a woman in her 30's. The coveralls she wore hid her figure, but not by much. There was enough ruggedness about her to tell him that she was not one to be teased. Lefty identified her as Judy Parks. She extended a hand. As they shook, Lefty identified the other one. He was built like a mountain, with collar-length red hair and a short red beard. His name was Dean Penrod. His grip was enough to remove lug nuts without a wrench, and Gumball grimaced at the crunch. He apologized and withdrew his hand.

"We're the Pros from Dover," commented Parks. She had a slight English accent.

"Glad to hear that," replied Gumball. "Did Drake give you any information on what I need?"

"Not much," answered Lefty. "Said you were heading into a covert op, and needed some 'improvements' to the bird. What's the area going to be like?"

"And what can you tell us about the mission?" added Penrod.

"Location: Central America -- DEEP Central America." He let that sink in a moment. "The overall plan is to have me fly us all in, then a three-man SOG team will split off unseen somewhere along the way. I've got some drawings of the area; they're kinda crude, but they'll give you an idea of what we're facing."

They moved over to a huge table and laid out the pictures. Gumball stood back as the rest poured over them and tossed out suggestions.

Without looking up from the pictures, Lefty asked, "Can you give us an idea of who or what you're going to be up against?"

"Would if I could," Gumball replied. "But most of this is either a mystery, or classified. I suspect we'll be the center of attention as soon as we hit their airspace, and they'll probably be expecting us to do something funny."

"So ... a little smoke and mirrors?" commented Parks.

"Exactly," answered Lefty. "An air drop is impossible. With that much scrutiny, they'd have to be invisible to keep from being spotted as soon as they hit the silk."

There was silence for several minutes. Gumball walked over to a table and was pouring himself a cup of coffee when Parks suddenly exclaimed, "The river!"

Gumball's attention turned in their direction and he watched as the two men followed Parks' logic.

"What is it?" asked Gumball, feeling a little out of place.

Lefty called him over and, gesturing at the pictures, explained. "Drop the SOG through a trap door in the bottom of the Osprey, straight into the water, right under their noses. Their attention will be on the plane ON the water, not the activity UNDER the water. And your wake will cover any splashes."

"Yeah, but this bird's not a seagull. It's not equipped for water landings."

Penrod smiled. "It will be once we finish with it. We'll assemble a pod that'll attach to the belly of the plane, and the trap door will be in the underside. Believe me, Mr. Mayfair, we'll make it look like it rolled out of Boeing Field that way."

Gumball was reluctant as to their claims, but was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. "Can you rig up a model so I can show the rest of the group?"

The three exchanged looks, then Lefty spoke for them all: "How soon?"

He shrugged. "We're planning a meeting around lunchtime ... is noon okay?"

Lefty nodded. "Easy."

Gumball smiled. "They also tell me the last leg of the flight path has some severe wind shearing. What can you give me in the way of an edge?"

Penrod answered. "Got just the thing," he said, walking over to a work bench. "Check this out ..."

The man in the blue jumpsuit and matching beret snapped us a quick salute. "Mr. and Mrs. Liston?" he greeted. "Lieutenant Robert Groce, at your service."

"It's Perry and Dot, okay?" I replied. "Drake sent you?"

"Yes, sir!" Then he began listing off his qualifications. There was no brag in his voice, only reciting a summary of his expertise. I had to admit, he was good. Ex-Special Services, participating in several hundred combat actions around the world, he was a marksman proficient in everything from a .22 to an elephant rifle. At one point he commented without humor, "If it's got a trigger, sir, ma'am, I've fired it." I wondered how many lives he had taken, seeing the grimness in his eyes, but I held that question for a more appropriate time and place. For right now, he was the master, and I was the student.

He started off by asking me some questions about my exposure to firearms. I told him about shooting a .22 rifle as a kid, and test-firing a friend's M-11 Ingram submachine gun while on vacation in Colorado, several years ago.

Once we'd outlined the basic situation and environment we'd be encountering, he suggested a tactical combat simulator they affectionately called 'Napoleon's Alley'. The warehouse-sized room looked like the back lot of a movie studio, and we walked from one end to the other while Lieutenant Groce pointed out its many features.

"Your path is your own, as long as you start at the beginning and end at the ending," he said with a grin. "In between are the targets." We walked over to a wooden storefront, and he showed us examples of each

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type of target: 'innocents' and 'hostiles'. "This will develop your discernment, and hopefully keep you from shooting anything that moves." He paused to drive the point home.

As we approached a different-looking 'hostile,' he pointed out what made it different. "Many combat simulators are passive, meaning that the targets don't shoot back at you like they do on the streets. That may be good for general target shooting, but, over time, it develops in the shooter a mindset of 'it's only a game' -- which can get you killed. Our solution was this -- " He indicated an apparatus attached to the target. "These hostiles will fire back at you. They may only be harmless paintballs, but they add just enough of a personal threat to hedge against the 'it's only a game' mindset."

He directed our attention to the upper level. We could see a glass-walled booth running the length of the room, and many closed-circuit cameras. "This whole place is wired to record your every move and allow you to produce a three-dimensional holographic record. You can see where you goofed, and where you succeeded. And, hopefully, learn from your mistakes."

I was impressed, and I told Lieutenant Groce so. He shrugged it off. "It's an expensive tool. Here -- " He tapped my forehead. " -- is where it'll make the difference. Now, do you know where do you want to start?"

I did. "I'd like to walk through a couple of times, alone and off the cameras, just to give me a personal feel for it."

He smiled and nodded. "Let me take you to our armory, and you can pick your weapon."

Fifteen minutes later I was alone in Napoleon's Alley. My palms were sweating, and the Russian-made machine pistol in my hands felt much heavier than it had first looked. Glancing upward at the control booth, I could barely make out the silhouettes of Dot and Lieutenant Groce behind the tinted glass.

My attention returned to my environment, to a movement caught in my peripheral vision. I swung left and squeezed the trigger just as the target of a gun-wielding thug popped up in a doorway. I fired first, but the target was missed by several feet. Not surprised, I still frowned. "Next time," I mumbled to the target, and moved on.

My next opportunity was only a few steps away, as another 'hostile' appeared thirty feet in front of me. I took a different firing stance and fired a small burst which stitched a line across the chest of the target.

Pleased and surprised, I thanked God, and continued.

When I reached the end of the Alley, Dot and Lieutenant Groce were already there.

With a hug, Dot encouraged, "You did okay."

I smiled at her attempt. "No I didn't, and we all know it."

Lieutenant Groce was more optimistic. "For a beginner, sir, it wasn't as bad as you think. Believe me, I've seen far worse."

I took a sip of water from a cup Dot offered. I was starting to feel the soreness in unused muscles, and knew it wouldn't get any better. "Okay," I said, determined. "Let's do it again."

The automatic doors parted on cue for Drake's cart, and closed behind them. The black man announced to Clark, "This is what we call the Toy Room."

It was an armory. A massive one, full of weapons -- on the walls, behind display cases on the floor, hung from the ceiling for show, and even propped up in the corners. Clark acknowledged to himself that this place was as impressive as anything he had seen so far.

While he took it all in, Drake walked about the floor, examining items here and there, checking mechanisms, then returning them to their place. Like a tour guide or a museum curator, he would occasionally pick up a piece of armament, recite its model number, caliber, and history.

"You talk about these weapons like a wine connoisseur discussing a Bordeaux.," commented Clark.

Drake defended himself. "In a way I AM a connoisseur, Mr. Dent. I respect a fine weapon and the history behind it. Take this, for example ..." He walked over to a glass case, opened it, and extracted the Superfirer he had spoken of the previous evening. "When Doc Savage created this, he wasn't interested in just another instrument of personal destruction. He wanted something that would be effective, compact, fast, and -- most of all -- non-lethal. The mercy bullets were intended to penetrate the skin layer just enough to allow the drug to be administered into the bloodstream. It was not intended to maim, but stop. And it was extremely efficient."

Clark was amazed at the black man's zeal, as well as his factual accuracy. For a moment, he saw himself, eager to fight crime, but with no desire to cause a single life to be lost in the pursuit of justice.

"Mr. Dent, I'm not sure if you were aware of this, but many of us in the firearms field tried to lobby Congress to replace the standard police round with a variation on the mercy bullet."

That took Clark by surprise. "No, I didn't know that! What was the outcome?"

Drake shook his head and answered sarcastically, "We had good arguments, but to them it wasn't cost-efficient. It didn't even get out of committee."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Clark said sincerely.

He shrugged. "Anyhow, like I said, the Superfirer is a magnificent design, and can't easily be replaced."

"The intent is not to replace Mr Drake, but to improve."

"I suppose there is ... room for improvement," he conceded. "To that end, this room contains the ideas and concepts of thousands of weapons-designers, all at your disposal. Feel free to look about. If you find something that interests you, set it aside. All of the items here have been defined in CAD. Are you familiar with CAD?"

"I'm afraid not," admitted Clark.

"CAD stands for Computer Assisted Drawing," explained Drake. "Let's say we want to capture the image of an apple. A painting of an apple could appear to be three-dimensional, but its physical properties would only be two-dimensional. However, if I define the same apple in CAD, it becomes an exact three-dimensional representation of that apple, able to be rotated and viewed from any possible angle. All it would lack is mass."

"Now let's say that I take this Superfirer apart and define each part in CAD -- which has been done, by the way. I send the information for each part via computer to our Fabrication Division. They replicate each piece, then assemble the parts into a carbon copy of the original. I'd say you'd be hard pressed to spot the original from the duplicate."

His eyes took on a mischievous squint, and he held up an index finger. "But let's take this a step further. Assume that I want to use the basic design of the Superfirer, but the barrel of this machine pistol -- " He held up a nearby weapon. " -- is more applicable to my purpose. Both guns have been defined in CAD, so with a few adjustments, I can take the barrel of this one and make it fit here. It's simple."

Clark nodded. "Fascinating."

Drake offered a slight bow, and indicated a side door. "Now if you wish to shoot any of these weapons, there's a firing range just through that door. Nigel's on duty at this hour; he'll take care of you."

"I may. Thank you for offering."

Drake smiled and took a step towards the door. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must leave you."

Drake climbed into the cart and, offering Clark a brief wave, he backed through the doors, leaving the bronze man contemplating the Toy Room's possibilities.

It was closing in on lunchtime, and Dot and I were the first ones back to the quarters.

I collapsed at the table and used my arms for a pillow. "I'm going to feel new levels of soreness in the morning," I mumbled tiredly.

"But you gotta admit," replied Dot from the kitchenette, "you made progress."

"Not by much," I sighed. "That's why I didn't want you with me until I knew what I was doing. I don't treasure the thought of accidentally shooting you."

She set the tray of sandwiches down between us and kissed me on the top of my head. "I appreciate that, hon."

We prayed over the food and dug in. As we ate, I stared at the wall and mused aloud. "Let's face it, hon. If we're going to get through this thing alive, I'm going to need some kind of an edge."

Just then the door opened, and the others came in a cloud of excited chatter. The only exception was Amy, who went straight to her room. Monk and Clark worked on a platter of sandwiches and veggies, and Gumball placed the model of the modified Osprey in the middle of the table.

Dot and I looked in the direction of the closed door to Amy's room, then I asked Gumball, "Amy's kinda quiet, isn't she?"

"Really? Sorry, didn't really notice," he replied distractedly.

I turned to Dot and leaned in. "I think she needs a friend."

"I'm on my way," she agreed, getting up from the table. "Cover me."

"Count on it," I replied, and began praying silently.

Dot knocked on the door. "Amy? It's Dot."

Silence.

She knocked again. More silence.

"Amy, are you okay? Open up."

"I'm fine, Dot. I'm just ... tired."

"There's more to it than just that. Lemme in."

"No," came the stubborn reply. "Please go away."

Dot looked back at her husband, then her face twisted into an odd grin. Leaning close to the door, she said, "Amy, if you don't let me in, I'll just have to tell everybody that you've become sick."

Three seconds later the door opened, and Dot slipped inside. Amy moved ahead and sat on the bed. Dot followed her and sat in a nearby chair.

"I don't really want to talk about it," she said.

"So I gathered. But holding it in won't do you any better." The tone of Dot's voice softened. "I'm your friend. Talk to me. Let me help."

Amy's eyes met Dot's, and she took a deep breath. "I brought several of my father's projects with me, hoping they could be of some use. However, as vast as the resources are here, it would take far longer than we have to produce working models. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," comforted Dot. "Maybe that's not what God has in mind for you here."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Amy, we're both new at being Christians. We're both learning." She paused. "Perry tells me that there's always a reason for everything that happens, good or bad, happy or tragic. We can't understand it at times because we can only see the moment before us. But God can understand it because He sees beyond just the moment. All we have to do is trust Him to work things out the way He wants it."

"Interesting," she said thoughtfully.

"The best we can do right now is get back in the game and keep our eyes open." She rose smoothly to her feet, then reached out a hand to Amy.

"C'mon. Let's go."

Amy took the hand and stood. She paused for just a moment, then asked, "Dot? Will you pray with me?"

"Happy to," she answered with a smile, and the two women bowed their heads and came before the Throne of Grace. Then, with a mutual, "Amen," they hugged, and returned to the central table.

"Y'know, guys, this plan could work!" bellowed Monk from the sink, a monster sandwich in his big fist. "If everybody's gonna be watchin' us, we might as well make it count. I know Dottie's momma taught her how to dive, but how 'bout you, Perry?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"What about Amy?" asked Gumball.

"Yes, I'm qualified for SCUBA diving," came the response behind me. I turned around to see Amy and Dot, both smiling, walking in our direction.

"What have you and Dr. Egan come up with, Monk?" asked Clark.

"Well, Katie and I've been able to compress the gas into canisters, and we're workin' on makin' it last longer when released." He paused, and his expression turned intense. "Wait a minnit ... what if we dropped some of these canisters into the river as we cruised through? That way, if we got into trouble, we could blow 'em open and hold our breaths ... more or less."

"Yes, you're right," agreed Clark. "The river is central to the Valley. The right amount of gas could blanket both sides."

As the discussion continued, I backed up from the table and moved over to Dot. I slipped an arm around her waist and she gave me a kiss.

"How'd it go?" I inquired privately.

"Stubborn. Obstinate. Prideful," she replied, her voice soft.

"Just like us," I said, straight-faced, meeting her eyes.

"Exactly," she agreed with a trace of a grin.

"Any problems?"

"Piece o'cake," she smiled. She gave me a quick summary of Amy's dilemma, then we moved closer to the discussion.

Clark was talking. "... and I found a type of ammunition that will gain us distance. But I'm afraid I couldn't find anything that could sufficiently increase our accuracy."

"I know what ya mean," added Monk, disappointedly. "We need somethin' with a good rate of fire, but also as accurate as a sniper rifle." He sighed. "Well, hopefully this should be enough. And if we survive this round, we can always come back later and try to improve things."

"Excuse me, gentlemen," interjected Amy. "I believe I can help."

"Go on," replied Clark.

"It appears that my immediate research will be fruitless. However, my father had been experimenting with a laser-guided tracking system for a standard weapon such as you have described. When operational, it would cause the weapon to fire automatically upon acquisition of its target. Additionally, in conditions where visibility was hindered, it could be used to fire upon a human heat signature without the need for shooter intervention." She paused momentarily. "If you would like to examine them, I have the diagrams in my quarters."

There was silence. All eyes were upon the slender Vietnamese woman.

Monk released a low whistle. "Very slick. I like it."

"What about the possibility of accidentally shooting one of us?" inquired Clark.

"I have some ideas," she replied confidently.

Clark nodded, his eyes glowing with interest. "I'd like to see them."

With a renewed bounce in her step and a glowing smile directed straight at Dot, Amy left the table and walked to her quarters.

7:35 pm. Dinnertime. And I was ready for the hot tub and bed.

Lieutenant Groce proved to be an most excellent teacher. He pushed me in areas where I needed pushing, but was also generous with encouragement.

We walked the course together a few times, with him assuming the role of shadow-instructor. He would make comments spontaneously as we traversed the course, instantly offering feedback without getting in my way. It was incredible, and seemed to be my most productive times.

By late afternoon, Dot and I were performing as a team through the Alley. Drake had provided us with tiny transceivers by which to keep in touch during the mission; the devices were almost invisible in our ears. We used them to alert one another of possible threats, keeping an eye on each other's backs. Although Dot was the unmistakable pro between us, I was slowly starting to improve.

We carried machine pistols similar to the design Clark had chosen for the new superfirer, in order to get accustomed to the weight and feel of the weapon.

Each walk began the same way, with a word of prayer for God's guidance. We noticed looks of disbelief from some of those around us, but Lieutenant Groce approved. "Take every advantage you can," he commented. "A man who has peace with God can go confidently into battle."

Returning to our quarters that evening, we found Mr. Drake speaking to the others.

"The new superfirers will be completed and mass produced by tomorrow morning," he announced. "I've gone over your plans, and you've definitely hit upon a winning combination."

"Excellent!" commented Clark. "And what is that you've brought?"

A large padded aluminum case had been placed on the round table, and seven smaller boxes were lined up in front of it.

"Due to the remoteness of the location, conventional methods of mapping are impossible to achieve. However, in order to give you a sense of the topography of the area, Clark and Monk have worked with our GIS branch to produce a representation of the location you are going to enter. This information has been transferred to these devices."

"This is what we call ARTIE," he identified the item; it looked somewhat similar to a handheld GPS locator. "Once at your destination, you'll need to synchronize it with the terrain." He paused. "Say, for example, you're standing next to the river. You have no idea of compass points, but you are able to make out points of reference. Hold ARTIE with the screen up and rotate it so that it lines up with the points of reference. Then just press ALIGN. Your position is now locked in, and the map will move about you. If you get separated, each unit will be able to locate the others -- as long as you don't lose them, of course." He grinned.

As he handed out the smaller boxes, he said, "The instruction booklet that comes with it is pretty much self-explanatory, but I'll stick around for awhile in case you have questions."

I took my ARTIE box over to the living room area, and sat on one of the couches. At the same time Dot vanished into our room, joining me a few minutes later dressed in sweatshirt, shorts and slippers. Setting her Bible on the seat, she asked, "You hungry?"

I suddenly realized that my interests had become engrossed by the new hardware, and we hadn't eaten dinner. "Yes," I replied.

"Any preference?"

"No, as long as it's hot," I answered, shaking my head.

"Gotcha."

Ten minutes later she returned with a tray. "Hope you don't mind microwave chili and bologna and cheese sandwiches."

I shook my head. The smell of the chili was wonderful. I put the ARTIE unit aside and practically inhaled the food. As I did, I observed that Drake was still here. He seemed to be engrossed in talking to Monk about 'old times with Doc Savage.'

Gumball and Amy listened in at the table, but gave up after awhile. Gumball went straight to his quarters. Amy joined us in the 'living room.'

Which left Monk, Clark, and Drake nostalgically recalling those thrilling days of adventuring. I could see that Monk, that old show-off, was only too happy to oblige. And Clark participated also, though in a limited capacity to keep his identity secret.

Amy and Dot, from their conversation, were involved in Bible study. I returned to the ARTIE unit until Amy thanked Dot for the study, wished us a good night, and went to her room. As she did, I realized that -- much to my surprise -- I'd stayed awake as long as I had. Collecting my things, I announced to Dot that I was going to bed. "Good idea," she agreed, and joined me.

As I looked at the three men sitting around the table in the center of the room, chattering like old soldiers at a reunion, I couldn't help but smile.

"Gentlemen," said Drake, standing and looking over at the last closed door. "Now that the kids are asleep, I got somethin' special I wanna show ya."

Without another word, he headed for the exit.

Clark and Monk glanced at one another briefly, then shrugged and followed.

A few minutes later, in a desolate corridor several levels deeper underground, their cart stopped before a storeroom door among many storerooms on that level.

The door innocently carried the identification D-31. The area was eerily quiet, punctuated only by the click of Drake's commlock and the hiss of the door sliding open.

Beyond them was a room the size of a large closet which glowed with muted illumination.

There was no hesitation as Drake walked into the room and waited. Clark and Monk walked to join him, as he stood in front of a second door with an odd metal-and-glass panel next to it. The room reminded them of an airlock, and there the mystery intensified -- an airlock into where?

Drake placed his palm against the plate. Several moments later, a female voice announced, "Identification confirmed. Please stand by."

The door behind them closed, and they waited. There was a subtle change to Drake's demeanor, a grin like that of a child on Christmas morning, or a person eager to share a secret with his fellows.

Clark's senses also detected a change in the air in the antechamber, a slightly higher oxygen content. His curiosity was becoming aroused by this mystery. But before he could ask, the door before them opened.

"Blazes!" exclaimed Monk. "It's the eighty-sixth floor!"

As well it was.

Beaming a bulletproof grin, Drake led them into the set of rooms and stepped aside. Painted windows gave them a panoramic view of New York City, and for a moment Clark and Monk took a fifty-year backstep in time. Monk rushed forward, unable to restrain his excitement, running his hands across the same furnishings that graced their skyscraper headquarters, and tears started to form in his aged eyes.

Clark was just as amazed as Monk, but he couldn't afford the emotional response that would give away his real identity. So he kept an even countenance -- a 'face of flint', as the Bible phrases it -- on the outside while he rejoiced on the inside.

The Bronze Saga #2: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

"Gentlemen, let me tell you a little bit about myself," said Drake, casually moving about the exhibits. "In 1947, Clark Savage Jr. visited my school in Bayonne, New Jersey. He was there to address several honor students, of which I was one -- a high achievement for a Negro in those days. Afterward, I reluctantly approached him, scared but compelled to make a request of him. As imposing as he was, I begged him to say a few words into the wire recorder I had received for my birthday. When he smiled at me, all my fear went away. Then he took the recorder and spoke ... it was only eight words long, but it meant the world to me." His voice choked with the memories.

"As the years passed, I never lost sight of the influence my boyhood idol had been to me. I followed a career in law enforcement, then with the intelligence community."

He paused, and walked over to a shelf. Picking up a rectangular box with a glass front, he ran his hand over it as a prized treasure. "One of my fields of study was the science of voiceprint identification. During the course of that study, my curiosity inspired me to find my old wire recordings, to see if I could establish a voiceprint from them." He walked slowly towards Clark. "Voiceprints are as distinctive as fingerprints in identifying a person, don't'cha know."

There was silence as Drake's eyes met Clark's.

"I believe this is yours ... Doc," he said, his voice filled with emotion, the box held out for him to see.

Under the glass front of the box, mounted next to a bronze plaque, was a single length of metal recording wire. On the plaque was the date of the recording and those eight influential words. Clark's mouth turned up in a smile, and his eyes met Drake's.

"Do right to all, and wrong no man," quoted Clark.

Drake's eyes blinked, and covered over with water as those spoken words once more touched his heart. "This place ... is my monument ... to a great man I feared was lost forever. Words cannot tell you ... how happy I am at this moment." He paused to collect himself. "I swear to you, your secret will be as safe as this room has been."

Clark held out a hand. "Of that I have no doubt." Drake's hand met Clark's, and the bond was sealed.

"Okay, Drake, I got a question for ya!" suddenly exclaimed Monk. "We had the auction for this stuff in the late 50's. You would'a only been in your twenties. What gives?"

"My dad," answered the Director with a smile. "He, too, was an admirer of yours. And he had amassed his fortune through oil reserves in Texas. He was the one who purchased the first few pieces from the auction. I was there, too, but I doubt you'd remember me. The rest I accumulated piece-by-piece over the years." He waved his arm around the room. "Since the original setting was your headquarters, I felt it only proper to display the items in the same fashion. The only variations are the glass display cases."

While Monk continued to browse, Drake stood next to Clark. Then he softly commented, "I'm impressed."

Clark looked at him. "At what?" he asked, curiously.

"At your self-control," he replied. "If it were me in your place, I couldn't hold in the emotions."

Just then, Monk's voice squeaked from across the room. "Doc! Look!"

Clark's eyes tracked where Monk was pointing. His mouth opened at the sight. Then his tear ducts.

It was an old painting.

"Father," he said softly, tears now freely streaming down his face.

"I followed the trail for three years before finding it," explained Drake. "A businessman in South Africa had purchased it from the auction. It took a lot to get it back, but this room wouldn't be complete without it."

Clark walked across the room to the painting, and lightly touched the frame with a loving reverence for his father. Monk and Drake stood silently and allowed Clark to have his time.

After a few minutes, Drake got their attention. "Clark? Monk? I have one more item that I'd like to show you."

As he headed for a door in the back of the room, Monk, overwhelmed, commented, "What now?"

"Not a clue," responded Clark, following.

They passed through another airlock-like chamber into a darkened underground cavern. They could hear the sound of water a short distance away. "Lemme get the lights," said Drake, his voice moving off to one side.

For a moment, Clark felt a rush of anxiety, his mind flashing back to the cave which served as his 'tomb' for fifty years. Gratefully, it passed as quickly as it had come upon him.

With a solid mechanical clunk the ceiling floodlights came to life, temporarily blinding them. As their vision cleared, Monk once more could not contain his emotion at the sight, but it was Clark who spoke first. "It's the Helldiver," he said in a soft whisper.

Drake explained. "When I found it, it was a piece of junk, nearly destroyed. But I made it a personal project of mine, like a teenager restoring a hot rod. Several years and a lot of money later -- here it is. And just to see the look on your face, it was worth it all."

"So does the old rust bucket still run?" asked Monk, familiarly.

Drake nodded. "Yes, Monk, it does. But I'll admit, I don't take it out very much."

"So how's about a joy ride now?" asked the simian chemist, rubbing his hands together excitedly.

He looked at his watch and frowned. "Not tonight, I'm afraid. But I'm hoping we can do so before you leave," he said. "In the meantime, I'll set it up so you can come down here anytime."

Clark had walked over to the water's edge and reached out a hand. He rested it on the metal hull with a low sigh. A few moments later, he pulled his hand in and walked casually back to Drake.

"Mitch, I am in your debt. You have given to me a remarkable gift, to know that the things of my past have not vanished from the face of the earth as I had feared. Thank you." He shook the black man's hand.

"Hey, Doc," said Monk. "Why don't we let him in on the rest of the story, including You-Know-Who?"

Clark's eyes narrowed, and a thin smile appeared on his lips. "Yes, definitely." He turned to Drake. "I apologize for holding things back from you, but there has been a certain ... sensitivity ... about our mission."

He dismissed it with a wave of a hand. "In my business, sensitivity is a must. I suspected there was more, but I didn't want to push," he said, cocking his head slightly and returning the smile. "So what's going on?"

"Let's go into the other room and have a seat. This may take a while."

Chapter Nine

"What's the name of this place again?" asked Jill Woodward, looking up at the high canyon walls. "La Casa del el Negro Lobo?"

"LA Negro Lobo," corrected Bonnie Clayton. "La Casa de La Negro Lobo. The House of the Black Wolf."

"Sounds ominous."

They took a few steps toward the ruins of a large fortress-like structure standing alone in the middle of the remote canyon. "When I was checking into this place, I got talking to some of the locals. They told me that this place used to be the headquarters for the Mafia's Capo di Tutti Capi -- Boss of Bosses."

Woodward snorted a quick laugh. "Are you kidding? What crime boss would trust their safety to this target? One good air strike and it would be history." She paused. "So is that what happened to it?"

Clayton shook her head. "Un huh. According to the locals, back in the mid-80's one man caused all this."

Woodward gawked at her lieutenant. "One man? Get outta here!"

Clayton laughed. "I don't know. It's probably no more than an urban legend." Her voice quieted. "But then, maybe not."

Woodward shrugged. "Well, now it's just a hole-in-the-wall rendezvous for drug dealers and smugglers."

"I gave Peg and Reba permission to poke around the ruins. Looks like it's been picked clean, so I didn't see any harm in it. I'll give them another half hour, then call them in."

Woodward nodded. "Okay. We all set?"

"As ready as we'll ever be. The choppers are fueled and tuned to perfection." She motioned to the two Chinook CH-46 and two Huey UH-1B helicopters illuminated by a ring of halogen security lights. "The troops are either asleep or winding down. All in all, we're good t'go."

"Good," she replied with a nod. They spotted a familiar figure several yards away, barely visible in the glow of the floodlights. "I think I need to take care of something. I'll see you in the morning."

"Night, Jill," she replied, and strolled back in the direction of camp.

Woodward was quiet as she approached the blond-haired girl who seemed to be wandering in a circle among the sagebrush and rocks. Her head was low, as if troubled by something. Still a few yards away, Woodward called her name. "Tracy?"

She turned abruptly at the sound. "Jill?"

"Yeah. You okay?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, I suppose," she muttered as the black woman reached her. "Jill, can I admit something to you?"

Woodward recited in a monotone, "You've never been in actual fighting, and you're scared out of your mind."

Tracy grimaced, "Is it that obvious?"

She waved a hand back at the tents and helicopters. "Look at us, Trace ... we work by night, hit and run. This is the first time most of us have seen combat. I'd be scared if you weren't scared." She put a comforting arm around the younger woman. "You'll do fine. Just keep your head and don't panic."

Tracy nodded. Woodward could see she wasn't fully convinced, but the words of encouragement seemed to help. "Thanks," she said, returning the hug.

"Let's get some sleep. Tomorrow's gonna be a big day for all of us."

They walked back to their camp as the stars twinkled overhead.

Several hours later, just before dawn, the camp was packed up and everything loaded into the two Chinooks. The air was cool in the canyon, and the troops assembled near the helicopters. Many of them came to attention, and all of them were dressed in jungle camo BDU's.

Woodward stood with Clayton at her side, and looked them over. Her outward expression didn't give away the pride she had that moment for these twenty-nine women who were now a team. She stood silent, rigid, while her presence registered in those who stood before her.

Finally she spoke.

"GOOD MORNING, LADIES!" she addressed them, her voice raised to be heard. "Today ... we will finally achieve our goal ... and change the course of Patricia Savage's empire FOREVER!" They were respectfully silent, but their excitement was reflected in their faces. "We are NOT professional soldiers! We are MISFITS! Most of us know we should be home baking cookies!" Her comment and grin was met with scattered giggles. "But we have chosen to be here now. And we will NOT give up until our goal is met." She paused. "Today ... we WILL achieve our goal! Before this day is over, Penelope Savage will be in our hands, and we ... will ... be ... HEARD." The troops were electrified. Woodward's voice lowered slightly. "I know you will not fail me. I know you will make me proud." She paused again. "All right, ladies ... MOVE 'EM OUT!"

The pumped-up crowd erupted in sound, as Woodward stood tall and let Clayton dismiss them to their aircraft.

"Good speech, boss," the tall brunette commented. "That was just what they needed."

Woodward didn't address her comment. "Let's go."

The four helicopters had been code-signed with the name Valkryie, or Val for short. The twin-rotor Chinooks were Val One and Val Two, and they carried the bulk of the cargo and troops. The Hueys were Val Three and Val Four, and each of them would carry four plus pilot and co-pilot. Woodward took a final walk around the area to confirm that everything was secure, then climbed up the rear ramp of Val One and through the body of the helicopter, forward into the cockpit where Bonnie Clayton and Alana Docket were in the middle of their pre-flight checklist. She glanced down at an unused jump seat behind them, but was too excited to sit.

Bonnie had the controls. "Valkryie One to Valkryie Wing," she broadcasted over her radio. "Report."

She received the acknowledgments one by one, relaying them to Woodward. "Okay, then. Here we go, by the numbers."

Woodward was now strapped into the jump seat, waiting expectantly. Moments later, the rotors beating the air, the large Chinook raised a few feet off the ground and hovered. One became four, and soon they were all poised above the canyon floor. Then, with Clayton issuing instructions over the radio, they climbed to a dozen feet, angled forward, and accelerated. They passed the ruins of the old fortress, and climbed above the canyon walls. One adjustment to set them on course, and they bade farewell to La Casa de la Negro Lobo.

"You're not eating your breakfast, Pat. What is the matter?"

Pat picked at her plate. Dressed in jeans and a safari shirt, she tried coming up with a good answer. In the end, she just replied, "I don't know. I just have a bad feeling inside."

"About what? Did you not sleep well?"

"As well as could be expected, I suppose," she replied. "I had a dream last night ... the same one I had experienced during the flight here."

"Do you wish to talk about it?"

She shook her head. "No. No. Let's just change the subject. It seems the little talk you had with your people worked."

"Yes. I was able to persuade them to be patient regarding what the changes in me mean to the Valley. They agreed not to do anything ... rash." She took a bite of food. "My people will accept things. Give them time."

Pat didn't reply. Her eyes were occupied, focusing on the sacrificial altar at the top of the golden pyramid.

The flight of Valkryie Wing had been an uneasy one.

They had started off fine, but then reality started settling in as they flew dangerously close to such political tinder boxes as Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Panama. And, considering they were in unmarked helicopters, dressed in military uniforms sans insignia or identification of nationality, and carrying weapons and explosives and enough fuel to cover quite a range, there was a collective feeling of anxiety aboard. There were a few who did their best to alleviate fears, but everybody knew it would be very unpleasant if they were caught before reaching their destination.

When at last the four helicopters passed into confrontationally-safer territory, there was still the terrain to contend with. High mountains and disturbingly-few lowlands lay ahead, and Bonnie ordered them to climb to their maximum altitude, taking on a single-file formation while in constant radio contact. Very soon, the patches of cloud cover became a blanket of impenetrable white. Doppler radar in the Chinooks' avionics gave them an advantage over the older Hueys, so they took front and back door of the little convoy.

In Val One, Woodward blinked hard through her sunglasses, against the glare of the clouds. Bonnie and Alana were casually radioing the distance of landmarks around them, in calm and steady voices that were a credit to their profession. Speakers in the cabin carried the ongoing talk between the helicopters.

Woodward had just looked away from the glare when the frantic call pierced above the rest.

"VAL THREE TO VAL ONE! MAYDAY, MAYDAY!" cried pilot Rachel Banta, her voice lowering as she identified the problem. "Oh God ... we clipped our tail rotor on a rock spur! WE'RE GOING DOWN!"

Woodward's face broke into an instant sweat, but there was nothing she could do. Helpless, she looked to her pilots, who were trying to talk her through options.

"Rachel, increase your airspeed, and turn in the direction you're going!" barked Bonnie Clayton into her headset microphone. "It's just like hitting a patch of ice! Turn into the skid!"

Rachel yelled over the panicked screams of the other women aboard the small Huey, "IT'S NOT WORKING -- WE'RE TOO CLOSE TO THE -"

Rachel Banta's voice was cut off by a sudden grinding noise.

Then there was silence.

Woodward stopped breathing for a couple of beats, and faced forward with her eyes closed against the tears that were forming. Behind her in the body of the Chinook came the muffled sobs from their passengers. In her mind's eye she saw the faces of the six aboard the Huey, and a lump caught in her throat. "Awww ... Tracy," she whispered with an expletive under her breath.

"JILL!" Woodward's eyes popped open at Clayton's sharp exclamation. "LOOK!"

The clouds had split apart as if cleaved by some celestial axe-blade, and they burst into an egg-shaped valley.

The Bronze Saga #2: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

The normally-calm morning in the Valley of the Vanished was broken asunder by the deafening whap-whap-whap of beating wings echoing off the high mountain walls. Natives looked up and pointed in fear at the strange animals, fleeing in terror to the security of their Queen.

Monja and Pat were already outside, standing in the clearing next to the palace, and looking expectantly upward..

At Pat's side, Hal Mason looked through binoculars and reported calmly. "Three helicopters ... two Chinook CH-46's and a Huey UH-1B. They seem to be circling the outer rim of the Valley."

"Is it Doc?" asked Monja, excitedly, to Pat. "Is it?"

"Who else could it be?" she responded absently, turning to Mason. "Troop carriers?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Mason. "They're capable of hauling troops, arms, and even light vehicles."

Pat looked up and started sweating.

She'd expected her cousin not to come alone -- defying the instructions he'd been given -- but this show of strength was more than she had anticipated. With the Mayan queen on one side, and her guard on the other, she knew she would soon be called upon to give their response.

She cursed her cousin under her breath.

"Wow! Will you look at that pyramid!" commented Alana with awe. "I'll give you 2-to-1 odds it's Mayan."

"And look who's parked next to it," added Clayton.

"Penelope's Osprey," breathed Woodward, now standing behind the two pilots.

The helicopters had maneuvered into a holding pattern while Woodward had assessed the situation with binoculars. She had been amazed at the sheer beauty of the valley, with its lush foliage and clear air, like a modern-day Shangri-La.

But then she saw the Osprey, and was reminded of their reason to be there, the mission that had already claimed six lives. Clenching her teeth at her laziness and selfishness, she concentrated on the mission.

"We've been spotted," observed Alana, noting the natives staring and pointing from the large village central to the valley.

"Yeah," replied Woodward absently, as she surveyed the area and formulated a strategy. Then she saw a familiar figure. "There she is, near that structure!"

"That's the palace," answered Alana confidently, then elaborated. "I took Mayan architecture in college."

"Do you think you can put us down there next to it?"

"I think so," commented Bonnie, and flexed her fingers around the controls.

"Careful," said Alana. "She's not alone. I see gunmen down there -- at least two."

"I see 'em. Thanks."

Woodward nodded and went back to the cargo section of the Chinook. As she passed the women, some still in shock, she offered comforting touches and hugs and encouraging words, trying to redirect their attention towards the fight and victory ahead of them.

She brought up a metal box the size of a cosmetics case and placed it on the floor. She opened the case and removed the cover, revealing a complex remote-control array. She attached a neck strap to either side of the box, which held it steady as she stood. After a quick check of the system, she put on a radio headset and signaled for attention.

"Okay, everybody! This is what we've trained for, so listen closely! Weapons ready, ear protection ready! Val Two, on my mark you will move to the other side of the pyramid and hover above an open area suitable for landing. You'll prep two LAWS rockets for dispatching on my command -- let yourself be seen -- aim for the top half of that pyramid." She saw the flash of concern on her co-pilot's face, and smiled. "Trust me, I know what I'm doing. I'm willing to bet that they'd be willing to do anything to keep their precious pyramid from being damaged."

Alana nodded understandingly.

Woodward continued. "Val Four, you will take a position above the lake. Make sure nobody is under you in the water. Set up a satchel charge, and drop it in the water on my command. Once we've made beachhead, you'll stay aloft and provide air cover if necessary. Acknowledge."

"Val Two, acknowledged and ready."

"Val Four, ready."

"All right, ladies. As of now we are going over to full-ASL mode with maximum ear protection. Good luck!"

Woodward replaced the radio set with a heavy-duty ear protection headset, adjusting it on her head. Bonnie and Alana took turns at the controls while putting their headsets on. Tapping her crew on the shoulders, they acknowledged their readiness with a pair of upraised thumbs.

Turning her attention to the remote control box, she set them to TEST and pushed two buttons. A moment later, green lights acknowledged the visual command. With a nod and a smile, she tapped Bonnie twice on the shoulder, then pressed a button on the control box.

The helicopters moved into position.

"Look, they're moving!" said Monja.

The helicopters smoothly broke formation, the smaller one centering over the lake, and the larger two positioning themselves, one over the pyramid, and the other drifting deliberately over their own heads.

The Bronze Saga #2: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

The cyclonic winds caused by the double rotors caused many natives to cower in terror, and Monja yelled for them not to fear, plus something Pat could not understand.

Mason and Balboa had maneuvered into strategic positions, their weapons ready. Her flight crew, not fighters, were safe inside the palace.

But Pat was ready to rumble.

Her long hair tied back against the increasing wind, she stood defiantly out in the open, in the clearing near the palace. Her old familiar six-shooter felt good in her hand, while a more-modern automatic pistol had been tucked into the waistband of her pants, comfortably resting against the small of her back, hidden.

The natives had also quickly prepared for battle, taking up whatever they could to defend their Valley. For what it was worth, they were ready to fight at Monja's command.

After the initial shock at her cousin's show of strength, she'd determined in her heart that -- if this were her last battle -- she would give him a fight he would never forget. It was an odd feeling, hopeless yet exhilarating, facing death once more. Like ... like old times.

Above the roar of the wind that pressed down on them, a high-pitched chirp from a speaker got their attention. A female voice then spoke: "PENELOPE SAVAGE!"

Pat was surprised at the female voice, addressing her by her alter ego's name. For a moment she wondered what Doc was pulling. Then something started to turn in her mind, and she muttered under her breath, "That voice ... I know that voice."

"Who is this 'Penelope' they ask for?" called Monja.

Before Pat could reply, the voice spoke again, "PENELOPE SAVAGE! IF YOU SURRENDER NOW, NO ONE WILL BE HARMED."

Suddenly Pat's jaw went slack, as she remembered the voice. Her eyes narrowed and her teeth clenched as she replied, "Woodward." Then she let out a howl of rage and swung the six-gun upwards in the direction of the helicopter's nose.

Anticipating such a reaction from Miz Savage, Woodward had a finger poised over a primary button. As she saw the pistol swing, she hit the button and yelled, "NO!"

From compact wave speakers mounted below the helicopters, the single word came like a clap of thunder, echoing several seconds afterward.

The response was immediate. Pat's gun stopped in mid-swing, unfired. Everyone was stunned, taken totally by surprise.

Woodward smiled at the reaction, then touched another control.

The Huey's sudden climb was hardly noticed by those on the river's shores. But that changed instantly at the thunderclap of an explosion that preceded a massive geyser of water 40 feet high above the Valley. As if in slow motion, the water curled up and out, and came down on the

shores of the river like a tidal wave. Natives tried to run but didn't get far before the wall of water and displaced sea life overwhelmed them.

Woodward's amplified voice spoke again. "THIS IS JUST ONE EXAMPLE OF WHAT WE CAN DO. OUR NEXT TARGET WILL BE YOUR SACRED PYRAMID ... OBSERVE!"

All eyes on the ground turned towards the helicopter hovering close to the pyramid. The side door had opened, and the vicious-looking muzzle of a rocket launcher was pointing directly at the top of their sacred structure.

"No! Not the temple! Not the temple!" cried Monja, frantically seeking answers from Pat. "Is it Doc? Is it?"

As if in answer to her inquiry, Woodward said, "PENELOPE SAVAGE. DROP YOUR WEAPON AND SURRENDER, OR WE WILL DESTROY THE PYRAMID!"

Pat stood, cursing under her breath. Then she lowered the six-gun and reluctantly lobbed it to one side. Turning to Monja, she said, "I'll pretend to give up, then use the other gun when I'm close enough. My guards are in place; they'll fire on the other helicopters when I do."

Before Monja could object, Pat stepped forward with her hands raised and a scowl on her face. She could see the crew through the windshield -- including that traitor Woodward -- and calculated her shots. She took a couple more steps, then quickly reached behind her back and drew the automatic.

Woodward's eyes had been locked on Penelope's grimacing face, watching closely as the six-gun was tossed aside. "This is way too easy," she mumbled suspiciously, just before Penelope reached for the concealed automatic.

Woodward jammed her fingers onto the control buttons, and the world erupted in sound.

Pat tried to hold onto the automatic, but her fingers had instantly outvoted her in favor of covering her ears against the din. Nothing else mattered at that moment except that she protect her hearing. The sound from the speakers was not a single note, but a cacophony of sounds of ear-piercing decibels, a multitude of noises that spread outward and echoed against the mountains surrounding the Valley. The bass portion among the sounds was overwhelming, vibrating everything and everybody within its range. Under its influence, pottery vessels cracked, and windows throughout the palace split and shattered.

The effect on the people below was just as devastating: all those who heard, throughout the Valley of the Vanished, fell stunned and wounded to the ground.

From Val One, Woodward winced against the concussion of the noise, threatening to shake them from the skies. She counted to five, then gave the command to land and begin the beachhead.

On the ground below, Pat felt the intensity of the wind increase, and a part of her mind told her to move before the helicopter landed on top of her. She scrambled away blindly, eyes pressed closed against the sound that grew closer. She hit a patch of grass and stumbled, landing with an awkward crash, yet unable to feel the pain.

As the wind's force lessened as the helicopter's rotors wound down, Pat turned in its direction and screamed for the sound to stop.

And, amazingly, it did. Woodward had discontinued the sonic attack.

Still stunned and feeling dizzy, her ears still ringing, Pat forced her eyes open.

The helicopters had landed, and ramps lowered from the larger ones. Pat watched helplessly as armed soldiers in paramilitary uniforms rushed down the ramp. She noted that they were all wearing hearing protectors against the effects of the sound. She suddenly heard the cracking of automatic weapons fire, and was surprised that her hearing hadn't been permanently impaired.

The last person down the ramp was dressed in a slightly different uniform. It was a woman. Gritting her teeth, she yelled, "WOODWARD!" accompanied by a string of profanities.

There was no reply. The black woman silently strode over to her and looked down upon her, like a hunter admiring their latest capture. She held a vaguely-familiar weapon in her hand, while an automatic was holstered at her hip.

Still stunned and hurting, but not willing to give up without a fight, she groped for Woodward's pants-leg. With a laugh, the black woman stepped easily out of her reach. Then there was a stabbing twinge in Pat's hip, and she noticed that Woodward's weapon was now pointing in her direction.,

Like audible taffy, sounds began to stretch and distort, and her vision began to cloud. Her thoughts became slow, like they were packed in cotton. Then the darkness obscured her mind and the sounds went away.

Chapter Ten

Woodward stood next to Val One, her hearing protectors hanging from the back of her neck. As she looked out upon this hidden valley, Bonnie Clayton came up the trail. She looked tired. It had been a long three hours for them both.

"All of the bodies have been moved to a place at the edge of the village, belonging to what they call a mortician here," reported the muscular brunette. "And we moved Janie to a hut on the far side of the village. Wilma's keeping an eye on her."

"Janie," sighed Woodward, remembering. "I knew it would come to this, Bonnie. Almost wish they'd have died together."

Clayton nodded slowly. "Yeah, I know."

Woodward couldn't help reviewing the details once more, looking for a way it could've been avoided. But her conclusion was always the same. There was no way. It was war, she rationalized.

The beachhead had been going well, with little resistance. Then Janice was killed by one of Penelope's guards. And that pushed Janie -- certifiably psychotic already -- completely over the edge. According to the accounts, Janie went berserk and mowed the guard down with her automatic weapon, practically cutting him in half; she was still pulling the trigger long after her ammunition and the guard's life had both expired.

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She had to give credit to one of the natives of this place, whose brave actions and aim with a rock brought Janie down. Woodward shuddered to think what she would've done otherwise.

Janie was now a dangerous liability to them, and she had no idea what to do with her once they were finished in this valley. So, for the time being, she had ordered Janie heavily sedated and moved 'out of the way' in one of the helicopters.

"What about you?" asked Clayton, thankfully interrupting Woodward's thoughts. "Did you settle things with the queen?"

Woodward nodded. "Yes. She's agreed to cooperate, and I believe her. She's a fascinating lady." She paused. "Something odd, though. When I told her all we wanted was Penelope Savage, she acted like she didn't know who I was talking about."

"Boss," someone called from the doorway of the palace. "She's awake."

"Good," she called back. "Okay, Bonnie, round 'em up ... it's Showtime."

The cotton in Pat's brain was slowly being cleaned out. There was no more ringing in her ears, and she clearly heard a voice say, "She's coming out of it. Get the boss."

The boss. Woodward. Just to think that she had been behind Apex caused her to seethe, and that helped clear the fog from her mind. She was tied to a chair -- not tied, handcuffed -- and her recovering vision told her that she was in her room in the palace. Some of the furniture had been moved aside, and she was well out of reach of anything to help her, even if she could free her arms.

Someone dressed in one of those paramilitary uniforms stood by the door, and, for the first time, she realized it was a woman. She was armed with the same kind of weapon Woodward had shot her with earlier, which she now recognized as a tranquilizer gun. The woman responded to something outside the room, and opened the door. Two people walked in, Woodward and another woman of considerable height and build. They both carried holstered tranquilizer guns; standard issue, she assumed.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty," said Woodward, approaching. Her tone was smug.

Pat's response was a stream of obscenities that didn't seem to affect her adversary. She just stood there, waiting patiently, until Pat paused to take a breath. Then she said, "C'mon, Penelope. You're ours now. You can't get out."

Angrily, she unleashed another stream of profanities at Woodward, while pointing out the fact that their heads would roll once her mother got hold of them. The women stood there, seemingly unfazed, until she was done for the moment. By that time, Woodward had dismissed the woman she first saw when waking.

Now she turned back to Pat. "Look, sweet cheeks, you're way out of your element here. Your guards are dead, your protection is gone, and nobody but us knows you're here. Now once this is all over and we have what we want, then you'll be released, and we can both go our merry way."

She was still seething, but knew they had the upper hand -- for now. "All right. What are your demands?"

Woodward didn't hesitate. "First, money. We need operating capital just like you do. And you're going to provide it."

Pat snorted, "Typical. Next?"

"We want your attention," Woodward said slowly and simply, without her standard smirk.

This momentarily surprised her. Then she caught on. "Why should I?"

Woodward shot her a nasty look. "Look, MIZ Penelope. Do you think we just sprung up overnight, with a rabid hatred for you and your company? Your company is just one of many businesses that exploit women by appealing to their vanity. You were targeted because of several people who were hurt -- badly -- because of businesses like yours, and a few because of your company in particular. Your victims have become my people." She paused. "Basically, we want you to see the faces, and know the stories, of those people you and your kind have harmed."

Woodward gestured to the tall woman, who went to the door and opened it. Another figure entered and stood before Pat. She wore the same uniform as the others, but also wore gloves and a face-concealing hood. "My name," she said hesitatingly, "is Jodie Sims. Do you recognize that name?"

Pat thought a moment, then said, "I think so. You tried to sue us because of a bad reaction you had to one of our products."

"A 'bad reaction' she says," shot back Sims with a bitter laugh. "Let me show you what kind of 'bad reaction' it was."

And she started removing her clothes. First the gloves, revealing red rashed hands. Then she removed her hood, and Pat gasped. What hair she had was in patches across the top of her head, and her face was horribly disfigured as if burned severely. Without comment, Jodie removed the uniform, undressing to panties and bra. Her entire body showed the same discoloration and burned appearance as her face. What had probably been a lovely woman was now a disfigured freak.

"You made me this way -- at least a couple of the products your company made did," she explained. She moved in closer to Pat, who recoiled and tried to move back. "I'm not contagious, if that's what you're thinking. This is the 'bad reaction' your products did to me. They were labeled as hypo-allergenic, and yet produced this reaction in me. I tried going through the legal system, but your high-paid A-Team got it thrown out of court. 'I should've known my limits,' 'I had not been forced to use the products,' and so you weren't liable for what it did to me. They labeled it as 'unfortunate' and threw the case out of court." She paused. "Oh, by the way, two weeks after that, the products that caused this were all pulled from the shelves -- due to a 'marketing decision' in the Corporate Office. One freak is an 'unfortunate individual' -- two freaks are a pattern. My fiancée couldn't stand to be around me. My friends got more and more distant. I was dismissed from my job, under the excuse 'poor work'." Her face showed the grief and pain, and Pat's breathing became shallow during the demonstration. "I almost killed myself, thinking suicide was the only way out -- when Jill found me. She became a friend, my only friend at the time. She didn't pity me, didn't condescend to me, but accepted what I was inside. And she gave me a reason to live, if only to get back at you and your kind."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Pat.

"What I want, you're not capable of doing. You can't reverse the hands of time and make me as I was before. But I appreciate the fact that you asked, and that you heard my story."

She gathered her clothes and walked away. Woodward moved forward. Her tone was sober, without her previous attitude. "Jodie's a sweet person, once you look past the outside. In a way, I apologize for hitting you with her story first. Hers is the most graphic of examples, and shows you just how serious we are. This isn't a game."

Woodward called in people, one by one, who stood before Pat and gave their stories.

"I'm Alexandria Foster, Ms. Savage. I'd always been self-conscious about my looks, so I spent ... a bit more ... on cosmetics."

"Tell her how much, Alex," gently prompted Woodward. "Go ahead."

"Uh, well ... fifteen thousand dollars last year, ma'am. That's what led to my Henry leavin' me, and takin' our two boys. After that, I had to work three jobs just to earn enough for the make-up."

"Just call me Larabee. I know I look older, but I'm only 29. I used your stuff for four years before they diagnosed my skin cancer. It went into remission for a while after chemo, but it's back now. All my body hair's gone, lady, and the doctors say I've got maybe a year left. I've got nothing to live for, except to make your life a living hell like you made mine."

"I'm Rosa ... Rosa Dutton. My story's the same as Alex Foster's, but I wasn't married. I wanted to be beautiful, desirous. I went into prostitution in order to feed my 'habit'. I wanted to be like some of those supermodels you hire. Well, that's not what happened. I got AIDS. That's my fault, not yours. But it was because I wanted to be beautiful ..." She started crying, and Clayton came over and comforted her, directing her out of the room.

A brassy blonde stood next before Pat. She looked in her mid-30's but she guessed she was at least five years older than that. "My name's Jeannie Simpson." She moved back and forth from one foot to another, as if she couldn't stand still if her life depended on it. "My boyfriend wanted me to look like the cuties in your ads. I used your cosmetics, hoping they'd keep him attracted to me. Spent my parent's inheritance doin' so, on that and on some assorted plastic surgery." She ran her hands down her body to illustrate where she had the work done. "In the end, the crumb left me for some little eighteen-year-old cheerleader type." She twitched nervously, like she was under the influence of drugs. "Anyhow, your company promised the world if I used your stuff. That's pure crap, lady."

Others came forward -- Cherry, Geraldine, Phyllis, Gina, Roberta, Sun Li, Cathy -- the names blurred after awhile. The stories were tragic: wasted lives, broken families, lost opportunities. But the common thread was that businesses like Pat's influenced the results for the bad.

A muscular brunette came in next. She looked at Pat with venom, and stepped closer. "My name is Kristi Armstrong. I'm 33 years old, and I ... was ... the mother of a wonderful little girl named Susie. When she was ten years old, she got one of your 'My First Makeup' kits. She was good with it, too. It made her look nice. It also made her look older than she was. She started hanging out with some older boys. She liked the attention because of the makeup." She paused, trying to compose herself; she looked to Woodward, who nodded supportingly. "One night she was picked up after school by some of those boys and taken to a party. I got the phone call four hours later, from the police. She had been involved in an accident. The driver of the car had been drinking, and he drove the car into a telephone pole. They were both killed." She spat the words out of her mouth like they were bullets. "I tried to hold your company criminally responsible for the influence their products had on my daughter, but the case was dismissed. Six months later, the 'My First Makeup' line was pulled from the shelves without explanation." Kristi's eyes flared

with hatred, and she lunged for Pat, cursing. "You made it look good to them. SHE WAS JUST A CHILD! Did you have any clue what it would do to them? DID YOU?"

The brunette suddenly lunged at the manacled Pat, grabbing her by the throat and toppling the chair over backwards.

Woodward and Clayton rushed in. "You get Kristi, I'll get Penelope," she ordered, drawing her tranquilizer gun.

Clayton pulled hers. "Gotcha."

The two women fired simultaneously into the struggle. The action froze instantly, then they melted as one to the floor, ending up in a crumpled heap of bodies.

Disgustedly, Woodward said, "Okay, Bonnie, let's clean up the mess. Let's tie Miz Penelope to her bed, then carry Kristi to a neutral corner."

As the amazonian Clayton dragged the unconscious Kristi, she commented, "I told you she'd do this, Jill."

"That's why I put her last in line, Bonnie. Now where are we -"

The door to the room suddenly burst open, and Queen Monja came in with a frustrated redhead close behind.

"What's going on here?" she was exclaiming. "If you've hurt my friend Patricia, you shall feel my fury!"

"I tried to keep her in her room, but she pushed past me," said the embarrassed redhead.

"That's okay, Eva," comforted Woodward, holding up a hand. "What did you say, Your Majesty?"

Monja stood there defiant, her fists on her hips. "If you have done any harm to my friend Patricia, I will make you regret it."

"She's fine. She's just been given something that will make her sleep for a short time. She has not been harmed." Then Woodward did a double-take. "Did you say Patricia? Patricia Savage?"

"Yes. The cousin of Doc Savage."

Her eyes narrowed. "I think you may be confused. Patricia Savage is over eighty years old. This is her daughter, Penelope."

Monja laughed, which momentarily irritated Woodward. "Daughter? You must be joking. Her youthful appearance is due to a special herb, the same one which restored my youth."

Woodward ventured cautiously. "Your Majesty, how old are you?"

"I have seen eighty-three summers," she replied without hesitation.

"And that person is Patricia Savage?" She pointed to the body on the bed.

"Yes."

The black woman paused, deep in thought. "Thank you, Your Majesty. Would you please return to your room with this young lady?"

She hesitated, then conceded. "Very well."

Eva graciously directed Monja from the room. Woodward and Clayton looked at one another, confused expressions on both their faces.

"Is it possible?" asked Clayton, amazed.

Woodward shrugged. "I don't know. I remember seeing a lot of interesting things in R&D when I worked for her, so I suppose anything's possible."

"But that would mean ..."

"That would mean that she's pulled off one of the biggest con jobs in history. She's made everyone in the whole world believe she is ... her own daughter. But that would make sense. I don't know the last time Patricia Savage was seen in public. It's been Penelope Savage making the personal appearances all these years."

"If that's the case, then how can we prove it?"

Woodward was looking thoughtfully at the woman sleeping on the bed. "I think I know of a way, Bonnie."

Pat was coming out of her tranquilized stupor. She looked over at Woodward, standing off to the side, and groaned.

"Welcome back," Woodward said with an annoying grin. "Sorry I had to do that, Pat, but Kristi would've torn your head off if we hadn't stopped you two."

Pat's face showed confusion. "What did you call me?"

"Oh," she replied, lobbing a object the size of a large white marble into the air and casually catching it. "I called you Pat. That is your name, isn't it?"

She released a chuckle she hoped would sound convincing. "No. Pat is my mother's name. I'm Penelope. What are you trying to do, test my memory?"

"If I wanted to test your memory, I'd ask you what you were doing in the early 1950's."

"I wasn't born then."

"Oh, really?" Woodward turned around the chair Pat had previously occupied, and sat facing the bed. "In a way, I've really got to give you credit. You pulled off the biggest con job I've ever seen."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she commented half-heartedly.

Woodward stopped playing games. "The Queen spilled the beans, Pat. She told us about the herb that has been keeping you young. You gave her the same herb to make her young again. She fingered you as Pat Savage, not Penelope Savage."

"You're crazy. But I'll bite. If what you say is true, how could it ever be proven?"

"This," she cooed, and tossed the white object into the air again.

There was something about it that looked familiar. Pat followed it as it sailed in the air, and suddenly recognized it. She groaned and released a profanity.

It was her eyeball.

Woodward smiled smugly. "Ah, yes. You do recognize this. I thought you would. Being a part of the company, I knew that you lost your eye many years ago, and had it replaced with an artificial glass eye just like this one. While you were asleep, we did a little testing to see if your eyes dilated when exposed to light. When this one didn't react like the other one, we ... removed it. Now what mother and daughter both have identical artificial eyeballs?" She paused. "Now let's cut the crap. You've been busted ... Pat."

Pat opened and closed her eyes. There was no pain, except for a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Okay. So now what?" she asked her captor.

The black woman stood. She had the upper hand, and knew it. Her smug expression was even more annoying. "Before, our intent was ransom. Now, it's blackmail."

Pat shifted on the bed. Okay, she thought, you wanna play hardball, then let's play hardball. "It won't work. Who would they believe, a Fortune 500 executive, or a kidnapper and a terrorist?"

Woodward was not dissuaded. "Very true. Very true. It would make exposing you difficult if we did it ourselves. However, if we 'leaked' the information to the world -- say, via the internet -- it might pique the interest of an ambitious investigative reporter or two. Someone who would have the tenacity to keep checking into things, until they discovered the truth and revealed it to the world. And your credibility will -- like your company -- crumble like dust and be blown away with the wind."

Pat's silence was all too clear. Woodward had the upper hand, and now both women knew it.

Clark was alone in the cavern that sheltered the rebuilt Helldiver. The lights were on but dim, and he moved about the rock floor performing his two-hour exercise routine. As he did, he took advantage of the solitude to commune in prayer with God.

"Well, Lord, tomorrow we leave for the Valley of the Vanished. And into the unknown -- again," he started.

"We've got the new superfirers, and enough mercy bullets to fend off a small army." He paused. "I pray it doesn't come down to that. I mean, I know Pat's not stupid, and she'll probably not face us alone -- not after Lincoln City. But I ask that You give us grace to overcome her and whoever she has on her side.

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"I thank You for what You've been doing in Perry. He, Dot, and Amy have been working out in Napoleon's Alley since early this morning, running the gauntlet over and over with the new superfirers. He's been improving, and Amy's targeting system is excellent, but I still ask that You give them all good eyes and steady hands.

"Getting into the Valley's not going to be easy, either. The last time was quite nerve-shaking. I know Gumball's a good pilot, but he could sure use an assist from You, even though he doesn't know You. Give him a strong hand and quick reflexes. You've given him a good plane in the Osprey, and it's all set up with the pod for the anaesthetic gas cylinders.

"Speaking of which, thanks for giving Monk and Dr. Egan guidance in modifying the anaesthetic gas and making it compressible. And the Paradox. It was an excellent idea to treat the diving suits Perry, Dot, and Amy will wear, making them almost as effective as a suit of armor. It'll give them an advantage they'll need."

He lowered himself into a seated Yoga position, silent as he took several deep breaths. Then he continued.

"I am ... concerned for our safety. Who wouldn't? But I have seen how You have worked in our lives over the past months, and I know I can trust You with my life and the others' lives. You have such a marvelous perspective on time, being able to see all time in the same way we would look at a single point before us. You know where we've been, and You know where we'll go. Knowing that makes it easier to trust You to direct my life. And knowing that You are in my heart makes it much easier to enter into a potentially-fatal situation. Paul said, 'To live is Christ, to die is gain.' I have no need for worry.

"And You have blessed me so very much with this place. I admit, when I learned that the Trading Company had been leveled and replaced with a park, and the 86th Floor was now an observation deck, and ... of course ... the College ... I lamented. I had always hoped that something of my achievements would outlive me. But they were gone, all gone ... until You allowed me to see this." He paused. "Thank You. You've given me back my team, my friends. Now all we have to do is get my family back. If there was any other way ... but there isn't. Please work on Pat, Lord. Draw her to you, somehow, some way."

Well-muscled legs glided him up into a standing position. "We're about as ready as we'll ever be, Lord. Now it's in Your hands to do with. Thy will be done. In Jesus' name, Amen."

He retrieved a towel and his commlock and started for the exit. He had only gone a couple of steps when the commlock alerted him to an incoming call.

Without waiting for Clark to identify himself, Drake's voice came through the speaker. His tone was urgent. "Clark, it's Mitch! There's been an accident in Monk's lab ... non-life threatening! There's a med team heading there right now!"

"Have you informed the others?"

"You're the first! I'll do that and meet you there!"

"Very good! Clark out!" he said, as he picked up his pace towards the airlock.

"Doggonit, Katie, it's only a sprain! Just let me stand up, okay! Hey -- put that shoe back on -- it's cold! Katie -- tell this bozo to put my shoe back on my foot!"

The Bronze Saga #2: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

The simian chemist was flat on his back, with a pair of EMTs tending to a quickly-swelling ankle. A middle-aged woman in a lab coat leaned back patiently against a table and watched. Amy arrived first, followed by Gumball, Drake, Clark, and Perry and Dot.

"Katie! Get these goons offa me!" continued Monk. As he saw the new arrivals, he pleaded for help. "Son! Boy, help your old man up, willya?" "Mitch -- you're in charge, they'll lissen to you -- tell 'em to go home! I'm fine!" "Doc, tell 'em -- I'm fine! We've gone through worse than this, and walked away with barely a scratch! It's only a sprain -- honest! Now get these goons offa me!" "Perry ... Dot ... I'm fine -- honest! Awwwww -- c'mon!"

Drake ignored Monk's protesting and turned to the EMTs. "Report," he asked curtly.

"It appears to be a clean break, sir. But we won't know the extent of it until we have it X-rayed."

Monk reacted to the news with a renewed wave of panic.

Perry and Dot were standing next to Kate Egan, who reacted to his bawling with a revolted grimace. Then, glancing at the table behind her, she retrieved a small metal canister and boldly moved towards the center of the disturbance.

"All right, that's enough!" she suddenly shouted. "Everybody, hold your breath!"

All but Monk obeyed the order. The woman shoved something in front of Monk's face and pressed a trigger. There was a brief hiss, and his simian face took on an expression of betrayal before his body succumbed to the effects of the anaesthetic gas and went limp. The sudden silence was surprising. A few seconds later, several relieved people exhaled and returned to normal breathing. The two EMTs looked up at her and broke into a round of applause, to which she responded by smiling and offering a slight bow.

"I just wanted to shut him up," she admitted to the group.

"Very efficient, Kate," complimented Drake, and nodded to the EMT's. They put a temporary restraint on his leg, then carried him to a special medical cart. Amy climbed into the following cart with Gumball, while Perry and Dot stayed in the lab and observed Drake questioning Kate Egan.

"So how did it happen?" he inquired.

She gave him a sheepish grin. "We were having ... a farewell party, and he was showing me how he could make salsa in glass beakers. Things got messy, and some of it got on the floor. Look." She pointed to several spots. "He was coming around the table when he hit one of the spots and down he went."

"Mitch, your EMT's were correct," commented Clark. "It doesn't appear that Monk will be able to accompany us."

The black man's face showed his regret. "I'm truly sorry. He can recuperate here, if you like. Or we could arrange transportation back to Oklahoma."

"It would probably be best for him to return home."

"Consider it done," said Mitch. "If I can swing it, I'll fly him back personally."

"Thank you." He walked over to Perry and Dot. "This is not good. As undiplomatic as he is, I was hoping he could help persuade Pat into surrender or truce." He paused. "We can't change our plans now: we leave in the morning."

"I understand," replied Perry. "It'll work out."

Clark nodded silently. "Let's see how Monk is."

The effects of the gas lasted roughly half an hour. During that time, Monk's leg was encased in a lightweight cast and he was placed in a hospital bed with his leg raised. The first sign that the effects of the anaesthetic gas had worn off was an extended-length volley of some of the rawest language any of them had ever heard from the man.

"Boy, is he ticked," commented Gumball, cringing. "I haven't heard him talk like that since I drove the Cord into the lake back in '69."

Clark's countenance was like flint, his eyes narrowed. "I'm going in."

"You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din," quipped the tall pilot, taking a seat in the waiting room.

As Clark stepped into the hospital room, the only thing that changed was the volume. Monk's language was filled with anger and frustration, and he seemed to be oblivious to the fact that the bronze man was standing there. Clark took a few steps towards the bed, then his voice virtually boomed like thunder as he said, "ENOUGH!"

The barrage of verbal abuse was halted in mid-sentence. But the look in Monk's eyes still mirrored frustration. "It ain't fair!" he mumbled. "It just ain't fair!"

"I know it's not fair, Monk," the big man said calmly. "I'm sorry. What can I do?"

"Take me with you," he pleaded. "Gimme a pair of crutches, and I'm good to go."

"You know that's not possible."

"Katie gassed me, didn't she?" he asked bluntly, changing the subject.

"Yes, she did. And if she hadn't, brother, I would have." His expression was cold. "In all the years we've known one another, Monk Mayfair, I have never seen you do such an accurate impression of a two-year-old spoiled brat!"

The strongly-worded rebuke deflated most of Monk's immediate anger. "It's just not fair, Doc," he persisted. "We've fought dinosaurs, monsters, and more baddies than you can shake a stick at. We've been in more life-threatening situations than anyone I know, and ... and I bust my ankle slipping on some blankety-blank salsa!" They were silent for several moments. "So now what? You gonna leave me behind?"

"I have to," he replied with regret. "Mitch will make sure you get home."

"Doc ... did you tell Lea?" His tone reflected concern for his wife.

Clark shook his head. "No. Both Dot and Gumball wanted to, but I stopped them. It would be best if she heard it from you."

"Thanks." His eyes turned downward. "I'm ... sorry 'bout my language."

"Accepted." He jerked a thumb towards the door. "You also need to repent to them."

"Huh?"

"Your little tirade carried through the walls."

His face turned a deep red. "Oh, God," he moaned.

"Him, too." Clark smiled. "Shall we start in prayer before I let the rest of them in?"

A smile came to Monk's face, the first since he had the accident. "You betcha!"

The bronze man stood at the bedside of his friend and reached out a hand. Then together they went before the throne of grace for a humble recharging. After they were through, Monk looked up and said, "I'm sorry. It's just that this was so ... important to me ... to get back into action."

"Look, brother, you're not getting off this easy," said Clark, surprising the simian chemist. "But for some reason neither of us are aware of, God's decided you've got a job to do on this side. Look for it."

The bronze man continued to the door and opened it. "It's okay," he announced, and let the people in.

Chapter Eleven

Pre-dawn over the Florida Everglades. Very peaceful, very serene.

Suddenly there was a stirring in the waters, and the large metal dome broke the surface, slowly raising itself clear until it stood tall. Seconds after, the steel wedges of the dome retracted, like the petals of an alien flower, revealing some interesting life-forms inside.

The light of the morning sun momentarily blinded the people standing on the helipad.

"Clark," addressed Drake. "The weather along your flight path is favorable, and I've arranged for a final refueling stop before the last leg into the Valley -- the information has been downloaded to the Osprey's onboard computer."

The bronze man took the hand of the black man. "Mitch, my thanks for everything."

"Keep in touch, okay? I'd ... like to work with you again."

"Count on it. Besides, you still owe us a ride in the Helldiver," he smiled.

"Blue Thunder?" repeated Amy, reading the name painted on the bow of the Osprey.

"Hey," replied Gumball, tipping his cowboy hat back. "I liked the movie. And you have to admit, the name fits."

"Uh ... yeah." She pointed to one side. "Look, your dad's calling us over."

They crossed the pad. Monk was in a wheelchair, with Dr. Egan behind him. He took his son's arm and pulled him close. "Now, son -- remember, as soon as you can, send me the signal that you're okay. I'll be waitin' for it!"

Gumball nodded. "No problem, Dad. And don't worry ... we'll do fine." He gave his father a gentle hug. "Give Mom a hug for me, okay? See you when we get back."

As he walked away, Perry and Dot approached. Monk addressed the three of them. "Now, remember, those wetsuits are stronger, and they'll resist a bullet, but that doesn't mean you're invulnerable. A rock can bounce off, but you'll still bruise underneath. And a knife or a spear won't cut the suit, but it can penetrate your body and cause internal injuries. Got it?" The trio nodded. "Good. Just keep the heroics to a minimum ... don't be like this old reprobate." He grinned.

One by one, they leaned down and gave the simian Monk a hug. Perry was the last. As he started to move away with the rest, Monk's hand grabbed his sleeve. He let the two women walk out of earshot, then turned back to the man in the wheelchair.

"Give us a moment, please?" Monk said to Dr. Egan. She nodded and moved offside.

Monk pulled Perry in close, his gaze compassionate, his voice cracking with emotion. "You take care of her, son. Don't let her do anything ... stupid ... like her granddad. Okay? You got that?" His eyebrows went up to punctuate the intent, and his apelike grip increased.

Perry's eyes met Monk's. "There's no need to worry. God is in control. And we'll all come home safe." His smile was reassuring.

"C'mon gang, we're losin' daylight!" yelled Gumball from the Osprey. "Let's get'um up, move'um out!"

Perry gave Monk a final fatherly hug, then walked to their transport, meeting Dot halfway. They both waved back at those they were leaving behind, then climbed aboard.

Everyone took their places. Clark closed the door. Amy and Dot made a final check of their gear, then took their seats. During their stay with Drake, Gumball had requested the installation of a CD player in the cockpit, and the music now coming from it was a John Williams movie soundtrack.

The three observers huddled close to the edge of the helipad, watching as Blue Thunder came to life, turboprops quickly lifting it gracefully into the air. A change in the angle of the props, and the Osprey charged forward. It circled once easily over the helipad and took their heading. Flying low to avoid radar, they cleared the Florida Keys, then swiftly ascended and settled on course for Central America.

The flight was mostly made in silence. Perry, Dot, and Amy made last-minute adjustments to their gear, rearranging things to avoid damage once they were on shore in the Valley, then passing the waterproof duffles through the secret hatchway into the pod under the belly of the craft. An eerie green glow shone

through the hole from their work light, and it took only one look to show them that it would as crowded as a submarine airlock -- which, more or less, it was.

They made their final pit stop right on schedule, and were back in the air within ten minutes, on the final leg of their journey.

"Good morning, Buttercup," said Woodward. "Hope you slept well."

Pat let out a growl from the bed she was shackled to. "How do you think I slept, you witch!"

"Witch? Witch?" she repeated, her head cocked slightly and laughed. "Talk about the pot calling the kettle black."

Woodward turned to the female guards and instructed them to remove her handcuffs. Another woman brought in a tray with breakfast and set it on a table. While both covered her with tranquilizer guns safely out of reach, Pat climbed out of bed. With eyes full of hate but her mouth shut, she slowly stretched aching muscles, and carefully put on a bathrobe over the underclothes she had slept in. She moved to the table where breakfast was, sat, and started eating without hesitation. She had learned from the last two meals, when her attempts at self-defense caused her meals to be denied her.

Woodward brought a chair around and sat opposite her at the table. "I have a proposition for you."

"This should be interesting," commented Pat caustically.

Woodward ignored her and continued. "We've been rethinking our purpose of holding onto you. Ransom is out -- who's around to pay for you? Blackmail seems to be more realistic, but we have a small snag. There's no point in demanding money in exchange for our silence, since your company will fold in six months at the rate it's going."

Pat's jaw went slack and her eyes grew larger. "How did you find that out?"

Woodward dismissed the exclamation with a wave of her hand. "Doesn't matter. What does matter is that we now want you to keep your company." She paused. "We do, however, have one stipulation: I'll become your silent partner."

Pat bolted straight up out of the chair and yelled, "WHAT?" There was silence, as every weapon was pointed straight at the bronze-haired woman. After a few seconds, she looked around her, raised her hands slowly, and sank back in the chair. "Not a chance," she hissed.

Woodward knew she'd react this way. But, having the upper hand, she could be patient. Still sitting, she motioned for Pat to relax. "Don't answer so quickly, Pat," she continued. "Hear me out. If you return to your company, you'll continue the same practices that resulted in people like Jodie and the others. More lives will be changed, maybe lost. However, if you were to make some ... changes ... in your company, this would be to both our advantages. Your company would continue to run, without Apex as a thorn in your side, and would continue to prosper." She stood and took a couple of steps around the room. "In order to make the right changes, you need someone who is 'in touch' with those who have been harmed in the past. That would be me."

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Pat was silent. Her expression was hard, but contemplative. "It nauseates me to think of you as a partner, but I may have to deal with the devil --" She deliberately paused to emphasize the personal reference to Woodward. " -- in order to keep my company. Let me think about it."

"Fair enough," replied Woodward, nodding. There was no smug grin; she was doing this for the sake of the others. Then she left the room.

Pat finished her breakfast in silence, still under the watchful eyes of a pair of female guards.

"WOAH!" shouted Gumball as the Osprey started feeling the turbulence. "Okay, boys and girls ... welcome to the roller coaster ride ... No standing, and please keep your hands in the car!"

"Need help?" yelled Clark from the passenger area.

"I'll ... let ... you ... know ... thanks!"

The winds shook the Osprey like a raft in the rapids. We'd never felt such shaking, and, even though we were all securely strapped in, we still strained against the straps. All of us in the back were silently praying, both for the ability of the pilot and the airworthiness of the aircraft. The minutes stretched out, and time seemed to slow down. We heard nothing from the cockpit but the music of Gumball's CD; the action film theme seemed to help the matter, masking our concern with fantasy.

Finally, the winds subsided, and the shaking ceased. Moments later, Gumball whooped, "We're clear! And there's the Valley!"

As we burst into the egg-shaped valley, we pressed against the Osprey's windows. The sight was absolutely beautiful, and I said so. It was a little oasis in the middle of the mountain range, hidden for centuries, seen only by a handful of outsiders. It was like discovering the Garden of Eden, pristine in all its majesty.

But then Gumball spotted the serpents in the garden. "Uh oh! We've got trouble," he observed soberly. "I count four aircraft on the ground -- Pat's Osprey, and three helicopters that look military! We could be looking at a small army!"

"I suspected as much," commented Clark with a regretful sigh. "Gumball, take us around the rim a couple of times, then start your approach." He turned to us. "Time to get into position. We'll try to make contact with you as soon as possible."

I looked at Dot and Amy, and tried to sound casual. "Okay, ladies! Let's get wet!"

We'd already donned our wetsuits, becoming familiar in moving about with them, so it was just a matter of adding the SCUBA gear. Clark helped us down into the pod and into position. The red utility light kept away the claustrophobic feelings in the tight enclosure made tighter by the presence of the diving gear.

As each of us vanished below the floor of the Osprey, Clark told us, "God be with you."

"You too," I replied, the last one in.

In the quiet pod, I opened the communications channel in our full-face masks. "Everybody okay?"

"Yes," replied Amy.

"Same here," added Dot. "I just pray I don't have to itch."

I grinned, and turned the communications outward. "Okay, Gumball. Looks like we're good to go."

"Roger that, Perry," he answered, his voice cold and determined. "We're making our final pass. Thirty seconds, more or less."

We felt the Osprey tilt and descend. According to the plan, Clark would move forward into the cockpit and sit next to Gumball during the landing.

I concentrated on my breathing, then suddenly felt Dot's hand near mine. I reached for it, and felt her squeeze my hand twice, deliberately, in our private silent signal for 'I love you.'

"Any second now," reported Gumball. "We're lined up and going down. Good luck, guys."

Luck had nothing to do with this, I thought. Just then we hit the water with a jolt. Prepared as we were, we still bounced around inside the close quarters. I heard Amy give off with a sudden, "Ouch!" but we hit again before I could check on her situation. This jolt was lighter, and settled into a forward rocking motion.

"We're down," announced Gumball. "Deploying -- now!"

The doors on the underside of the pod opened, and we slid smoothly into the water. It was not as cold as I had expected, a welcome feeling, but it was surprising. I quickly descended, moving clear of the plane's wake. As I did, the canisters of anaesthetic gas began rolling free, like depth charges. One bounced off the end of one of the weighted waterproof duffles attached to my belt, then continued downward. The water was clear, and I could see Amy and Dot ahead of me. After a few seconds, I stopped my descent and pivoted to look above me. Only the gentle rippling of the water by the Osprey indicated any movement on the surface. Good, I thought, thanking God for a smooth insertion.

I continued my descent, stopping at the hundred-meter depth. The others were already there. Hovering in the water, we faced one another and quickly checked each other out. Everything was in good shape, as we reported through our communicators. Our rebreathing gear was working flawlessly, showing no telltale trail of bubbles. Our intent was to spend fifteen minutes at this depth, then make a landing at a place on the left of the river as one faced the pyramid.

My concern now turned to Clark and Gumball.

From the clearing near the palace, Woodward and Clayton had watched the approach of the blue plane.

"It's an Osprey, alright, but like no configuration I've seen before," commented Bonnie. "Looks like they're aiming to come ashore at the base of the pyramid."

"This is getting to be a very popular place," added Woodward tiredly. "Friends of Pat?"

"Not a clue."

"Then grab a couple of your best shots, and let's welcome them ashore."

Clayton ran off while Woodward walked towards the lake.

Pat had been allowed to stay unshackled as long as she promised to stay in her room. She agreed, if only to net her some freedom to find a way of escape.

So at the first sound of airplane engines, Pat rushed to her bedroom window.

Her initial response had been elation, knowing that her nemesis cousin was at last where she wanted him. But her joy crashed to the ground as she realized she was no longer in control, but Woodward -- and that turned Pat's stomach like habanero peppers and tequila. If Doc sided with Woodward against her ... she shuddered in fear at the possibilities.

Her eyes turned to the descent of the blue aircraft, and her jaw dropped as she recognized it. "An Osprey?" she exclaimed, her language now punctuated with obscenities. "My blankety-blank cousin got an Osprey? How? And he painted it blue to get on the natives' good side!"

As the plane cruised casually up the river, Pat's hopes sank.

"That's the last of the canisters. Pod bay doors closed," acknowledged Clark. "You ready?"

Gumball gave the bronze man an astonished look. "You're asking me that now?" He smiled. "So where do you want me to come ashore?"

"Let's drop anchor on the far side, there ... to the left of the waterfall."

"Roger," he answered.

As they slowly sailed upriver, Gumball commented, "Your descriptions of this place didn't do it justice, Doc. It's beautiful."

"I won't argue that. Thank God, it hasn't changed much," he added with a smile.

Gumball pointed towards the shore, where the Mayan natives were curiously gathering and watching. "Looks like tourist season has started. Wow -- they're gorgeous!"

"Indeed. Every one a pure Mayan, with no intermarriage with outside races."

They passed rows of impressive stone houses, and could see the detail in architecture. Many of the natives sank to their knees and bowed to the ground as the Osprey passed by. Gumball gawked at the sights, until Clark put a hand on his shoulder, reminding him, "The pyramid?" They slowed and eased precisely towards the pristine white sand of the beach.

"Okay, now what?"

"Now we see who meets us," said Clark, eyeing beyond the shore. "Drop the anchor."

Gumball flipped a switch. "Anchors aweigh!"

There was a slight jerk as the anchor took hold and slowed them to a crawl. A few moments later, mere yards from shore, their momentum halted. The Osprey rocking gently with the waves, Gumball shut down the engines and looked out at the shore. "Here comes our welcoming party," he announced. "And they don't look like natives."

Four women were walking directly towards them, in two rows of two. All were wearing camouflage clothing and carried holstered weapons, and the two in the rear carried automatic weapons at the ready. Of the two in the lead, one was a black woman with a determined walk, and the other was of amazonian height and build. The natives gave the women a wide berth, Clark noted, and appeared to be frightened at their presence.

"I don't see Pat or Monja," commented Clark, inserting one of the tiny transceivers into his ear. "There may be more going on here than we are aware of. I'll open the door and make my appearance first. We'll keep in touch with the transceivers."

"Sure thing," replied Gumball, adjusting his transceiver. "Be careful."

Clark moved back to the door and slowly swung it open. He stood in the doorway for a moment, then dropped into the shallow water and waded onto shore. "Read me?" he said softly.

"Loud and clear," came the answer.

As he shook the water from his boots, the welcoming party reached him, and the black woman in the lead spoke first, "Who are you, and what is your business here?"

First conclusion, he thought, is that this one's not supporting Pat, otherwise she would've acknowledged me as who I am. Interesting.

Thinking quickly, he put on his best used-car-salesman smile and stepped forward with an outstretched hand.

"The name's Dent, ma'am -- Clark Dent. I'm a trader to these people. And, as you can see, I'm also unarmed. Now who might you be?"

"Woodward," she said coldly. "I'm the military government of this valley. What is it you trade, Clark Dent?"

Clark didn't hesitate. "Services, mostly. Medical needs, technological skills." His outstretched hand was still alone, so he withdrew it. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am. Will you allow my pilot and I to come ashore?"

She looked him over, maintaining an intimidating silence. The women accompanying her were just as stoic. A moment later, Woodward replied, "Permission granted."

Clark turned to the Osprey and waved.

"Okay, Doc," said Gumball through the transceiver. "You want me to activate the on-board security?"

Clark shook his head briefly, no.

"Okay," answered Gumball. "Here I come."

The tall pilot walked from the aircraft to the shore, and stood at Clark's side.

"This is my pilot," said Clark.

"Call me Gumball," he added.

Woodward turned to the amazonian brunette and ordered, "Search the plane."

Without hesitation, the three who had accompanied the black woman waded into the water and climbed into the Osprey. After a few minutes, the tall one called back, "It's clean."

Woodward turned to Clark. "Services, huh," she mumbled, suspiciously.

The three returned to the shore and the tall one -- they overheard the name Clayton -- took Woodward offside. Clark was able to read their lips, and knew they were conferring about what to do with him and Gumball.

WOODWARD: "I don't trust those two. It's just too convenient for them to show up at this time, and in an Osprey no less."

CLAYTON: "You think they're here because of Pat?"

WOODWARD: "Possibly. Either way, we need to find a place to hold them."

CLAYTON: "There's a place about a half mile from the palace. The natives call it the Island of Shame. I checked it out yesterday, and it's just what you're looking for."

WOODWARD: "Good."

They returned to where Clark and Gumball stood. Her expression was hard. "Until we can confirm your story, you will be placed in protective custody. Any resistance, and my people will shoot you. Is that understood?"

"Certainly, ma'am," replied Clark. "Although I'm confused. We're just here to help these people. Will you let us help them?"

"In time, Mr. Dent. For now, come with us. Your aircraft will be safe."

They both nodded and went with their welcoming party, to a clearing with an island only a few yards wide surrounded by a water-filled channel. They crossed the moat using a sturdy plank, which was removed once they were across.

Clayton talked to Woodward offside, resulting in a loud explosive laugh from the black woman. Clark, reading their lips, reacted with only a raised eyebrow.

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The welcoming party marched off, and Gumball looked around the area with amusement. "This is their holding cell? Heck, I could broadjump this moat easy."

Clark replied sternly, "I wouldn't." He pointed at the edges. "Look closely. There's sand on both sides of the moat. Makes it hard to push off on this side, and hard to land on the other side without falling backwards."

Gumball wasn't impressed. "So? What's to stop us from wading through it? Can't be more than a couple'a feet deep."

"Did they ever teach you about poisonous snakes in the military?" asked Clark nonchalantly.

"Survival course during Basic Training, and two semesters of marine biology in college. Why?"

Clark pointed at the moat. "Look closely."

Gumball warily edged towards the water and peered down. All of a sudden his eyes got large and he backpedaled several feet. He hit a soft spot in the sand and fell onto his backside. "Holy cow!" he exclaimed. "I've never seen so many different species of poisonous sea life before!"

"She called this the Island of Shame," said Clark as he helped Gumball back to his feet. "Now I can understand why. Very practical."

The pilot dusted the sand from his pants. "Okay, so we're stuck. How do we get unstuck?"

"Right now I don't believe that's important," answered Clark, looking around and walking over to a clean patch of ground. "They have us under a microscope." He lowered himself into a cross-legged seated position and looked up at Gumball. "So we wait and see. Join me?"

The pilot gave Clark an impatient look, then shrugged and flopped down on the sand near him. "I hope they're doing okay," he said softly.

Clark turned his eyes to the heavens and replied under his breath, "So do I."

While Dot and Amy held onto my duffles, I made my way to the surface.

My head just above the water, I scanned the area. Thank God! We were well clear of the village -- it was more the size of a small town -- and closer than we had hoped to our intended beachhead. Submerging, I joined the others and guided them to the shore. One by one we cautiously left the water and regrouped a dozen yards inland. Once we synchronized our ARTIE units to our location, we moved deeper into the jungle and set up a camp site a mile from the river.

I thanked God for the Paradox wet suits, especially after a couple of reptiles tried to get familiar with Dot and Amy. Our special survival knives took care of them, as well as clearing some of the foliage away from our campsite.

Amy set up a hypersonic repeller that would guarantee a twenty yard radius clear of pests and other critters, and a heat sensor that would alert us if anything with a human body temperature got within a hundred yards of our little hideaway.

"Okay, the perimeter's safe," she announced. "We can breathe now."

Dot and I released a simultaneous sigh. "Thanks, Amy," I said, and started opening my duffles.

The first thing I unpacked were the three transceivers that would keep us in touch with Clark and Gumball. I put mine in my ear as I handed the box to Dot.

"Perry to Clark ... do you read me?"

"Yes, Perry," acknowledged Clark. "I read you. Is everyone okay?"

"Yes, we're fine." I gave our position relative to the pyramid. "We've set up camp within a mile of shore. How about you ... what's your situation?"

"It appears that things have changed since our first contact. The additional aircraft we observed in our approach are not associated with Pat, but seem to be a paramilitary force that has taken control of the Valley. The leader is a woman by the name of Woodward, and from what we've seen, their entire force is comprised of women. We've neither seen nor heard anything from Pat or Monja since our arrival, and currently we're in an area called the Island of Shame, under 'protective custody'. We've told them we're traders to the area, but I rather doubt that they believe us. So, right now, we're waiting to see what you find out."

"Yeah," added Gumball. "Like Clark put it, we're under a microscope. And how! We can be watched from several angles, including the palace."

"Are you sure it's safe to talk?" I cautioned.

"We're free to talk as long as we're not being directly observed," said Clark. "And if we give the appearance we are communicating between ourselves and not with outside parties. For the moment I would suggest you remain where you are until we can discern more about these people."

"Agreed. We'll need the time to determine a route to reach you without being discovered."

"Good. Clark out."

As the morning sun crept overhead, the two men passed the time by examining their surroundings and exchanging information. Clark identified the palace, and both of them watched the activity on the second floor. At one point they saw an exchange between Woodward and a dark-haired woman, then with someone in the room next to it. They observed the movements of the female soldiers who patrolled the area, and noted the weaknesses in their actions.

Sometime after noon, they were visited by Woodward and a couple of her soldiers. The amazonian lieutenant wasn't with her.

She stood there on the outside edge of the moat, silently looking him over for many moments. Then she spoke with slow deliberation. "You ... are ... Doc ... Savage."

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Clark had anticipated this sooner or later, but his countenance remained firm. He calmly denied her statement, and tried to argue the point, but the black woman held up a hand and exploded, "No, that's crap! You're him! I don't know how you look so young, but since your cousin's on some Fountain of Youth drug, anything's possible!" She paused. "By the way, it was Queen Monja who finally spilled the beans and identified you!" She glared at him. "And don't even think about conning me, or you'll never get off that island!"

Clark paused, his face impassive, and their eyes met. "You are correct. I am Clark Savage, Jr. And may I assume you're the leader of the group they call Apex?"

"Good guess, boy scout," said Woodward, her eyes narrowed.

"Apart from taking my cousin captive, why are you here?"

She looked at him and tried to read through the bronze mask. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Obviously not."

She took a deep breath. "Your cousin, apart from deceiving the world through her duplicity, has perpetrated numerous atrocities through her company. If you would like a few flesh-and-blood examples, I can introduce you to them personally. We followed her here in order to have an opportunity to bring her face-to-face with her actions."

"I assume you've done that by now?"

"Yeah. We did."

Clark looked at her and stated, "There's more."

She nodded. "We know her secret. We plan to use that knowledge to force her to make changes to her company."

"Will you free her once she agrees to this?"

Woodward paused, suddenly realizing how open and honest she was being with this man. And it concerned her. Perhaps it was the legend behind the man, or his imposing stature, or something she couldn't put her finger on. She had no reason to answer his question, but she did. "I don't know yet. There's no guarantee that she'll comply if we do. Until we get that guarantee, we can't let her go."

Just then the amazonian Clayton, calling Woodward's name, ran to her side and pulled the black woman away, out of earshot. As Clark read their lips, he suddenly moved his hand to his ear and released a sharp cough. "Your attention please!" he said softly but forcefully. Then he relayed the information along the transceiver's path.

"There is a problem ... one of Woodward's soldiers named Janie has escaped from a special confinement ... she persuaded her guard to untie her so she could relieve herself, then overcame the guard ... injured her rather severely ... and fled into the jungle ... 'she has a pistol and some grenades' ... Woodward is ordering a search party to go after her ... 'take her alive if possible, kill her if you're attacked'."

"One of their own?" commented Gumball softly.

Seeing Woodward walking back towards the island, Clark suddenly said, "Stand by!"

The black woman's face betrayed her concern, and she did her best to hold it in.

"Nothing wrong, I trust?" asked Clark naively.

"None of your business!" she snapped. They could see that this latest development had disturbed the unflappable black woman. Maintaining an even countenance, she stood silently for a moment to compose herself. Then she looked at Clark. "I'm curious about something. I found out that Pat used some sorta drug on her and on Monja. Is that what happened to you?"

Clark thought a moment, noting the detail about the silphium being used on Monja. He wondered for a moment if that was the dark-haired woman he saw in the second floor window of the palace. If this were so ... he needed to talk to her.

But Woodward needed an answer. "It's a little complicated," he replied vaguely.

"I'm a scientist," she affirmed impatiently. "Try me."

He looked at her and nodded. "Very well. Fifty years ago, I was rendered unconscious by an enemy, then placed into a form of suspended animation. I awoke only last year."

The black woman's interest was peaking. "Cryogenics? Freezing? Stasis?"

"I'm not certain of the method. As I said, I was unconscious when it happened to me, and, since the breaking of the mechanism is what freed me, I was unable to analyze it. But I would surmise some variation of cryogenics."

"Amazing!" said the scientist within her. She paced a few steps outside of the Island, taking an occasional glance back at the unmoving bronze man. Then, without warning, she spun on her heel and swiftly walked away.

Gumball had been sitting on the far side of the island during their exchange. Now he came close and spoke. "I know you didn't have much of a choice but to tell her the truth, Doc. I just hope it doesn't backfire on us."

"As do I," he replied. "Perry, did you all hear that?"

The preacher's voice echoed softly in their ears. "We all did, loud and clear."

"It looks like we're going to be having company soon," added Dot.

"Unfortunately," concluded Clark. "Can you find a safe place to hide?"

"I doubt it. Our best bet is to keep going and pray that God blinds their eyes from finding us."

"Very well. I'll be praying for you. Keep us posted."

"Gotcha. Perry out."

Maneuvering through the jungle growth was a pain. Our inexperience was beginning to show in spite of the 'special compensations' provided by Drake & Company. The waterproof duffles were resting within lightweight titanium frames on our backs, distributing the loads sufficiently.

The greatest obstacle was the jungle itself. We didn't dare use the established paths by day for fear of discovery, so we cautiously cleared a trail using special high carbon steel bush knives.

We'd been at it for a few hours, and were preparing to make a rest stop in a small natural clearing, when we suddenly came face-to-face with the subject of Woodward's search.

To call her a madwoman would've been an understatement. Her eyes were wide with insanity, and her Tom Peterson-style buzz cut was slicked down with sweat and dirt. She had scratches over her bare arms, and blood showed where her clothes had been torn, but she was oblivious to it all. Oddly, the preacher in me couldn't help comparing her to the woman mentioned in the gospels, the one possessed with many demons.

But that one wasn't packing an automatic.

We were sitting ducks, weary from hiking through the jungle, our packs slowing us down. We barely had time to scatter when she let out an animal-like half-growl, half-scream, and opened fire on us.

I heard the shots, and felt something hit my leg. Losing my balance, I fell in a clumsy tumble to the ground. Smacking the quick-release buckle with my palm, my pack fell free and allowed me to assess the situation.

Dot was to my right. She had also ditched her pack and -- closest to our assailant -- was going on the offense. Amy was behind us, trying to free herself from a stubborn buckle.

I looked back to Dot as she closed in on the armed woman, and thought I recognized an odd hesitation in her approach. However, reflex took over as the gun leveled on her chest. With an easy high sweeping kick, she knocked the gun into the bushes and sent Janie sprawling backwards onto the ground. As she landed, the contents of her bag emptied around her, and she grabbed one.

"Oh God!" I breathed at the sight of the hand grenades, and scrambled for the superfirer in my pack.

I reached my pack and looked over my shoulder just in time to see Janie toss one of the grenades at my wife.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl, and I was powerless to do anything but watch and pray as the explosive rolled over and over.

As it passed too high and too fast to endanger Dot, I breathed a sigh of relief -- cut off abruptly as I saw just where the explosive was going to land ... less than a dozen feet from Amy.

She'd also come to the same conclusion, and was quickly trying to scramble clear.

She didn't make it.

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The concussion from the blast flattened me against the ground, and I heard a crunching thud to my right a moment later. Looking back, I saw Amy's limp body slumped across some bushes.

Praying fiercely, I rushed to her side.

Now was NOT the time for a personal crisis, decided Dot to herself.

But there SHE was.

GI Jane.

Everything about this crazy lady -- her clothes, her hair style, her attitude, and even her name -- reminded Dot of that seedy smoke-filled bar in San Francisco, where she came disturbingly close to killing the other 'Janie'.

Dot was trying not to admit it, but she was scared. Scared of her own capabilities. She'd vowed to God that she'd never again allow herself to become such a berserker, that she'd always be able to control her inner animal.

But then the grenade exploded, and Amy was tossed by the blast. Dot's eyes went blood red with rage as she looked at the originator of the grenade. Screaming an obscenity, she leapt upon the camouflage-clad terrorist without a second thought.

Straddling Janie's midsection, Dot struck out repeatedly, feeling no pain in her fists as they collided with flesh and bone. At that moment, one single thought kept going through her mind ...

Destroy.

Amy was alive, but unconscious. The Paradox wetsuit seemed to have absorbed a fair portion of the blast, thank God. And she didn't appear to have any broken bones.

I looked up from my examination long enough to see what was going on with Dot. My wife was straddling the chest of the woman Janie, and I could see her arms flailing down in a wild rhythm.

Without hesitation I yelled, "DOT! NO!"

My yell had the effect of a slap to the face of a hysterical person, bringing her out of her rage long enough to see what she was doing. She jumped back from Janie as if touched by a high-voltage power line, and staggered back a few steps.

I called her name, and she turned to face me. The look on her face was pure horror. I called her name again, and she moved woodenly over to Amy's other side, dropping to her knees.

"Is ... she ... ?" she asked, her voice quavering.

I nodded. "She's alive. The Paradox took the brunt of the concussion. No telling how she is inside, though." I looked into her shocked eyes and probed compassionately, "How are you?"

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. As she saw the blood on her hands, she began sobbing uncontrollably. I reached across Amy and shook her shoulder. "Dot, come out of it! Please!"

Just then a shadow crossed Amy's body, followed by several more. Groaning within myself, I looked up into the faces of several Mayan natives. They were armed with short knives and farming implements, and the expressions on their faces told me they weren't heading out to harvest.

I dropped my head and sighed, "Oh, God."

Chapter Twelve

Dot and I were tied up in a corner of the Mayan residence. I looked again to see how my wife was doing, and my heart sank to see that she was still locked in her earlier depression.

In another part of the room, not far away, Amy was laid out on a low stone slab covered with a homemade mattress. Her wet suit had been removed and had been set aside in another corner, along with the rest of our gear. She still seemed to be unconscious, but I took comfort seeing the steady rise and fall of her chest under the blanket that covered her. A couple of the natives, a man and a woman, were at her side; they probed with practiced fingers, as concerned with her condition as I was.

Janie wasn't with us. As we were being taken away, I'd caught a glance at our ambusher, and saw her breathing and stirring. With no little relief I concluded that Dot had not injured her severely. Yet, for some reason, our captors had ignored her when taking us back to the house on the outskirts of the village. I hated to admit I was glad for that, but there were other matters more important to me at the moment.

Our fate, for one.

The natives that had captured us came into the room. Along with them was an older man. He moved slowly, and there was an air of dignity about him. The others pointed to us as they talked.

Drawing upon what Mayan I'd learned from Clark during our 'road trip' last year, I strained to understand what they were saying. After a few minutes I was able to make out several words, then complete phrases.

"They are enemies and must be killed!" said a tall youth, angrily waving a fist at us.

"No, Tenneca," calmly replied the older man, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Observe. The ones who invaded our land were all women, wearing the same kind of clothing." He gestured at me and Dot. "These three are different. Two are women, but one is a man, and their clothing is not like the others'."

"But how could they get here if they did not arrive with the invaders?" asked another.

"Have you asked them?" replied the older man. "They have no reason to deceive, since they are your prisoners and you are caring after one of their own. Remember, repay not evil with evil, but repay evil with good. It will be as burning coals upon their heads."

My eyes went wide, and my jaw dropped. Had I heard him correctly? I continued listening in.

"Please, sir," pleaded another. "We can use these three to force the others to surrender."

The old man shook his head slowly. "No, Grey Bird. That would be wrong. We are told to pray for those who would oppress us."

This was incredible! I hoped I wasn't misinterpreting their language. I couldn't hold back. It took a few minutes to plan what I wanted to say, then translate it into Mayan. Finally, I took a deep breath and spoke.

"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of the Most High God."

Time froze.

After the initial shocked gasps, every head turned in my direction. Knowing that I now had their attention, I continued.

"You have heard it spoken, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That you do not resist evil: but whoever shall hit you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man takes you before the authorities and takes away your coat, let him have your cape also. And whoever shall force you to go a mile, go with him two."

The silence was unbelievable. All eyes were fastened on me. I returned their gaze, then -- just to let them know I had spoken correctly -- I repeated my words to them.

The older man walked over and bent slightly to look down on me. "You have spoken the sacred words of Jesus the Christ, and in the tongue of our people. How do you do this, stranger?"

I smiled. "Your sacred words are my sacred words. They are written on my heart ... 'written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.'" I paused and played my next card. "And I was taught your language by my friend ... Doc Savage." I paused again. "Please forgive me if my words falter; I haven't spoken your language in some time."

I could see that my statement had made an impression on them all. I could hear excited voices talking too fast for me to understand, but not too fast to make out words like 'devil' or 'demon.' But I continued to fix my eyes on the elder Mayan's.

After a moment, his eyes narrowed and he stood erect. He returned to the others and spoke in hushed tones I could not hear. I prayed as they exchanged words. Finally, he walked back to me, accompanied by two others. In their hands were our own special bush knives! I prepared myself for the worst, feeling that I had failed all my friends.

The two natives took my arms and lifted me to my feet. I took a deep breath as I felt pressure near my wrists, and then the pressure released as the ropes binding me were severed. I exhaled with relief, softly thanking God.

As the two natives freed Dot, the old man took my hands and addressed me. "My name is John Blue Corn. I am the keeper of the sacred short wave radio by which Doc Savage speaks to the Valley. Forgive us if we have harmed you."

I smiled. "My name is Perry. My wife is Dot. The other woman is Amy. How is she?"

"She will live. We have given her some herbs that will help her heal. She is resting now."

"Is there damage inside?" My hands indicated vital organs.

He shook his head. "No. It is truly amazing, considering how purple her skin is. But there does not seem to be any damage inside."

"How did you come to know Jesus the Christ?" I asked, using his phrase.

"Many years ago, in the time of the father of Doc Savage, there was a man who brought with him the word of God. While the father of Doc Savage taught our people medicine and hygiene, the other man taught us about the saving grace of Jesus the Christ. They left a book with Chaac the King, which was the word of God. Through the years, we have copied the book over and over, so many of us now have the word in our homes."

He walked over to a table and opened a large hand-bound book with a delicately-crafted solid gold cover. Although I could not read the words, I was awestruck to know that it was an authentic hand-copied Bible, that had probably led many Mayans to Christ. I touched the book, and the book touched my heart. My eyes misted over.

"Yes. You do understand," said John Blue Corn. "You are one of us."

My attention turned next to Dot. She hadn't moved much during our exchange. Something about the fight with Janie had messed her up bad. I went over to her and put my arms around her, drawing her close. She melted right into my arms and held onto me as if her life depended on it, as I interceded in prayer for her.

Finally her head raised and she looked into my eyes.

"It was ... GI Jane ... all over ... again," she said softly, and started crying.

I remembered the two incidents with the gang member, the first one with Dot and I together, then the second with just Dot and Jane ... "Oh God," I mumbled under my breath at the conclusion. I held her closer and tried to comfort. "It's okay."

"It's not okay!" she countered, anger and frustration in her voice. "I promised I'd never do that again, never let things get so out of hand that ... " Her voice faded out.

I tried to look her in the eyes, but she avoided my gaze. "Dot ... it's okay. You promised you'd never do that again, and yet you did. We all make promises like that. I have, many times. God knows we're too weak to do it without Him, and he lets us make the promises just to show us how much we need Him to fulfill those promises. It's okay. God understands, and I understand." I allowed that to sink in, and waited for a response. "If our positions had been reversed when the grenade went off, it might've been me who'd have tried to kill her. But it wasn't. You can't let this to drag you down, hon. I NEED you ... they need you. Amy needs you. She's bruised and hurting, but she'll be okay. And she needs you at her side."

I felt Dot move in my arms, and she looked up at me. Her face was tortured, drained. Her breathing came in spontaneous gasps, as if her mind was cycling through the procedures on basic respiration.

"Do you want to help them? Do you want to be past this?" She nodded weakly. "Will you pray with me?" She nodded again. I held her tight and prayed, while several Mayan natives looked on. They heard the name Jesus spoken in a language unlike their own, and two moved closer. They bowed their heads, as they agreed with the intent of a prayer they didn't know the words to.

Somewhere in the midst of things, I felt Dot's shallow breathing turn into a sudden deep breath, her body sucking in air as if the spiritual chains around her had been suddenly blasted apart. She breathed deeply, exhaling in a sigh and softly thanking God.

I finished the prayer and Dot softly cried on my shoulder. I held her for a few more minutes, and the two natives that had joined us in prayer moved in closer and put their hands on her shoulders to offer comfort. She looked at them, at their wonderfully calm smiling faces, and a smile came to her well.

I told them, "Thank you." Then I explained to Dot what had happened, that these natives were not strangers, but brethren. And that everything would be all right.

Another native brought a cup with some steaming liquid in it, and offered it to Dot. The smell was nice. After a moment or two, she released her arms around me and took the cup with a nod of thanks. As she sampled it, she smiled. "It's good. Thanks." I translated the words to the native, who smiled and moved away.

"Clark!" I suddenly exclaimed. "I gotta talk to Clark! He's probably worried sick about us! Are you going to be all right?"

She smiled and kissed me lightly. "Yes. Thanks."

I moved over to the corner where our gear was, finding the boxes where our transceivers were. I put my color-coded one in my ear and switched it on.

"Perry to Clark, Perry to Clark!" I said excitedly, my hand by my ear. "Do you read me?"

The response was immediate. "Yes, Perry! Are you all right?"

I smiled and exhaled, relaxing. "Yes, more or less. We were ambushed."

"The woman they were searching for?"

Subconsciously I nodded. "Yes. We're shaken but not out. Amy got hurt, but ... she's going to be all right. She's resting now."

"The woman ...," his voice was sober as he informed me: "Perry, she's dead."

My breathing slowed and I felt the blood drain from my face. My eyes reflexively looked to my wife as I whispered, "How?"

"It appears that the search party found her beaten up in the jungle. They attributed it to the natives. When she came to, she panicked and ran, grabbing a grenade for defense. Someone in the search party fired a tranquilizer dart at her, and she dropped the grenade. Apparently the pin had been pulled. It killed her instantly."

I sighed with relief that Dot had not been the cause of her death, then felt guilty that I didn't have more compassion for the other woman. "Thanks for telling me."

"What happened? Where are you?"

I lowered my head and smiled to myself, and tried to summarize the last couple of hours. "It's a long story. Like I said, we ran into the woman in the jungle, and she took a couple of potshots at us -- praise God for the Paradox suits! Anyhow, Dot moved in and knocked her gun away, but she tossed a grenade in our direction." I paused. "Amy took the brunt of the blast, Clark. I rushed to Amy's side while Dot fought Janie. After the fight, we were captured by several of the natives -- did I ever thank you for teaching me Mayan?" I grinned and continued. "Everything's okay now. They're on our side. And get this: these natives are Christians."

"What?" said Clark, incredulously. "How?"

"Your father," I replied, then continued before Clark could respond. "When he first came to the Valley, there was a Christian in his group, and they left a Bible with King Chaac. They've been studying it since, and I can't even begin to guess how many have come to Christ because of it." I paused to let that sink in.

"From my father's group?" he repeated, and I could hear the change in his voice. "Are you sure?"

"You can read Mayan, right?"

"Yes."

"Then I can show you a hand-copied Bible translated into Mayan."

There was silence in my ear.

I continued. "Like I said, Amy's going to be sore, but she's alive thanks to those Paradox outfits. We're in the house of a John Blue Corn, and they're taking good care of us. They've given Amy something to help her heal, and she's resting nicely." I paused and summarized. "For the moment, it looks like we're guests here. And they've recognized us as brethren."

Clark's voice was excited. "That's excellent, Perry!"

"What about you?" I inquired.

"No change. Gumball's taking a nap. Go ahead and stay where you are. And keep your transceiver on."

"Agreed. I'll turn it down so I don't drive you crazy, but I might need some advanced tutelage in the Mayan language." I grinned.

"Anytime," answered Clark.

"Perry out." I removed the transceiver and adjusted the tiny controls. Then I put it back in my ear and went over to Dot. I held her close, but didn't tell her of Janie's fate.

In the open courtyard outside the palace, standing next to the twin-rotored Chinook, Jill Woodward and Bonnie Clayton talked about what had happened.

"Face it, Jill," explained Clayton. "There was no way we could tell she'd pulled the pin. When we found her, she looked half beat to death. I had Marcy wake her up while the rest of us covered her. When she came out of it, she let out a scream, swatted Marcy away like she was nothin', and ran. We all started

shootin' at her -- no telling whose dart caused her to drop the grenade. We all bailed when we saw it fall out of her hand." She shook her head. "After the dirt settled, we found her. We figure the blast killed her instantly."

Staring off at the high mountain walls, Woodward sighed heavily. "She was a good fighter. A loose cannon, but a good fighter." She paused. "Y'know, it's ironic. She was an explosives expert, and explosives finally did her in."

"She who lives by the sword dies by the sword," paraphrased Clayton. "But where does that leave us?"

Before Woodward could speak, one of their uniformed troops approached and addressed them. "Excuse me, ma'am. The queen is requesting to talk with the big guy on the island."

After a moment, the black woman nodded. "Sure, why not? But no physical contact: she stays off the island. And have a guard on each of them, just in case they try something funny." She waved her hand to indicate she was done.

"Yes, sir," replied the soldier, quickly walking away.

Clark was pondering over the facts that Perry had given him regarding the influence his father had in the spiritual revival of the Valley of the Vanished. Gumball was still stretched out on the sand, sleeping.

His eyes turned towards a trio of women approaching, a dark-haired Mayan woman accompanied by two of Woodward's troops.

Although he could hardly believe it, Clark knew the identity of the dark-haired woman while they were still a distance away, and the fragment of conversation with Woodward came to mind.

"Monja?" he whispered, amazed, and his heart leapt within his chest.

They stopped at the clearing, and Monja stepped closer to the outside edge of the moat. The two others moved a respectful distance away while keeping a wary eye on them.

Clark spoke first. "Monja? It IS you."

She smiled. "Yes, Doc."

"It appears time has stopped for us both."

"Yes. Pat has told me many things about you. Are you well?"

"As well as can be expected," he dismissed. "My cousin's responsible for this change in you?"

She smiled and nodded. A smooth hand reached up and touched the dark hair. "Yes. Two days ago, she gave me some of what keeps her young. This change came by morning."

His eyebrows raised. "Amazing."

"And what has kept you so young?" she inquired.

"Many years ago, one of my enemies knocked me out and placed me in suspended animation, a type of sleep where you don't grow old. That was fifty years ago. I awoke only last year."

Monja was quiet. "You do not sound like how Pat has described you."

"I'm not surprised. She put you up to cutting off the gold and bringing me here?"

"Yes."

"I have to thank her someday," he said quietly.

Monja suddenly said, "Pat told me that you tried to take over your country ... that you killed your friend Monk!"

"I did what?" exclaimed Clark. "That is not true, Monja! I have done nothing of the sort, and Monk is very much alive." He nudged Gumball's sleeping form, and spoke his name.

The pilot stirred. "Is it dinnertime yet?"

"Gumball!" he repeated, this time a bit sharper and louder.

Realizing they weren't alone, he sat up with a start and apologized, "Oh, sorry, Doc! Didn't know we had company!" He addressed his attention to Monja. "Afternoon, ma'am!"

"Gumball, this is Queen Monja," he introduced. "Would you please tell her your name and how we know one another?"

"Well, sure." Getting to his feet, he offered a tilt of the head and said, "My name is Clark Mayfair, but folks usually call me Gumball. My dad's Monk Mayfair, and I'm the pilot of the plane that brought Doc here."

"And where is your dad?"

"Well, I'd hope he'd probably be home by now ... back in Oklahoma, with my mom."

"Is he ... alive?" asked Clark deliberately.

"What kinda question is that?" responded Gumball with an offended look. "Of course he's alive! We left him back in Florida just before we came here, just as cantankerous as ever. Why?"

Clark didn't respond, but instead turned back to Monja. "Do you believe me now?"

Her face was slightly flushed, her cheeks red. "She deceived me," she said softly. "In order to get to you, she deceived me. I am so sorry, Doc. Please, please, forgive me."

Clark smiled. "I do forgive you. What can you tell me about these others?"

She briefly looked over her shoulder at their two escorts. "Not much," she said softly. Then she summarized their appearance, attack, threats, and presence in the Valley. "Apart from those who fell in the beginning, none of my people have been harmed. I suspect they, too, have been deceived."

He shifted to Mayan, making it appear as if he were coughing. "Do not let on. We have a plan to liberate the Valley. We are waiting for the right time. Have hope."

She smiled. "I am glad that you are here."

One of the women escorting her came down. "That's enough for now, ma'am. Let's go."

Clark and Monja's eyes met and exchanged brief thoughts and emotions. "Thank you for visiting us. We hope to be free soon," said Clark.

"I will do what I can," replied Monja. "Goodbye."

As they walked back up towards the palace, Clark moved closer to Gumball. "Perry ... did you hear that?"

"Loud and clear," came the response to their transceivers. "Looks like the home team is back on our side, praise God. I also caught your little Mayan postscript." There was a moment of silence. "Why didn't you tell her you were a Christian?"

"I didn't want to give the impression that I was using it to gain her favor." He paused. "Talk to you later."

"Sure. Perry out."

Chapter Thirteen

We had to move.

We weren't ready, but we knew it was necessary. In order for the plan -- such as it was -- to work, we needed to get closer to where Clark and Gumball were, in order to free them when the time came.

So we moved.

It wasn't easy. But, like the song goes, we got by with a little help from our friends. In broad daylight, practically under the noses of Woodward's troops, we relocated our gear and ourselves from the house we first were taken to, to the house of John Blue Corn. Several Mayans -- male and female -- either carried, covered, or acted as lookout, as we made our way through this vast village.

As we shifted, I kept a close watch on Dot and Amy.

Dot had finally broken through her depression. When I at last told her about Janie's fate, she cried for the lost soul of the woman, and acknowledged that she'd forgiven herself for that which God had already forgiven her for. We prayed that Janie's death would be the last one during this mission.

Amy was recovering nicely from her injuries, mostly due to antibiotics and pain relievers, Mayan homeopathic treatments, and her own stubborn determination.

When we moved, she refused to be carried, citing the attention it would generate. So she walked with us, slowly but steadily. Her acknowledgment of fatigue, and her willingness to rest, showed that her pride had not overshadowed her wisdom.

Once we had settled in at the new location, and made sure our gear was ready, Amy napped while John Blue Corn's youngest son Harvest Moon gave Dot and I took a tour of our surroundings. Barely into his teens, he was well educated and quite helpful.

Our Paradox wetsuits felt a bit uncomfortable under the native clothing, but we felt more secure with it than without it.

It was easy to spot the various aircraft. They stuck out like beacons in the wilderness. Gumball's Osprey was safely moored below the pyramid. Pat's Osprey and one of the twin-rotored Chinooks flanked the golden pyramid. The other Chinook was slightly settled into the turf of the plain alongside the palace, and the smaller Huey helicopter had been parked expertly in a clearing within the village itself. Each of Woodward's helicopters were guarded by female warriors with hard expressions and suspicious eyes.

We cautiously made our way past Woodward's patrols, to the Island of Shame, where we understood how it got its name. It was good to see Clark and Gumball again, even though we had to pretend we were natives with only a passing curiosity in the strangers. Using the transceivers we exchanged information and well wishes. Then we had to move on.

Returning to John Blue Corn's home, I was met with a marvelous surprise.

"Perry," the elder Mayan asked. "It would honor my house if you would speak to some of us about Jesus the Christ."

I paused, amazed. "You want me to preach?"

He nodded, smiling.

I was stunned. I was being given the opportunity to preach the word of God before Mayan natives converted to Christianity, very possibly the first outsider to ever do so. A lump rose in my throat as I felt so totally unworthy. "I-I would be most honored," I stammered. "However, since my Mayan is not as good as I would like it to be, I request someone to translate my English into your language."

"With your permission, I will give than honor to my grandson."

I reached out, and we clasped forearms. "Thank you," I said.

For several moments after John Blue Corn had walked away, I stood leaning against the wall with a dazed look in my eyes. Finally, Dot walked over to check me out.

"Hon, are you okay?" she inquired.

"Sure," I said, and my lips curled up into a silly grin. "He asked me to talk to them about Jesus. They want me to preach."

"Woah!" she replied, giving me a hug. "Praise the Lord!"

John Blue Corn had made me believe that I'd be speaking before only a small group, twenty at best. So when I watched twenty grow to over a hundred, I was overwhelmed. I was concerned that such a crowd might be discovered by Woodward, but I put faith ahead of fear and trust in the one I was going to be speaking on.

I spent some time preparing in prayer, and, sometime after dark, stood in the main room of John Blue Corn's home while people crowded just about every square inch of floor space, eager Mayan faces all directed at me.

Dot and Amy sat on a couch-like mat, and I could see the pride in their faces. Clark was also listening in via the transceiver; I later found out that Gumball had been tuned in to me as well.

For the most part, many of those around me were saved, and had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The ones who really needed to hear the message of salvation were the ones outside, with the guns.

My message, therefore, was one of encouragement and uplifting. I spoke of the promises, that no earthly weapon could prosper against our spiritual selves, that those who have given themselves to Jesus Christ are God's whether they live or die. I reminded them that God was with them, and would deliver them, as he had delivered his people time after time after time, in sometimes miraculous ways, from their enemies. I encouraged them to continue fighting the good fight of faith, and to stand firm in the power of God.

John Blue Corn's grandson was an excellent interpreter, and he followed my words precisely and with enthusiasm.

The response to my invitation for prayer was astounding. When asked if anyone needed prayer for the time to come, that they could stand and still stand, virtually every hand in the room went up. Feeling that same old glow like I used to have when getting a good altar call response at the Mission, I led them all in prayer.

As the crowd slowly dispersed, I was approached with thanks, handshakes, and embraces from just about everyone. I appreciated their words, but gave the glory to God, hardly remembering what I had preached - a good sign that God had been the one doing the preaching through me, the willing vessel.

Afterward I sat next to Dot and Amy and sighed.

"Good job, hon," commented Dot. "I think you've got a fan club." She grinned at me, and rested her head on my shoulder.

All I could do was grin back and say, "Praise the Lord."

Clark stirred at the rustling from the jungle beyond them. Peering into the darkness, he saw someone approaching. A few moments later, an old man walked cautiously into the clearing.

"You are he," said the old man in Mayan. He sank to his knees and bowed before Clark. "I am your humble servant."

"Rise," replied Clark in fluent Mayan. "I am but a man."

The man slowly got to his feet, but kept his head lowered.

"What is your name?" asked Clark.

"I am John Blue Corn, honored one."

"You're the one who's helped my friends. I am grateful."

"No, it is I who gives thanks to be able to help them."

"Why do you come here, John Blue Corn?"

"I have come ... begging your forgiveness, honored one."

"For what?" asked Clark, quizzically.

"I am the keeper of the sacred short wave radio, sir. It was I who received your call ... and deceived you."

Clark smiled and spoke compassionately. "Look at me, John Blue Corn. Look at me."

The old man lifted his head.

"I recall your voice now. Who instructed you to give me the words you spoke?"

"Monja the Queen, and the woman who came in the other flying craft. The one who calls herself Savage."

"Pat," said Clark quietly. "So you were relaying the words you were given, is that not right?"

"Yes." His head lowered again. "I beg your forgiveness."

"I forgive you, John Blue Corn. You have done nothing to offend me." He paused. "Now, please, there is no need to stare at the ground."

John Blue Corn slowly raised his head. "Is it true ... you are now a joint heir with Jesus the Christ?"

Clark smiled. "Oh, yes. I follow Jesus the Christ as my Lord and my God. As do you?"

"We are brothers by the blood of the lamb," joyfully declared the old man. "Praise be to Him."

"Amen."

"Perry said you are here to deliver us from our oppressors."

"Yes. Soon. Stay with my friends Perry, Dot, and Amy. I will speak to them soon. In the meantime, it would be wise to stay away from this place, otherwise the others may become suspicious of our actions."

The other man nodded. "You speak truth. But I could not allow myself to go another moment without repenting to you for what I had done."

"It is well. Go home, now, and sleep." He paused. "There will be much to do tomorrow."

"God be with you, Doc Savage."

"And with you, John Blue Corn."

The old man turned and quickly moved away. Clark looked down at Gumball, who had been feigning sleep.

"What was that all about?" asked the pilot.

Instead of answering, Clark placed a hand to his head. "Perry ... were you listening?"

The voice in his ear answered, "And how ... did he just repent to you?"

"Yes, he did," replied Clark with a smile. "Our assessment of the original situation was correct. Pat had deceived Monja into summoning me -- us. John Blue Corn operated the short wave radio."

"So he was apologizing for his part," said Gumball, picking up on the conversation.

"More or less, yes."

"So what's the plan?" asked Perry.

"Who's on the channel?" inquired Clark.

"Dot and I. And Dot's giving Amy her transceiver now." There was a pause. "Okay, she's online."

"How are you doing, Amy?" asked Clark.

"I've been better. But I'm on the mend. Everybody's been taking good care of me."

"Are we safe to talk?" asked Dot. "Actually, are YOU safe to talk?"

Perry and Gumball had been subtly looking around ever since John Blue Corn came into their area. "It's clear," appraised Gumball. "If anybody's watching, it'll look like we're just talkin' to each other."

"Yes," agreed Clark. "I've been reconsidering some things. I had been originally planning for Gumball and I to assault the palace, and you three would take care of any resistance in the village. However, in light of Amy's injuries, I have reevaluated matters."

"Don't take me out of the game, please!" interrupted Amy. "I may be sore, but I'm still capable!"

"I completely agree, Amy," calmly responded Clark. "I wouldn't think of leaving you out of this. But I do have a change in the line-up." He paused. "Perry and Dot will join me to secure the palace, while Gumball will join Amy in the village. When the gas is released, the village will be bathed in it, therefore resistance will hopefully be few." He turned to Gumball. "However, I might suggest that you, Perry, speak to John Blue Corn about recruiting several strong hands to join Gumball and Amy in the fight. What is our supply of spare superfirers and oxygen masks, Perry?"

"On hand, two of each -- one for you and one for Gumball."

"But ten more of each tucked away in the Thunder," added Gumball

"Good. You'll need to retrieve them before the gas is released," Clark instructed. "Can you do it?"

"Won't know until I try," he said confidently.

"Good." He paused. "Comments or questions?"

There was silence for several heartbeats. Then Gumball spoke up. "I just hope that whoever I work with speaks English. Listening to you two was like listenin' to a couple'a heavy smokers trading coughing fits."

"We'll make sure you have an interpreter," informed Perry with a chuckle.

"Perry," said Clark. "I'll want to speak with John Blue Corn in the morning. Do you have the spare transceiver?"

"Yes. It's with our gear."

"Good. Show him what it is and how to use it."

Perry released a short laugh. "This is going to be interesting."

"So when do we make our move?" asked Dot.

"Tomorrow. Everyone gets a good night's sleep -- as well as possible -- and we'll talk in the morning."

Two minutes later, the transceivers were silent. And Clark and Gumball were alone.

"And just how do you propose we get off this island, Doc?" asked Gumball.

The big bronze man just smiled. "I have an idea."

"That's what worries me," replied the pilot with a grin. "Goodnight, Doc."

"Goodnight, Gumball."

A sliver of moonlight shone down on the Valley.

Standing at her bedroom windows, Monja looked across the jungle at the Island of Shame, and the two figures curled on the sand. She recognized Doc, sighed, then quickly stepped away from the window and closed the drapes. She lighted the oil lamp and placed it on a stand next to her full-length mirror. Looking at herself, she paused, then removed and dropped her robe, exposing her naked body.

I am once more desirable to men, she thought. I am no more an old woman in an old, wrinkled body. And Doc is still young. I know he desires me -- I saw it in his eyes. And I desire him. As she turned around, she wondered if there could be a chance for them to be a couple once more. Could they have a future together? She suddenly felt very light-headed. Leaving her robe on the floor, she lightly walked across the floor to her bed. She placed the lamp next to her bed, then blew out the flame and got under the covers. As she slept, she prayed that there could be a chance for her and her love once more.

Clark couldn't sleep.

He should've been able to. In the past, in situations far worse than this, sleep was easy for him.

So why couldn't he sleep now?

He curled around in the sand, smelling familiar scents, hearing sounds of the jungle around him -- and Gumball's snoring, just like his father's. He moved around and looked in the direction of the palace. Two windows were lit, and he saw the familiar silhouette standing at one of them. It was Monja, and she was watching him.

He needed so desperately to talk to someone about this. He thought about Perry on the other end of the transeiver, but chose not to disturb him over such a personal item as this.

He saw her light go out, and rolled onto his back. Looking through the thin cloud layer over the Valley, he softly voiced his thoughts to God.

"She's young again, Lord. It's as if the years had never passed for the two of us. And Gumball was right, she's a knockout. I still love her, Lord. She has captured my heart, You know. Is this the reason You brought me back now -- so that Monja and I could still have a future together, enjoy a life together? I know it was Pat who restored her youth, something involving the silphium. Have You used her for this, for Monja and me? God, what do I do?"

He rolled over onto his side and repeated his last phrase until sleep took him like a warm blanket.

Pat tried to ignore the guard with the tranquilizer gun who watched over her as she tried to sleep. She looked her over for the tenth time in as many minutes, then tried to roll over and shut it out. The sound of the bedroom door opening drew her attention, and the person who came in caused her to groan quietly.

"How's Sleeping Beauty?" inquired Woodward, making no attempt to lower her voice.

"Not," replied the guard.

"And how do you expect me to?" asked Pat sarcastically. "I usually don't have an audience when I'm asleep."

"Don't knock it, Cupcake. I could've kept you shackled in that chair, and given a tranquilizer cocktail every few hours."

"Small comfort." She paused. "Did you ever find out who came in the other plane?"

Woodward chuckled. "As a matter of fact, yes. I'm surprised you didn't recognize him. Queen Monja did. It's your cousin Clark."

She made a disgusted noise. "Terrific. And now I suppose he's going to side with you?"

Her expression unchanged, she slowly shook her head. "No. Actually, the boy scout claims he's here to rescue you."

She held tight to her surprise. She hadn't anticipated him being on her side, but against her. And even more so especially after she had the gold cut off. It confused her.

Woodward continued. "But I wouldn't put much hope in him rescuing you. He'll find it impossible from where he's at. You're probably able to see him from your window."

Pat changed the subject. "So what's on your agenda for tomorrow?"

The black woman showed white teeth in a broad smile and shrugged. "Who's to say? Maybe we'll put you two together on the island and see what happens. Won't that be a Kodak moment?"

With a disgusted grunt to cover her fear, Pat rolled over and ignored Woodward's laughter.

The soft glow of the oil lamp illuminated what passed for guest quarters in John Blue Corn's home. We three were still awake, dressed in comfortable Mayan bedclothes, sitting on a handmade futon-like mat, winding down by engaging in conversation.

"Did the estate get settled?" asked Dot.

"Yes. Father had a fine attorney, and the transition was smooth." She paused, then said, "Perry, I really want to thank you for including me in this mission. Now that Father is gone, I feel like a child in a house made for grownups, it's so big. Sometimes I think, if it wasn't for the lab and such, I don't know if I'd want to spend my life there." Her face suddenly brightened. "Enough of me. What about you two? Do you have plans for settling down?"

"Not for awhile," I answered. "We'll be living mostly out of the RV's. But we could use a place to recharge our batteries. You have a suggestion?"

"Maybe you could use my place as a base camp of sorts. I can hold your mail -- filter out the junk -- and let you know if anything important came in."

"I'm for it," said Dot. "Maybe I could learn to surf."

I suddenly heard something in my ear through the transceiver. I started reaching to turn up the volume, then stopped. Although it was too faint to make out details, I could sense that Clark was praying. Remembering Jesus' promise -- 'where two or more are gathered, there I will be in the midst of them' -- I silently agreed with Clark, then joined my wife and Amy as we prepared for sleep.

Tomorrow would be a busy day.

In his Oklahoma home, Monk Mayfair maneuvered his crutches over to his lounge chair. With each pained movement came a reminder of what he was missing because of his antics. As he put the crutches aside -- resisting the impulse to toss them like javelins -- Clark's voice echoed in his head, telling him that God had a reason for allowing this affliction to occur.

"Yeah, sure," he doubted aloud, reaching for the remote and switching over to the news.

Seconds later, however, his attitude changed dramatically. Yelping wildly, he practically jumped out of his chair, the clamor causing his wife to rush to his side to see what was the matter.

Chapter Fourteen

Convincing John Blue Corn that the small transceiver plug would allow him to talk to Clark was as hard as I had expected. The older Mayan was a model of doubt. But, in the end, he relinquished and tried it.

"John Blue Corn, can you hear me?" we heard together.

"Yes . . .," he answered uncertainly, looking around. "W-where are you?"

"I am still on the Island of Shame. The device in your ear allows us to talk. Do you understand?"

"Yes ... I do."

"I have important information to give to you and the people of the Valley."

"Say on," replied the old man.

"This day, when the sun is high in the sky, a thick blue mist will appear on the surface of the river and overflow over the land like a fog. It will be a sign for you and your people that their deliverance is at hand. It will cause a deep sleep to come over all who breathe it, but it will not harm them. Do you understand, John Blue Corn?"

"Yes, Doc Savage."

"I need your help."

"I am yours to command," he replied without hesitation.

"I want you to find six strong men who are trustworthy, who are willing to fight but do not desire to kill."

"It shall be done."

"You remember the other man on the island with me? His name is Gumball, and he will be joining you soon to help prepare you and these men to fight for your village."

"We will be ready." I saw the look of hope shining in his eyes.

"Good. He will provide firearms that will not kill, and face covers that will allow you to breathe in the blue fog without falling asleep."

"Yes, I understand."

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"While you, your six men, Gumball, and the woman Amy defend the village from any of the enemy who remain awake, I will be with Perry and Dot. We will be taking back the palace and freeing the Queen."

"Yes!" the older man said eagerly, the presence of the transceiver no longer alien. "This is good, Doc Savage!"

Clark continued. "Once you have selected your six men, Gumball and I will leave the Island. When we do, the enemy will know, and they will be looking for us."

"I will send someone to you with clothes for you both. He will be waiting just beyond the clearing."

"Thank you, John Blue Corn." He paused. "Tell the people of the Valley that there is nothing to fear about the blue fog. It will be a sign that their freedom from their oppressors is at hand."

"It will be done. We will be ready."

"Good. You can give the device in your ear back to Perry. But I may have you use it again."

"I understand." He took the transceiver from his ear and handed it back to me with a new respect. I accepted it, switched it off, and returned it to its padded storage box.

Light came over the top of the ring of mountains. By standard time, it was mid-morning, and Dot and I hid in some bushes just beyond the clearing of the Island of Shame. With us was Harvest Moon, who would escort Gumball back into the village.

Dot smacked me on the back and whispered, "Duck!" I moved low and looked back as the ominous Ms. Woodward approached with a single armed escort, passed close to us, and stopped a safe distance from the moat.

"Good morning, Savage," greeted Woodward smugly. "I hope you slept well."

"I've had worse," Clark replied with a thin smile.

"Just thought I'd let you know, we're going to be leaving today."

Clark paused a moment or two, their eyes meeting. "And what shall become of us?"

"Well, I think we're going to leave you here. My pilots have been looking at your Osprey like cats to a mouse." She looked at the bronze man, trying to see past his impassable countenance. "When we arrive back in the States, we'll ... allow the coordinates of this place to fall into the hands of the media. Very soon, you will find yourself exposed to the world."

"And what of Pat?"

"She's decided to make a corporate decision -- to make me a silent partner in exchange for us ending our attacks. I believe this is going to be the beginning of a beautiful arrangement, ultimately beneficial to us both." She paused. "What do you think?"

Clark paused. "You must do what you believe to be right." And he turned his back on her, walking to the center of the island.

She watched him, but said no more. The two women turned and walked away from the area.

"Perry?" softly said Clark.

"We caught it. We've got to make our move very soon."

"Agreed. Are you ready?"

"Here we come."

Moving swiftly, Harvest Moon and I entered the clearing and placed the board across the moat. I quickly stepped over and onto the island, where Gumball handed me his flight jacket and hat.

"Good luck, guys," he said as he shook our hands.

"Keep us posted," replied Clark.

Gumball went back across the plank, and he and Harvest Moon returned it to its original place.

They moved to the cover where Dot met him with a hug and the native clothing. A few moments later, with Harvest Moon in the lead and Dot watching from the cover, they left the area in the direction of the village.

We knew that Gumball needed time to get the gear from the Osprey, then more time to train the natives in their use. A missing man on the Island would blow our chances of taking them by surprise, so we hoped this little switch would suffice.

"Good to see you," Clark greeted me.

"Likewise," I returned, handing him a couple of nutrition bars and a canteen.

Gumball did his best to keep up with Harvest Moon, but he moved like a cat. And why not? he thought. This valley is his turf, where he's lived all his life. He could probably maneuver through this jungle like what's-his-name.

Without warning, Harvest Moon suddenly froze and went straight back against a wall, his outstretched arm smacking Gumball in the midsection. Two of Woodward's soldiers passed where they would have been had they not stopped. Once the two women were clear, Gumball and the boy continued, the pilot developing a healthy respect for the kid.

They reached a house and quickly vanished inside. He was greeted by John Blue Corn.

"I am so glad you made it safely. Was there any difficulty?" he asked.

"No, sir," returned Gumball. "Your son got us past a couple of close scrapes, but there's no harm done."

An attractive young girl, a servant, brought in a pitcher and cup on a platter. "I know you have not had much to keep you sustained, and you must go out again. But this will help." Gumball accepted the offered cup and took a couple of sips of the herbal drink before downing it in several grateful swallows.

"Gumball!" he suddenly heard, and saw Amy walking towards him.

With a big grin on his face, he started to greet her with a characteristic bear hug, but froze in mid-move as he saw the various bruises on her arms. He opted instead for a soft, caring embrace, and she rested her head on his chest.

"You okay?" he asked her.

"I'm sore. But I won't let you down," she replied with a smile.

He kissed the top of her head. "Okay. But before we do anything, I'm gonna have to go shopping."

Ten minutes later, he and Harvest Moon were at the edge of the river, near the base of the sacred pyramid, where the Osprey was docked.

Gumball moved in close to the boy. "Now don't do anything stupid while I'm in there! If there's problems, take off! I'll be all right!" The dark-haired boy nodded, but Gumball could see the ends-of-the-earth devotion in his eyes. He smiled and headed for his airplane.

The hardest part was getting through the door, out in the open and in broad daylight. But he had no other way in. With a last look, he reached the door in several swift steps and turned the handle, cringing at every creak and sweating as he glanced about him. Quickly slipping inside, he closed the door and stood silently for a few moments, trying to still his own breathing. Then he breathed a sigh of relief.

A thought ran through his mind, that somebody's gotta be watching out for him, considering he'd gotten this far.

He looked around him and grinned; nobody had been poking about. "OH Looossee, I'm home," he said softly, his cockiness returning as his confidence increased. "Good. Okay, let's take it by the numbers ..."

He swiftly got to work.

At the communications array panel, he keyed in the command for a special radio signal that his dad would receive, one that would tell him that they were alive and well. "Better late than never," he commented.

Then he went towards the rear of the Osprey. Various crates containing supplies had been opened, but nothing had been taken. Just as well, he thought. They wouldn't have found anything out of the ordinary anyhow. In a clear even voice, he said, "Glitch, BS&P!"

A panel in the deck dropped an inch and slid aside, revealing two large canvas duffles in a storage space. He pulled one duffle out and placed it on the deck. With a satisfied nod of his head, he quickly confirmed the contents, then closed the duffle and grabbed it by the handle.

Touching a control inside the storage space, the secret panel slid closed and Gumball headed for the door. He shifted the weight of the duffle, and took a glance out one of the windows. To his amazement, he'd actually got this far without being discovered.

But he was far from the finish line, he cautioned himself.

As he prepared to open the door, he called back into the empty air, "Glitch, Mousetrap!" This would trigger a silent anaesthetic gas charge if anyone else tried entering HIS ship without the proper authorization phrase.

"Think you'll take my Osprey? I don't think so," he said with a grin. Then he opened the door of the airplane and cautiously made his way back to Harvest Moon. Their trip back to John Blue Corn's house was blissfully without incident. His youthful companion's attributing their safe return to God made Gumball wonder if there wasn't something to what Clark and these others were talking about.

"This is Gumball," came the excited voice over the transceivers. "We're back with the birthday presents. Gimme about an hour to teach the band how to play, and we can start the surprise party for the ladies. It'll be a blast. Over and out."

Chapter Fifteen

Combat psychology must be a fascinating science -- analyzing what goes through the mind of a soldier just before a battle. The surge of adrenalin, the abandonment of values for an animalistic survival reflex, the fear of death.

I didn't know about the others, but I was a little numb. My breathing was slow and shallow, and I could feel the even beat of my heart under the Paradox wetsuit.

On my left was Clark, with Dot to my right. Clark had changed into his wetsuit, and they both silently re-checked their equipment and superfirers. What was going on in their minds, I momentarily wondered? Were they reflecting on their lives, or just bracing themselves for the action ahead?

I knew my gear was ready, but was I? Even though our weapons were non-lethal, our opponent's weapons weren't, and death was a real possibility. But I held tight to the promise: 'For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.'

I was ready.

Gumball's voice sounded over our transceivers, "Ladies and gentlemen! The band is ready to play, and we're all in our places. Shall we dance?"

I smiled at Gumball's humor through this, and looked to our leader.

Clark took a deep breath and said, "Let's pray." And he led us in a simple prayer for God's blessing in the battle, that no lives would be lost, and that freedom would return to the Valley.

Then he took the remote control in his hand and flipped up the plastic cover over the red button.

"Activating charges -- now!"

All along the narrow lake, the water suddenly appeared to be boiling. Yet no one in the river felt an increase of heat. Many people moved quickly out of the river, while many others gathered closer to its edge, curious at the apparition. Then a mist started appearing over the surface of the water. It was a blue mist, thick as a fog, which spread out gently to cover the lake and shore. As it crept onto the land, those closest started getting sleepy. They yawned a couple of times, then simply sank to the ground and took a nap. The obscuring feature of the fog kept many people from suspecting anything, and only a handful on the fringe saw danger afoot and ran.

Those in houses, inquiring into the nature of the fog, fell prey to it. Within minutes, natives for a mile on either side of the lake were peacefully asleep.

Woodward's walkie-talkie came alive with the excited voice: "BOSS! We got something weird going on here ... at ... the river!"

She tried to get more details, but there was no reply.

Rushing to the window, Woodward watched the spread of the blue fog in the village, then turned the binoculars towards the now-vacant Island of Shame, muttering several profanities and reaching for her walkie-talkie.

"ALL UNITS, RED ALERT!" she yelled urgently. "WE ARE UNDER ATTACK! Repeat -- we are under attack! Do not breathe the blue mist: stay clear of it and secure gas masks immediately! All units, report!"

"Okay, Pilgrims," said Gumball through the facemask. He swung an arm in an arc over his head. "Let's move 'em out!"

Leaving the security of the house, Gumball, Amy, John Blue Corn, and the selected six entered the blue fog.

It was only after the fact that they realized they should've included some optics to penetrate the fog. However, Amy was confident that her father's targeting system would suffice -- so sure that she volunteered to act as point.

"Okay," conceded Gumball. "But don't go far. I want to be able to spot you."

She had agreed, and now they quietly roamed eerie blue avenues, playing cat-and-mouse with any of Woodward's people left standing.

John Blue Corn, in alerting the people, had suggested that they stay off the streets and not to be troubled by the sudden fog. So there were few sleeping Mayans to stumble over in the low visibility.

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Amy had been slowly panning her superfirer, like a blind person's cane, when it suddenly fired twice into the fog. In response, they heard the thud of a body and a swirling of the fog ahead of them. Upon closer investigation, they found one of Woodward's soldiers, armed but down for the count.

Amy looked at Gumball and smirked. The pilot tried ignoring the silent 'told ya so' by relieving the soldier -- a skinny redhead with a pockmarked face -- of her weapons, gas mask, and walkie-talkie.

Suddenly they heard the crack of a gun, and one of the natives clutched a red-stained arm while the two natives closest to him swung their superfirers and automatically fired, sending several mercy bullets following the heat signature to the source. A surprised grunt was their response.

"Makes sense. Always saw them in pairs," commented Gumball. "How is he?"

A native replied, "He will live. The bullet went through the arm. He wants to stay with us."

"Okay. But only if the bleeding doesn't get worse."

They nodded and applied a cloth as a field bandage. Then the brave natives stood and followed.

Moments passed, and Woodward observed the spread of the blanket of blue fog. A minute later her frown turned into a grin, as she observed the edges of the fog swiftly dissipating. There was a limit to this, she thought. They'll be concentrating on the palace. They'll be after Pat, the queen ... and me. I need a bargaining chip!

She left the room.

Our view was good, but what we were seeing wasn't.

The village was covered in a blue blanket. But it wasn't spreading up here where we were going to need it.

"This is not good," observed Clark; I could hear the concern in his voice. "The gas may not reach this far. We may have to alter our strategy."

I looked over at Dot while I asked Clark, "So it's up to us to stop them?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Dot ... the Equalizer."

Dot already had the duffle bag in front of her, in anticipation of the request. She opened it up and pulled out a weapon Monk had suggested to us back in Florida.

"Let's just say that we were ... inspired to bring this along," I commented while Dot prepped the weapon. "I didn't quite care for carrying it all this way, but now I praise God we did."

The Bronze Saga #2: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

Designed to fire 40mm cartridges, the weapon we christened The Equalizer sported pistol grips fore and aft of the impressive 20-round cylindrical magazine. Dot slung the shoulder strap over her head, which would help stabilize the load and decrease the kick, and recited the stats: "Five rounds of high-explosive, just to get their attention, and fifteen of the long-term anaesthetic gas." She shifted the weapon into a firing-ready grip and grinned at us. "Okay, boys -- let's rock and roll!"

"Yes," agreed Clark. He had slung a musette bag across his back. "You've both gone over the floor plans of the palace. I'll move through the main hallway down the middle, then break off to the stairs and rescue Monja and Pat on the second floor."

I did a double-take. "Rescue Pat? Why, if I may ask?"

"Right now, her enemies are our enemies. She has no choice if she wants to escape them. That is to our advantage. I'll get Monja first and send her down to you two. Keep her safe." There was a special emphasis in his gold-flecked eyes.

"Count on it," said Dot for both of us.

We poised for the attack, oxygen masks on, waiting for the door to open. Seconds later, two of Woodward's soldiers came bursting through, gas masks covering their faces, tranquilizer pistols ready. However, they didn't have a chance as Clark and I fired simultaneously on them. One woman fell against the door, propping it open.

"Now that's what I call convenient," said Dot, raising the launcher. "Fire in the hole!"

The weapon bucked in her hands as the shells sailed straight through the open portal and burst open with a muffled blast. The effect was immediate as expected, as people ran from the unknown menace. Those who ran from the palace were taken out with mercy bullets, and the gas felled the cautious ones. Without another word, Clark lunged from our hiding place and sprinted low for the open door.

Stepping over the unconscious women surrounding the entrance and holding the door open, Clark quickly vanished inside the palace. He sent a short burst at a couple of women in the hallway, ducking a dart that imbedded itself in the wall near him. A moment of silence, waiting for someone else to appear, and he swiftly ran to the steps and ascended them three at a time.

It felt good to be back in action, he thought, the adrenalin coursing through him like nitro in a race car.

His footfalls alerted the woman at the top of the stairs, who hid behind a pedestal supporting a vase of flowers. She was shooting live ammunition, which stitched a neat trail along the wall behind him. Pausing a moment to swing the bag to the side and gauge his movements, he sprung forward, tucking his body into a forward roll ending flat on his stomach. The move took the woman by surprise, and Clark shot her with the mercy bullets. Pushed backwards, she crumpled into a heap against the wall.

He reached the door he estimated to be Monja's bedroom, and found it ajar. Pushing it open cautiously for fear of hidden traps, he found the room cleared, with so sign of Monja. Moving next door, he opened it and saw his cousin handcuffed to a chair.

The look on her face went from relief to disgust. "Come to finish me off?" she spat.

"Have you been in charge of your world for so long that you've forgotten what it's like to be rescued?" he replied, and moved around behind her, lowering his oxygen mask. Swinging the musette bag around front, he quickly found the set of lockpicks, and soon had her freed.

As Pat tossed the handcuffs aside and rubbed her wrists, Clark retrieved something from the bag and handed it to his cousin. "Here!" he said.

She held the item, her expression a mixture of surprise and confusion.

Meanwhile, Clark moved to the window, looking around the edge in order to avoid making himself a target, and saw Woodward and Monja heading in the direction of the twin-rotor helicopter. What Woodward held caused his heart to beat faster.

"What's this?" asked Pat, still looking at the object in her hand.

Clark turned back to her and answered, "Superfirer." As he did, he saw the faintest look of indecision on her face. Taking a step in her direction, he spoke with conviction. "Look, Pat. I love you. That will never change. I know I've made some horribly stupid mistakes that have hurt many people. Please know that I am truly sorry, and ... I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me." He paused. "My mistake was in returning to those caves in Maine unarmed and alone -- in my STUPID pride and vanity! Monk, Johnny, Renny, even Long Tom ... they have all forgiven me. Can you?"

Quickly moving to the door, he left Pat holding the weapon and the words he was finally able to communicate. His back to his cousin, he peered through a crack. When he turned to face her, Pat saw the familiar confident look on his face. Plus ... something else ... she couldn't recognize.

"Now," Clark said unexpectedly. "You can either shoot me and exact your revenge on me, or we can fight together -- again." His tone became defiant and forceful, and he jerked a thumb in the direction of the window. "Why don't we show these yahoos what two Savages can do when they've had enough!"

He paused.

She hesitated a moment, then two.

"So what's your decision ... are you with me, or against me?"

She was silent, shifting the weapon in her hand, looking down at the floor. When she finally looked up, her countenance was like flint. Her voice became as ice. "With you."

Clark looked her in the eye and grinned. "Then let's go kick some butt!"

"You HAVE changed," she observed with amusement that dispelled her hesitation. "I've never heard you use language like that before!"

"There's been a lot of changes in me," he replied absently, glancing again through the window.

She held up the weapon. "New superfirer, you said?"

The Bronze Saga #2: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

As he moved to the door, he gave her the highlights: the range, type of ammunition, rate of fire, location of safeties, sighting system, etc. Then he reached into his musette back and retrieved an oxygen mask. He tossed it to Pat, then affixed his own to his face. "There's still traces of anaesthetic gas outside. Ready?"

She tightened the mask and took a couple of practice breaths, then nodded, "Lock and load, cousin!"

"Okay. On three." He paused. "One ... two ..."

"THREE!" they said simultaneously, throwing open the door and rushing into the hallway.

The corridor was empty save for Clark's earlier target. They paused at the top of the stairs, looked around quickly but cautiously, then descended.

Pat, with determination, cleared the door first. As Clark followed, he was greeted with a blur and a hammerblow kick to his midsection that caught him by surprise and actually lifted him off the ground and onto his back.

Rolling backwards, he landed on his feet and prepared to strike back. All he saw was the amazonian brunette named Clayton, swiftly closing the distance with a flying side kick. His arms swung up and deflected her attack. But she was good, and struck him with a fist to the head as she spun in mid-air. The connection was solid, and Clark was momentarily stunned.

His attacker quickly got to her feet and took a martial arts stance. Behind the gas mask, her eyes were narrow slits of cold determination. "Nothing personal, Savage," she said softly as she closed in for the kill. "Just doing my job."

Pat suddenly realized she was alone, and turned to see the fight between Clark and that Clayton woman.

She stopped and hesitated, briefly considering what action to take. Thanks for getting me outta there, Doc, she thought as she moved on, but you're on your own.

The rear door of the helicopter was lowering, and Woodward and Monja stood ready to board. They turned as one as Pat came into view. The Mayan queen's face, behind the gas mask, was frozen in terror. Woodward's automatic pistol shoved ungainly into her ribs probably had something to do with that.

"Stop and drop the gun NOW -- or I'll kill her!" threatened the black woman.

Pat slowed her pace, but didn't stop.

"If you do," she replied. "Then there will be nothing stopping me from ripping out your throat and showing it to you as you die, will there?" With a countenance of pure fury, she continued to move forward and demanded, "Now ... let ... her ... go."

Woodward wasn't about to let Monja go, but, instead, pressed the gun harder into her side. "No."

Pat hesitated only for an instant, hoping that there were truly mercy bullets in this new superfirer, then raised the gun at the pair and fired a burst that cut across them both. With matching looks of surprise, they jerked once, then their eyes closed and they sank to the ground in a heap.

Her superfirer extended before her, she spun around in a slow circle to make sure there were no counterattackers, then moved swiftly to examine the two women. She took the gun from Woodward's hand, and quickly verified that both women were unconscious but very much alive.

She stood there for several moments, the fatigue of the excitement catching up to her, the questions of the future looming before her.

"MIZ Woodward," she addressed the unconscious black woman through gritted teeth. "You've hurt me and you've hurt my company. Now it's payback time!"

She lowered the superfirer and lifted Woodward's own automatic, grinning at it.

Clark had been down, but not out. The blow from Clayton had slowed him, but he quickly got back into the swing of things.

Clark parried a roundhouse punch to the head, and countered with a straight arm fist to Clayton's face. She swept her arm up to block, then dropped into a low crouch and placed the heels of both hands into Clark's midsection. The big bronze man staggered back at the blow, but quickly recovered and circled his opponent.

A kick here, a punch there, a toss into the air, a recovery from a toss. Clark had a slight advantage in strength, but Clayton had the advantage in knowledge and youth. Bottom line, they were evenly matched, looking for the other to make a mistake.

Clark faltered first.

The tall brunette ducked into a crouch and swept her leg low, impacting Clark just behind the knee, and sending him to the ground. An instant later, she was straddling his chest, reaching for his oxygen mask. Clark was unable to stop her, and he struggled in the open air. Seconds passed, and the big man's chest heaved once, twice ... then slackened. His eyes, full of rage, flickered, then went closed as his body went limp.

All Clayton could hear was her own labored breathing as she straddled her conquest. After a moment, she shifted her position.

She felt a twitch under her thigh, and looked down in time to see Clark's eyes burst open. Faster than she believed possible, they had reversed positions, and he had her pinned to the ground with her arms at her sides. She thrashed like a bucking bronco under him, trying every trick in the book to escape, but he had learned from the earlier melee, and the weight advantage was his.

He removed her gas mask. She tried holding her breath in the same way Clark had, but never expected his sudden open-hand slap to her face. Gasping involuntarily, she sucked in enough anaesthetic gas to do the trick. As she started going under, she cursed Clark and gave him a dirty look. Then she went limp.

Clark had stuck her gas mask on his own face, relieved to be able to breathe once more. He continued to sit on her for several long seconds, not making the same mistake she did with him. Finally, when he was sure she was out, he stood up and retrieved his superfirer and oxygen mask.

For good measure, he put two mercy bullets into Clayton's body, then continued heading in the direction Pat had vanished.

He arrived in time to see his cousin standing with an automatic over Woodward. His eyes quickly assessed that both fallen women were still breathing -- he deduced that mercy bullets had caused their unconsciousness.

But there was a greater threat, and he addressed it in an even tone. "Don't do it, Pat. It's not worth it."

His cousin's voice seethed under the oxygen mask. "But what she did to me, to my company ..."

"Don't do it." Clark's voice was calm, low, commanding. Like she remembered in those days before everything fell apart. It gave her an odd feeling of security. Yet, on the other hand, the pistol she held was so very tempting. One quick shot -- a light tug on the trigger, and she could hardly miss at this distance -- and the threat to her company would trouble her no longer .

So ... easy.

Then he was there, at her side. His hand took the barrel of the weapon, and a gentle twist released it from her grip.

She looked up at her cousin, now so much different than she'd remembered. Then she looked down at Woodward, and -- unexpectedly -- kicked the unconscious woman in the ribs. As she looked back up into her cousin's rebuke, she defiantly snapped, "So sue me!"

As Clark knelt at Monja's side, Pat explained, "Woodward was using her as a shield. She had the gun on her. It was the only way I knew to save her. How long do these mercy bullets last?"

"Thirty minutes, depending on the individual. But I can bring her out now." He glanced over at Woodward as he stood. "Why don't you tie her up?"

"With pleasure," she replied with a mischievous grin that momentarily took Clark back half a century.

Returning to the battlefield he'd shared with Clayton, he found the brunette where he'd left her. She was a good fighter, he commented as he retrieved his musette bag and its scattered contents. Finding an electronic device, he waved it around and looked at the indicator. Nodding, he removed his oxygen mask and confirmed that the anaesthetic gas had dissipated.

Finding his transceiver where it had fallen out, he dusted it off and inserted it in his ear.

"Perry, Dot, Gumball, Amy! Status report!"

"Gumball here! The village is secure. We sustained only minor injuries."

"Perry here! We're fine, but Monja never came outta this end. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Woodward tried to use Monja as a hostage, but Pat got them both with mercy bullets. Everything is secure on this end. Meet me at the helicopter."

"Will do."

"Clark out."

Dot and I rounded the corner of the palace. Clark was kneeling at the side of someone on the ground I assumed was Monja. Pat stood nearby, her arms crossed, standing over a well-trussed-up Woodward.

Upon seeing us, Pat reacted with a surprised exclamation of profanity. "You DID bring reinforcements!"

Clark didn't look up, but simply replied, "You didn't think I would? They are my friends."

As I handed Clark my medkit, Pat suddenly said, "Wait a minute! I know you." I turned to face her, and she continued. "You were the arrogant Bible-thumper with the derby hat and cane!" Her reference was to my appearance at the battle in Lincoln City, where I quoted from the story of David and Goliath in order to psych out her and her guards. "And in the hospital, with her." She was referring to when she showed up at Long Tom's hospital room soon before his death. I had been sitting with Dot.

I wasn't sure how to respond to her. Since Clark felt secure in having his back to her, I assumed peace was being worked out between them.

So I responded on the side of love.

I closed the distance between us, held out a hand, and introduced myself. "The name's Perry Liston, ma'am. That's my wife, Dot. It's an honor to meet you."

Her expression was confusion, and she looked down at my hand as if expecting it to come up and strike her. After a moment, however, she extended her own hand and we shook.

Meanwhile, Clark had taken out a small aerosol bottle, and sprayed it over Monja's face. She stirred almost instantly, and opened her eyes. She smiled at the sight of Clark's face.

"Doc ... ?" said Monja weakly.

"Yes, beloved. I'm here."

My head turned at his intimate reference to her. Was there more going on that any of us had been aware of?

As we looked upon the Mayan queen, she suddenly grimaced in pain and her face became pale. Then she began to shake violently as if in the midst of a seizure, and passed out.

Clark's trained eyes were sweeping over her, diagnosing her symptoms. "Let's get her upstairs," he ordered, scooping her up in his arms as easily as if she were a child.

"Amy!" he called through the transceiver. "I need you up here now! Monja's having some sort of seizure! Pulse is erratic, breathing shallow! We're heading up to her bedroom on the second floor of the palace! STAT!"

"On my way!" replied Amy.

We followed Clark as he headed for the entrance to the palace, past the very-unconscious Clayton. I took the lead to open the door to Monja's room and move aside for Clark. He eased her onto the bed and loosened her clothes. He didn't show any outward signs of anxiety, but I could sense it. Clark's feelings toward Monja were no secret -- although he sometimes wished it was -- and it was a vulnerable spot for someone who wasn't quite used to being vulnerable yet.

Needless to say, I began to intercede for them both.

And I could see that I was not alone, as I made eye contact with my wife. She and Pat stood off to one side, helpless to do anything but watch and pray.

But all Pat knew to do was watch, which wasn't enough. "Let's load her onto my Osprey," she commanded vainly. "We can have her in Miami in a couple of hours." We all just looked at her briefly, then returned to what we were doing.

Just then Amy came into the room. She was out of breath, and we could see the pain on her face. Later we would find out that she had ran all the way from where Clark contacted her, despite the protests of her own injuries. She immediately opened the med kit and moved to the other side of the bed. Clark removed a blood pressure cuff and gauge while Amy checked Monja's other vital signs.

Following about two minutes later were Gumball and John Blue Corn. Dot went over to them and drew them aside, summarizing things. The elder Mayan responded by sinking to his knees and praying in his native language.

Pat seemed to be bothered by the mixture of coughs and other sounds characteristic of the Mayan language. "Would you stop that?" she complained. "Or at least keep the volume down?"

She was suddenly jerked off balance by Dot, who had clamped a hand around her forearm, and pulled her into a far corner of the room. Her tone was low, but assertive. "Pat, can't you see what he's doing? He's praying, which is about the only thing any of us can do right now! Now hush!"

Pat's mouth hung open in surprise at the strong rebuke. Dot looked at her a moment to see if there was a response, but there was only silence. Dot went back to Gumball, while Pat stayed put.

Minutes passed. Clark and Amy diligently worked with what they had, to determine what was wrong with Monja, and how to fix it. Finally they had their answer, and it was not a good one.

"It's her heart," sighed Amy. "She's had an extraordinary strain on her heart. How old is she?"

Clark told her, adding the details about the silphium treatment. Pat walked over and added, "I gave her only one dosage of my silphium extract, but it was several times stronger than what I used at the start."

Clark and Amy's eyes met. "The strain on her system has been too much," said Amy, dreading the conclusions that were so familiar. "She may have had a previous heart problem, and this has aggravated it to the point of ..." She let the words fade off.

Clark understood nonetheless. We all did. "How long?" he asked, trying unsuccessfully to detach himself emotionally from the moment.

We were also concerned about Amy's mental and emotional state. Finally she said, "I ... don't know ... not very long ... I'm ... sorry." She stood and took a step back from the bed. The look on her face was ashen, and she seemed to be on the edge of tears. "I-I'm sorry," she repeated, then she ran from the room.

Gumball was the first in pursuit. "I'll take care of it!" he quickly said, then was gone.

Amy hadn't gone far.

Gumball found her sitting on the ground next to a tree a short distance from the palace. Her head was bowed and she was sobbing openly.

The pilot approached, then seated himself next to her. He put a hand on her shoulder and said softly, "Amy?"

She responded by turning towards him and burying her face against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and said nothing.

"It's because of your father ... right?" he finally inquired, even though he knew the answer.

Her head nodded silently.

"You feel helpless?" he asked.

She nodded again.

"It's okay, little sister," he said softly. "Get it all out."

And she did.

"Doc?"

Clark had not left the side of her bed. He took Monja's hand, looked into her eyes as she returned to consciousness and smiled. "I'm here, Monja."

She looked over at Pat and frowned. "She shot both of us."

"They were mercy bullets," explained Clark. "They wouldn't have harmed you."

"It was the easiest way of getting Woodward to release you," added Pat, drawing closer. "I'm sorry I frightened you."

She nodded. "It is all right, Pat. I understand."

Pat came to the side of the bed. Her shoulders were slumped, and she spoke hesitatingly, uncertainly. "And ... I'm sorry for using you like I did. I never wanted this to happen."

Monja smiled weakly. "I forgive you, Pat."

The Mayan queen paused. Her eyelids lowered a bit, and her breathing became shallower. I could see the look on Clark's face, and we all knew that her end would come soon for her. I moved over to Dot and she took my hand.

"Doc?" Monja asked. "Are you here ... to stay?"

It was obvious that Clark's heart was breaking, yet he kept his emotions at bay. "Yes, my beloved." He took her hand in both of his. "I'm here as long as you need me."

"God has given us a second chance. We will be together forever."

"Forever," echoed Clark.

She coughed, and her body shivered briefly. "You have not yet met my children, Doc. Mordecai is the oldest. He is such a good boy, and he will make a good king when I am gone. I am proud of him, as I am proud of all my children." Her face suddenly contorted in a grimace of pain, and Clark held her hand tighter.

She looked up into his eyes. "You are my love, my life." she said. "I am so glad that you are back."

Clark leaned down and they kissed. "You have not changed," she smiled, settling back on the pillow. "Your kiss still takes my breath away."

"I love you, Monja," professed Clark.

Knowing the inevitable made the words even more emotional. Dot couldn't take it anymore, as she wrapped her arms around me and started crying. I admit, I was very close to it myself.

"I love you, Doc." She smiled at him, then another spasm of pain twisted her face. She looked up at the ceiling and said something strange: "I must go home."

"But you are home," replied Clark softly. "This is your room."

"No. My home is there." Her eyes were still trained on the ceiling.

Suddenly, like a bright light, I saw the truth of her statement. Monja, like so many of her people, had become a Christian. She knew her home was in heaven, and she was now standing within view of the pearly gates.

Her body shook with one last wave of pain, then her eyes closed and she relaxed entirely. There was no more movement.

"She's home," I said, tears of joy busting free from my own eyes.

But Clark did not hear the words. He could not. Still holding her hand, he broke into tears, unashamedly mourning the loss of one so close to him. And for several minutes, we all mourned with him.

Finally, he placed her hands across her chest and stood.

But something changed when he looked at Pat. His eyes narrowed and his breathing became shallower. "YOU!" he suddenly yelled, his voice loud enough to rattle nearby glassware. "YOU DID THIS TO HER!"

Only a few minutes before, Pat had been crying with the rest of us in mourning. Now, tears still streaking her face, her expression was a mask of terror, as she realized there was nowhere to run to.

She was standing near a corner of the room, too far from the door, but not too far from the window. She glanced at the window, contemplating the odds of surviving a leap from this high. Then she looked at her cousin, and figured the odds of surviving his wrath to be far less.

Clark's arms, as well as his entire musculature, were as tense as steel bars wrapped in coils of cable, and the expression on his face said that he'd rip her to shreds before he'd realize what he did.

Pat didn't have a chance on her own.

And suddenly there I was, standing so close to Clark that I could feel hatred coming off of him like spiritual radiation.

I raised my arms and opened my mouth and said sharply, "No, Clark, NO! This is wrong! This is no way of handling this!"

The next moment I was aloft, looking down at the scene from the ceiling.

Almost effortlessly, he'd clamped two massive hands over my arm and leg, and lifted me over his head, mere inches below the ceiling. Clark was a man possessed, and I didn't really want to consider what he was going to use me for, as he continued moving towards Pat.

There was an odd lack of sound in the room. Perhaps it was my own perspective, suspended in mid-air as I was. But then I heard a voice, loud and piercing: "NO! IN JESUS' NAME, NO!"

It was Dot.

And we stopped -- completely, as if a giant hand had been placed in our path. Time froze, and all I knew was the rapid beating of my own heart.

Clark blinked, and the madness was washed away from him like dust caught in a sudden downpour.

His arms quivered, as if they were acknowledging the weight of my body above him.

His head tilted upward, and he looked at me with an expression of absolute ... fear.

I suspected that he was just realizing what he had almost done. Slowly and very carefully, he lowered me to the ground.

I was dizzy from being suspended at that angle and height, and it took a moment to clear my head. I could feel Clark's hands lightly on my shoulders, and we looked into each other's face. We locked into an embrace and we reassured and became reassured that the danger was over.

I heard Clark's labored breathing repeating, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. My God, what was I going to do?"

I just hugged my friend and repeated, "It's okay, Clark. It's okay."

Standing in the corner of the room, Pat Savage was acknowledging that Perry Liston had just saved her life.

She'd only known his name a few minutes. Before that, all he was to her was an arrogant preacher who was a friend to her cousin. She remembered him from Lincoln City ... and he was probably that other guy with Doc back in New York; she recalled that he also talked religion.

So this Perry Liston seemed to be a recurring pain in her side -- and yet he just put his own life on the line to save hers.

The whole thing went strange from that point on. The guy's wife -- the one who got in her face because she wanted some quiet up here -- screamed, and Doc just stopped in his tracks. And he wasn't angry anymore, like he snapped out of some magical spell. And now he's hugging Perry like they're long-lost brothers.

She looked around, and saw nothing between her and the door. Nobody stopped her as she left the room.

She had some thinking to do.

Chapter Sixteen

The battle had been the easy part. Now came the mourning, as the people of the Valley of the Vanished awoke from the effects of the anaesthetic gas and learned that their queen, their Monja, was dead.

I suppose it was hardest on Monja's own children and grandchildren, who never had a chance to say goodbye.

There's a modern proverb that says that pressure makes diamonds. During the hours following Monja's death, there was one diamond who shined above the rest -- Monja's eldest son, and now King, Mordecai.

Standing tall before the bedside of his mother, tears streaking his face, he humbly assumed the mantle of regal responsibility.

He recognized Clark as the man his mother had spoken of for many years, and acknowledged him as a friend and an ally. In short order this eldest son of Monja also had taken command of the Valley, and, like Josiah in the Old Testament, started restoring order among his people.

Woodward and her soldiers were placed on the Island of Shame for safe-keeping, with several armed Mayan brutes waiting for them if they dared try to reach the other side of the moat, regardless of the fact that they were women.

Gumball tried to make contact with Monk, while Amy, Dot, and I moved among the villagers, ministering to any needs. There was initial suspicion towards us as outsiders, but now-King Mordecai -- after a visit by John Blue Corn -- verified that we were trustworthy.

In front of the pyramid, overlooking the river, a half-dozen funeral pyres were being prepared. Since there was no open ground large enough to relocate the helicopters, they remained where they were, a bizarre contrast to the ancient golden structure.

That night, Clark came to the Island of Shame to speak to Woodward. Her attitude was ungrateful as she crossed the plank.

"You here to gloat?" she said, sneering.

"No," he said simply. "I want you to see something. Follow me."

As they walked away from the Island, Clark's attention was drawn to the amazonian Bonnie Clayton. She caught his eye, then offered a slight smile and a subtle salute. He nodded acknowledgment, then continued with Woodward behind.

"You lost others," Clark stated bluntly. "The natives reported a crashed helicopter just beyond the mountains."

Woodward hesitated, her throat tight, then replied, "Yes."

They approached the small clearing where the bodies of those killed in the earlier battle had been placed. Torches ringed the area, putting forth an eerie light. As they entered the clearing, Woodward spotted something new, and her jaw dropped.

Clark saw her reaction. "King Mordecai instructed several of his men to retrieve the bodies from the craft and bring them here for a proper funeral."

She looked over the additional six bodies, and knelt down next to one in particular. Her hand reached out, but she couldn't touch the bloodied form of the young blond woman. Then her body started shaking and tears fell down her cheeks, and Clark could read her lips repeating, "I'm sorry, Tracy."

After several minutes she stood, and turned to Clark with a curious expression. Her smugness was no longer.

"How?" she strained. "Why?"

"Despite what you may think of these people, they are quite civilized, and have a high regard for life ... even the life of their enemy. In their culture, to allow the dead to pass from this life into the next without a proper internment would be dishonorable. It would be an insult, so to speak, in the face of God." He paused. "The internment ceremony will be tomorrow. If you give me your word that your people will behave peaceably, you will be allowed to join us."

Woodward looked at Clark for several moments, trying to see beyond the emotionless exterior. "Why should you trust me?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Why should I not?"

She paused a moment, then nodded. "You have my word," she said softly. "Thank you."

"King Mordecai, Monja's eldest son, has also assured me that your people will not be harmed as long as they act responsibly."

Woodward replied, "I appreciate that."

As they walked back to the Island, Woodward tried to understand what was going on. Her smug attitude had been replaced with surprise, and not a little confusion.

"So what do I call you? Doc?" she suddenly asked.

"My name is Clark."

"Jill." She paused. "So what happens now? After the internment?"

"Since you and Pat were the primary instigators of this matter, you will go before King Mordecai. And he will decide what happens."

"Oh, great," she mumbled. "So Pat's gonna get off scott free."

Clark stopped and looked at her. "Why do you think so?"

"Because we're on her turf."

"That means nothing here. She will face judgement according to what she has done, not who she is."

The internment of the dead, regardless of cultural background, has always strained and drained the emotions, and this one was no exception.

Only those members of the Valley were allowed to take part in the actual ritual. One-by-one, the bodies were placed upon funeral pyres and cremated. Then their ashes were carried in golden urns by the nearest blood-relative, to the top of the golden pyramid where the water flowed out. Then, slowly and deliberately, with Mayan words of farewell and dedication voiced to the Creator, the ashes were poured into the water, where they flowed down and into the lake, and eventually out of the Valley to the Great Unknown.

To one side, set apart from the people of the Valley, the survivors of Woodward's group stood, quiet or crying, as witnesses to the ritual. When the ashes of their friends were added to the stream, emotions broke wide open. Many responded by dropping to their knees in tears, or clinging to one another for support. Others, like Bonnie Clayton, gave honor to the fallen by standing at attention and freezing in sharp salute.

Gumball and Amy stood with Dot and me. Gumball comforted his 'little sister' with an arm around her shoulders, and I held tightly to my wife's hand.

Nearby, Pat and her two pilots stood watching the proceedings, and I saw her stiffen and ineffectively try to hide the emotions as the bodies of her two guards were cremated and carried by Mayan natives to the top of the pyramid, then committed to the Great Beyond. Tears streaked her face, and her lips moved silently.

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The final body to be delivered was that of Queen Monja. We all watched as King Mordecai climbed the many steps of the golden pyramid with the urn. Matching him step for step on the other side of the waterfall was Clark, dressed in ceremonial garb similar to Mordecai's.

At the top of the steps, Mordecai stretched out his arms to Clark, and the two of them held the urn aloft, above the mouth of the fountain. As if in one voice, they spoke the Mayan words of dedication.

Then Mordecai released his hold on the urn, and Clark finished the ritual, slowly pouring the ashes into the waters. They stood tall and motionless, like two stone idols, as the ashes traversed down the golden pyramid, into the lake, and out of sight.

The two men descended the steps of the pyramid, again in perfect synchronization. At the bottom, Clark stopped while King Mordecai stepped into the open and raised his arms for attention. He spoke a few words to close the ceremony, and everyone was dismissed.

We were escorted into the structure they called the Hall of Justice. It was like something out of The Ten Commandments, minus Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner.

I'd been surprised that we'd been included as witnesses to these proceedings, again considering we were outsiders. But I chalked it up to Clark's influence on the new king.

We came in through a large door at one end. Two rows of pillars ran parallel from one end to the other. Behind the pillars against the side walls were stone bleachers, galleries where viewers could watch the proceedings. We were directed to the right side gallery. John Blue Corn sat with us, as interpreter and friend.

A few minutes later, others were escorted into the hall, eight adults and seven children. They sat in the gallery opposite us.

John Blue Corn leaned in to us and identified them as Monja's family. There was Esther, the eldest daughter, with her husband and three children. Beside her was Ruth, next oldest, with her husband and son. On the lower bench was Matthias, the next oldest son after Mordecai, with his wife and two children. Sitting near him was Miriam, the youngest daughter; her husband comforted her in her grief.

"There had been another son," added John Blue Corn. "His name was Micah. He was but a boy when he and his father died in the accident in the caves."

I moved over to Clark. "How are you doing?"

"I am ... fine," he said.

I didn't believe him for an instant, and we both knew it. But I didn't push it. I knew he was seriously concerned about the fate of his cousin, his only living relative. And I had to admit, we all were concerned, despite the fact we started off as adversaries.

I didn't see Pat, nor Woodward; I assumed they were sequestered offside -- and, hopefully, apart from one another.

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We waited for several minutes. Then two natives entered with bell-like objects, stood before the throne, and simultaneous struck them. The clang echoed throughout the hall, demanding our attention.

King Mordecai entered from one of two doors on either side of the throne. Clothed in royal attire, he looked around the hall, and nodded solemnly in our direction. Then he walked over to the other gallery, where he reached out to a boy of ten. The boy stepped off of the bench seat and hugged the man.

"His son, Benjamin," said John Blue Corn. "Mordecai's wife died when the boy was born."

Mordecai walked back to the throne. He paused a moment, looking up at the solid gold seat of power. Three steps led up to it, and he took them slowly, settling into the chair.

He picked up a golden rod from a recessed niche in the chair, and declared aloud, "Bring them in!"

In front of each gallery was a door. These opened, and Pat and Woodward were directed in. They were accompanied by two guards each. Neither woman showed any resistance.

King Mordecai looked them over, examined them from the throne, then leveled the rod at Woodward.

"Jillian Woodward. You led your people with the intent of conquering my people. Your people spilled the blood of my people, killed my people. You and your people caused destruction in my village. Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

She stood tall and faced the monarch. "Your Highness. My intention was never to take life. I was led to believe that you were a hostile people, and I sought only to restrain your people long enough to achieve my true intention -- to capture Patricia Savage. I strongly regret the deaths of your people at the hands of mine, but those who did the killing were themselves killed." Her face mirrored anger. "Believe me, sir, if your people hadn't killed them, I would have!" She collected herself. "Sorry. I speak for my people when I say that we are prepared to repair any damage we have caused. Thank you for allowing me to speak, Your Highness." She bowed respectfully, and stepped back and waited.

King Mordecai sat and observed her. Then he spoke. "Jillian Woodward, your actions are that of violence, and your motives slavery. You are correct in your assessment -- those who took life had their own lives taken from them. Have you reconciled your differences with Patricia Savage?"

Woodward looked over at Pat. "Not yet. However, I believe that ... in time ... we shall."

"Very well. Restitution will be made by your people to my people. Your life is spared."

"Thank you, Your Highness," sighed Woodward, visibly relieved.

King Mordecai looked over at Pat, then leveled the rod. "Patricia Savage, come forward," he commanded.

She didn't look back, but slowly stepped towards the throne of judgement. She didn't look very well, which was understandable. There wasn't a sound in the room.

"Patricia Savage," started King Mordecai. "When you came among my people, you came as a friend. You gave the substance known as silphium to my mother the Queen and restored her youth -- and her joy -- for a brief time. But, in the end, the silphium hastened her death." He paused. His eyes bored into her like lasers. A wave of crying came from the gallery containing Monja's children.

Mordecai paused a moment. "Had you not come to this Valley, my people, nor my mother the Queen, would have suffered death and loss. You alone are responsible for this deed." The silence which followed hung like a hangman's noose around Pat's neck. "Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

Pat opened her mouth twice to speak, but no sounds came out.

I may be the law in my own country, she thought, on my precious Caroline Island, but here I'm subject to the laws I've broken.

All the things I've done in my arrogance and pride. All my youth, my power, my possessions -- all gone, useless, to end here.

How ironic, in the land that Doc's father -- my uncle -- came upon those many decades ago, I would meet my end, branded as a criminal. Here it started. If it hadn't been for Doc and the gold here, they would've never come to rescue me from the man who had killed my own father, all because of that strange map. I, too, would've been killed then, and all that happened since then would never have happened.

She reflected on all the people she'd hurt.

Caroline, my true daughter! I wonder what she must think of me? I've made a real mess of it, haven't I? Going off in search of profits and power and pleasure. Where are they now? Just memories, soon to die with me.

Oh, Tom! If I'd only taken my eyes off myself and saw your love for me ... what could we have been? I was so wrapped up in my own life. And now I see I have no one else to blame but me. Doc admitted his actions had been stupid and prideful. Why couldn't I have?

She pictured those women, their lives and bodies destroyed as a result of her greed. She thought of Jodie Sims and lamented, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I wish I could make it up to you.

I see the mistakes in my life, and how I tried to blame others. I can't do that anymore. The fault is mine, and I must face the consequences.

She lowered her head and spoke. "I have no defense, Your Highness. I am ... guilty."

King Mordecai's face was a cold mask, as if it were carved from the gold she had sought to attain for herself. "Very well. Life has been taken. Life must be taken." He stood, and leveled the scepter at her. "Patricia Savage, when the sun is high in tomorrow's sky, you will be taken to the temple, and it is there that your life will be taken from you in ritual sacrifice. Your body will be ... discarded ... in the sacrificial well. You will die without honor."

Although everyone expected the sentence to be harsh, the proclamation brought gasps from many of us. Pat stood there, unmoving. She had accepted her fate, like a lamb to the slaughter. Her shoulders were slumped, her head bowed. She was broken and defeated.

I looked over at Clark, wondering how he was taking this. His normally-chiseled countenance was even more so, and I could see his lips move slightly. I strained to hear what he was saying, and finally heard the word he repeated.

Sacrifice.

I tried to say something to him, but he suddenly bolted forward from the gallery, towards the throne. "I demand an audience of the King!" he spoke loudly and forcefully.

Just then, I knew what his plan was. "Oh, God," I whispered, and began to pray.

King Mordecai was shocked by the outburst. "Doc Savage, you have no -"

"As a recognized brother of the People of the Valley, I demand an audience of the King!" he repeated, clarifying himself. He stood tall.

King Mordecai's mouth closed. He sat, and was silent for several moments as their eyes met. Then he nodded. "Very well. Our brother is recognized. Speak."

Clark bowed low before the throne. "Your Highness. I deeply apologize for the impetuosity of my actions, but I must say ... what I have to say."

Clark stood tall and continued. "Your Highness. My cousin Pat means much to me. I know she has done wrong in the past, but I request she be given a second chance."

Mordecai was swift with his response. "Your request is denied! Life has been taken! Life must be taken! It is the law!"

"Then take mine," said Clark, his arms slightly away from him, his palms open and facing upwards. "Take my life in place of my cousin Patricia's. Honor will remain."

There was a collective gasp throughout the crowd at the declaration.

Pat swung around to face Clark. Her eyes were wide and full of tears. "NO!" she screamed. "You can't do this for me! You can't!"

Watching the drama unfold, I leaned in closer to my wife and whispered, "Greater love hath no man ..."
She nodded in recognition, then took my hand and joined me in prayer.

King Mordecai sat quietly, then suddenly -- and loudly -- commanded, "SILENCE!"

Everyone froze and held their breaths, waiting.

Mordecai stood at the top step of the throne and looked down. His face did not give away his thoughts.

"Clark Savage, Jr. Your father brought much to our Valley. We were in danger of becoming extinct from our own lack of knowledge. Your father educated us, helped us to survive. For this we owed him much -- our lives -- and repaid it with the gold to him, and to you.

"You have also brought much to this Valley, and to my -- our -- people. We also owe you a great deal.

"I will admit that your actions confuse me. I do not understand why you would wish to give your life in exchange for this person who brought death to one so close to both of us. But now I see, and I understand. And this action has returned the honor to our people."

He raised both arms skyward. "Let it be known that I rescind my sentence against Patricia Savage. You have shown humility in accepting your fate, and not arrogance. You have also shown compassion by not wanting your cousin to take your place. Your life is spared."

He paused, then lowered the rod straight at Pat. She looked up and met his eyes as he simply ordered, "Go now, and do no wrong."

At my side, I heard a choked whisper from my wife: "And Jesus told her, 'Go now, and sin no more.'"

Pat stood there transfixed. Then her eyes rolled up in her head and her legs folded. Clark was instantly there to catch her, lowering her to the floor.

When she came to a few moments later, the first thing she saw was Clark's smiling face over her. Gripping the arms that cradled her, she buried her face in his chest, tearfully repeating how sorry she was.

As he helped her to her feet, she noticed that Monja's family was not present. "They did not take the final judgement very well. But Mordecai is talking privately with them, and I believe he'll be able to help them understand."

"I hope so." She looked around and saw Woodward. With a less-than-confidant step she approached her and extended a hand.

"You beat the rap," said the black woman. "But we lost."

Pat met her gaze. "I'll make things right -- I promise you that. Just give me a chance."

Woodward looked at her, trying to see if she was real or bogus. Then she nodded, "Okay. We'll see."

"There's one more thing. I need to apologize to your people."

Her eyebrow raised. "What's your game now?"

"No game. You convinced me that changes need to be made. The first change has to be in me." She tapped her chest. "They need to know this."

"They'll never believe it."

"They will if you take me to them."

"I don't guarantee anything."

"I'm not asking you to."

She thought it over. "Deal. But let me suggest a different approach. We're gonna be here a few days patching things up and making good on our end of things. Join us. Work side-by-side with us. Get your hands dirty. Let them see the changes -- if there are any. Then they'll be more open to what you have to

say." She paused. "I still don't make any guarantee, and I might have Bonnie play bodyguard for you, but it's the best deal I can offer. What'cha say?"

Pat smiled. "You've got a deal."

The two women shook on it.

Chapter Seventeen

A very-frustrated Gumball was pacing the floor of his Osprey. "What is with you?" he said to the communications array, in response to the static that continued to grease the air. "For two full days I've been trying to get through to dad, and you --" He pointed accusingly at the array. "-- haven't let me get through. Now, let's try it one ... more ... time."

He entered commands and sent it again.

There was silence for a few moments. Then: "Clark! Clark! Is that you, son?"

"My God, it worked!" He looked up at the ceiling. "Thanks!"

Adjusting a couple of controls, he improved the strength of the signal. "Yes, dad! Can you hear me?"

There was a whoop. "My God, boy, am I glad to hear from you! Is everybody okay?"

"Yes, dad, we're fine. We're all fine." He paused. "Mission accomplished. The gold flow is restored."

"Thank God. Who was behind it all?"

"Just like you figured ... it was Pat."

There was an unusual pause. "It couldn't be."

"What?"

"Son, there was a story on the news. Pat was kidnaped by that Apex group. She's being held for ransom -- right now!"

Gumball gambled. "Did they mention anything about a Jillian Woodward?"

"Yeah -- they said she's the mastermind." He paused, and his voice was low. "Son, how'd you know her name? It was only in the news yesterday."

He grinned. "Are you sitting down, dad?"

"Yeah," he replied dubiously.

"Well, they're all here. Pat's here, Woodward's here, and Apex is here. Everyone."

"Son, I know you're not one to lie to me. You remember the last time you did."

"Dad, I'm not joking. If I understand things correctly, Pat came here first, to cut off the gold and bring us here -- just like we figured. Then while we were in Florida, Woodward and Apex came sweeping in and took over the place. We got here after that. But now it's all over."

"Amazing, son! So is everybody okay?"

"Amy got bruised up from a grenade blast; she's sore but doing great. But there were casualties before we got done."

Monk paused, then asked in a low voice, "Who?"

"Queen Monja. It looks like Pat gave her some of that youth-stuff, and it aggravated an existing heart problem, like Long Tom's. She's gone, dad."

Monk groaned. "Oh, God! How's Doc taking things?"

"Better, now. I'll explain it more to you later. Right now, it looks like Pat's turned over a whole new leaf, and she's made peace with Apex. Since yesterday, we've all been working together to repair the damage to the village. It's amazing, dad! Really amazing!"

"Okay!" There was a pause. "Son, I need to talk to Doc as soon as possible! We've got a situation brewing on the homefront that he needs to know about!"

"Sure, dad! Hold on!"

In his Oklahoma home, Monk Mayfair took a deep breath and uttered a private profanity. Then he reached for the cordless phone and his address book. A minute later he had his connection.

"Karleen speaking," answered a young female voice.

"Karli? Monk Mayfair."

"Hiya Monk! How's tricks?"

"Not bad. I've been kinda on the mend lately. Busted my ankle inna freak salsa accident."

"Only you, Mayfair. So what can I do for ya?"

"You're quick, Karli. Remember that story you did about the Savage kidnaping?"

"Yeah. Got picked up by CNN."

"Terrific! I'm prouda'ya!" He braced himself, then played his hand. "I need access to it, and quick!"

"What for?"

"I got a friend that might be able to help."

"Who?" she asked curiously.

"Woah there, ducky! You're the one always spoutin' about 'confidential sources', right? Well, this one might be a dead end, but they missed the headlines when they first came out. That's why I thought of you. Your story was first rate."

"Yeah ... but I don't know ..."

"Karli, who got'cha that exclusive footage of the demolition of the College, huh? That piece's been seen all over the place, from what I hear. So I figure you may owe me one, kid."

There was silence on the other end. "You're a dog, Monk."

"Yeah, but ya love me anyhow. So how soon can you get your hands on it?"

"It's in the library. I could zip you off a copy and overnight it to you ..."

"Actually," interrupted Monk. "I was thinking of something a little sooner. Can you rig up a direct computer feed, like, within an hour?"

She thought. "It's that important?"

Monk's voice lowered. "Karleen. If this is as important as I think, you have my word that you'll get a BIG piece of the action. Now, can you do it?"

She paused. "I can give it a try. Let me check a few things and get back to you."

"Deal." His ear detected a voice from the cell phone. He quickly picked it up and said, "Yeah, I'm here -- hang on a second!"

Returning to the cordless, he said, "I'll keep the phone close. I really appreciate this."

"Save it, Monk. You haven't gotten your feed yet. Later."

She hung up the phone. Monk set it down and picked up the cell.

Clark and Gumball stood next to the communications array. "Monk, are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here -- hang on a second!"

There was silence for a couple of minutes, then: "Doc, I think we got us a blockbuster!"

"Gumball started to tell me about it. What is it?"

He told him. Clark's expression didn't give away the thoughts inside. When Monk had finished, Clark said, "Very good, brother. We will assemble here in an hour. Will that give you enough time?"

"I hope so." He paused.

"There's more," sensed Clark.

"Yeah. Gumball said Patty's changed. Has she?" There was concern and compassion in his voice.

Clark smiled broadly. "Yes, Monk. Short of accepting Christ, she's a whole new person."

There was a sound on the other end. It almost sounded like a weary sob. Clark smiled again. A few moments later, Monk said, "Thanks. Let's keep this line open."

The passenger compartment of the Blue Thunder felt like a waiting lounge.

All of us were there, some standing, some seated. Since Amy was still on the mend, she took one of the chairs; Dot stood nearby. Gumball hung close to the communications array, as did Clark. I stayed offside but close enough to hear. Pat was standing near Clark, curious as to the reason for the gathering. Jill Woodward and King Mordecai were the last two to arrive, within a minute of each other. Clark greeted Mordecai and moved to the array.

"Monk, are you there?" he asked. "How is our reception?"

"Excellent," came the voice from several speakers in the Osprey. "I think our previous problems have cleared up."

"Everyone is here, and the sound system is working. You should be able to hear them clearly."

"Good," replied the simian chemist. "Patty -- you out there?"

Pat leaned in a bit. "Yes, Monk."

His tone softened. "It's good to hear your voice, Patty. You okay?"

She was hesitant. "Yes," she finally answered. "I'm -- I'm sorry, Monk. Can you forgive me?"

There was silence, but those of us who knew the man could picture him dabbing at moist eyes, his throat choked with joy. "Of course I do, Patty. Of course I do."

"Mayfair? What's goin' on?" spoke Woodward impatiently. "Clark said it included me and my group."

"You must be Doctor Jillian Woodward. Hiya, Doc!" He paused. "Okay, I'm gonna step aside and let this story speak for itself. Just so you'll know I'm on the level, the lady you'll see is a friend of mine in New York. She's straight, and this story made the networks. Everybody ready? I hope you're sittin' down, though. Beginning data feed in three ... two ..."

The video screen on the communications array came to life. Mordecai was fascinated with the technology, never having seen it before. Clark noticed his curiosity and lack of fear. On the screen, a professional-looking blonde anchorwoman looked out at the audience. "Today's top story -- cosmetics leader Penelope Savage has been kidnaped by terrorists. For more, we take you to Karleen Bush on Caroline Island."

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They switched to the reporter, a dark-haired young woman with a hand-held microphone. Behind where she stood, Pat recognized familiar features of her island and felt homesick.

"I'm speaking from Caroline Island, home of cosmetics matriarch Patricia Savage. Earlier today, in a press briefing, Acting Director Daniel Franklin announced the shocking news."

"Acting Director?" exclaimed Pat, doing a double-take. She didn't notice Jillian Woodward's brows furrowing.

The scene switched to another location on the island. The immaculately-dressed Franklin had walked up to a row of microphones on a hastily-assembled podium, and raised his hands for silence. Reading from a printed statement, he said, "Two days ago, while on a flight from here to Central America, the private plane containing Penelope Savage, her pilot and co-pilot, and two passengers, vanished from radar screens. Yesterday, we received a communication from the group calling itself Apex, asking for one billion dollars ransom for the safe return of Ms. Penelope and her party."

"WHAT?" exclaimed Woodward, bolting closer to the screen until she was side-by-side with Pat.

Franklin paused as the crowd reacted with mumbled exchanges, then continued. "I regret to announce that Ms. Patricia has ... chosen not to pay the ransom for her daughter's return -"

"That little WEASEL!" exploded Pat. "He's pretending that I'm there!"

"Ms. Patricia has appointed me as Acting Director of Patricia, Inc. until such a time as Ms. Penelope returns, or another Director is appointed. She is presently in seclusion here, in her home, praying for the safe return of her only daughter."

Pat released an angry scream that most of us saw coming.

"As of yesterday morning, we have turned over all evidence to Interpol, including a piece of information tying the group Apex to Dr. Jillian Woodward, a disgruntled former employee of Patricia, Inc."

"WHAT!" Woodward's jaw went slack and her eyes grew as big as saucers. A moment later her anger detonated in a string of profanities of thermonuclear proportions.

He lowered the paper and faced the cameras. "That's the end of the official statement. I am personally grieved by this whole matter, and ask for your thoughts and prayers for Ms. Penelope's safe return. Thank you all for coming."

The reporters tried firing a few questions, but the black man ignored them and walked away from the podium.

There were a few final words from Karleen Bush on the story before the screen went dark, but none of us heard them. There was a greater show right where we were, as both Pat and Woodward proceeded to verbally -- yet individually -- crucify Daniel Franklin. It was obvious that there was more behind this than met the eye.

I leaned in and whispered to Clark, "I thought I'd heard it all, but they're using language that would put most biker gangs to shame." He nodded.

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The stereophonic tirade continued for several seconds, until, without warning, the same phrase was spoken simultaneously by both women: "And to think, I slept with that horny toad!"

Everyone froze as if the compartment had suddenly been filled with liquid nitrogen. The silence was shocking.

Pat and Woodward looked at each other with expressions of horror and shock. Then as if they possessed one tongue, they blurted out, "YOU?"

Woodward started to say something more, but Pat held up a hand to still her. "I think you and I ought to have a little talk. Shall we?" She gestured for the exit. Woodward nodded and started out of the Osprey. Pat followed, stopping just long enough to look back at the communications array and say, "Monk? I owe you big time! I'll get back to you! Thanks!"

"Anytime, Patty," came the voice through the speakers.

Clark watched from the doorway while the rest of us recovered from the past few minutes' revelation. Then he returned to the array and announced, "Okay, Monk -- they're clear."

Monk let out a relieved whoosh of air and said, "Y'know, I don't know alla what went on with this Franklin bozo, but I sure hope he's got his life insurance paid up."

"Amen," echoed several voices.

King Mordecai was talking with Gumball, and Dot was talking with Amy. Clark was standing outside the aircraft, a pair of powerful binoculars to his eyes.

I walked over and looked in the direction he was facing. Then I said quietly, "You're reading their lips. What's the scoop?"

Without lowering the binoculars, he said, "Well, most of their conversation is predictably unrepeatable, but I believe I have the gist of the matter." He paused. "It appears that this Franklin fellow is -- was -- Pat's personal advisor."

"Emphasis on the 'personal,' I assume," I quipped.

"Indeed. He was also Woodward's ... paramour." He paused. "Apparently he manipulated both of them in order to gain the upper hand with Pat's company."

"And Franklin waited until they were both out of the country to make his public statement." I paused, and grinned. "Y'know, it may sound strange, but I praise God that Monk busted his ankle. If he hadn't, he'd be with us, here, and there'd be no one home to see the news broadcast, let alone have the connections to be able to send it to us."

"Yes." He lowered the binoculars. "They've put aside their differences in order to deal with their common foe, Daniel Franklin."

"God, help him," I voiced, seriously. "He'll need it."

Near the village, Woodward called her people together. Others gathered with varying suspicion to hear what the woman had to say.

"Ladies," she started. "Let me first say that I've never been more proud of you than I am now. We came here with a goal, and this day we have ACHIEVED that goal!"

There was a cheer among the camouflage-clad cadre.

"But now we must press on. We ... are ... needed, by no less than Patricia Savage herself." She paused. "She has given her word to me, as she has apologized for her actions to you, that changes will be made, that NO MORE ATROCITIES will be allowed by her company -- EVER!"

Another round of cheering.

"However, there is something that stands in our way -- another who has taken over the reins of control in her company. He is a slimy little weasel, and we're going to need to get him out of the way if we intend to truly succeed." She paused. "We need your help to deal with him, otherwise all that we have accomplished will have been done in vain ... including the deaths of our fellow sisters." She paused again, standing ramrod-straight, a fire in her eyes. The air around her was electrified. "I have fought a good fight against Patricia Savage. And now I choose to fight at her side."

She paused, then yelled, "WHO IS WITH ME?"

Bonnie Clayton stepped forward first, followed by the hooded Jodie Sims and several others. In moments, the entire crowd had shifted around Woodward.

We stood a short distance away, observing the display.

"She's certainly got style," commented Dot.

"Agreed. She is quite charismatic," added Clark.

"Doc?" asked Pat, standing next to her cousin. "Will you help me also?"

"Of course," he responded, meeting her gaze. "I am surprised that you doubted."

Then he gave her a large, tender hug. In his arms, she commented, "You never used to be a hugger. But I like this side of the new you."

"And I praise God for you," he whispered.

With the new goal before us, everyone got busy.

After a discussion among the pilots, it was decided that Gumball would coordinate the combined fleet of airplanes and helicopters, making sure everyone would get out of the Valley safely. He discovered that

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Alana was a Grade-A mechanic as well as a good pilot, and they had things running at optimum capacity in a short time.

Once King Mordecai spoke to the people of the Valley and enlisted their aid, the damages were repaired before the end of the day, as Mayan worked side-by-side with the women of Apex.

Clark, Pat, and Woodward mapped out their strategy for taking back the company. Monk, working with Mitch Drake, acted as liaison between the Valley and the outside world. While they were waiting for Monk, they pitched in with the repair work on the village.

It was still a couple of hours before the sun would set over the Valley, and Pat was carrying debris to a dump site outside of the village. Her clothes were torn and dirty, and she'd gotten scratched in several places not worth mentioning. But, somehow she couldn't understand, she felt cleaner inside. Alone at the site, she tossed the debris onto the pile, then suddenly heard an unfamiliar voice behind her.

"Don't move."

She obeyed, then slowly turned to face the speaker. It was one of Woodward's people, pointing a small twin-shot pistol at her from about twenty feet away. It didn't take an expert to know that, at that range, the small weapon was a deadly one.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Want? Oh, I want you. My name is Deuce Robinson. Sound familiar?" By the tone of her voice and the expressions crossing her face, it was obvious that she was not a stable person.

Pat ran the name through her memory. "You're Ace Robinson's sister."

The woman gave an odd lop-sided smile. "Very good. You and Ace used to be an item."

"I remember. How is he?"

Her voice went stone cold. "He's dead. After you ... threw him away like an empty beer bottle ... he committed suicide. And that's why I'm here, to even up the score."

Inside she groaned, wondering if she would ever get past all the people who apparently wanted her dead. Then she chose to bluff. "This is a small Valley. You'll never get away. Do you want that?"

Deuce coughed up a bitter laugh. "Do you think that matters to me? This gun has two shots. The first one is for you. The second is for me." Her smile was pure psycho. "I'm going to be with my brother."

Pat's eyes glanced around, but there was no place for cover. She could grab something from the debris pile for a shield or a weapon, but not before Deuce would fire.

"Oh, please do something stupid! I want you to be afraid, very afraid!"

Suddenly another voice broke in. "Fear is not an option."

From one side, Dot Liston casually walked into the clearing. Deuce's aim never wavered from Pat, but her eyes darted back and forth between the two women. Without hesitation, Dot stood in front of Pat, directly between the shooter and the intended target.

"Get out of my way!" warned Deuce. "I don't want you, I want her!"

"I won't let you," announced Dot defiantly.

"Get out of the way!"

"No," repeated Dot firmly. "Everybody deserves a second chance -- even her."

"No! This gun has two bullets! I can kill you both!"

Pat leaned closer to Dot. "Don't do this because of me, Dot!"

The brunette turned her head back, and whispered, "Go left on three!"

"Huh?" muttered Pat.

"Go left on three," she repeated, then faced forward. "Deuce. Doing this won't bring back your brother. Neither will killing yourself." She paused and shifted her weight. "Now I'm going to count to three, then I'm going to come over there and take your gun away." She paused again. "One."

Deuce's face mirrored confusion. "Are you crazy, lady? I've been practicing, and I'll kill you before you take two steps!"

Dot just grinned. "Take your best shot. Two."

Deuce took the pistol in both hands and leveled it at Dot's heart. At that distance, no one doubted its accuracy or effectiveness.

"Three!" exclaimed Dot, darting to the right as Pat darted to the left.

Deuce was momentarily distracted, moving her gun back and forth. Then she tracked on Pat and took aim. But before she could fire, a rock flew like a bullet from offside and smashed into her arm, causing the pistol to fly from her hands. Taking the cue from the yell of pain, Dot changed directions like a heat-seeking missile and plowed head-first into Deuce's midsection, causing them both to topple to the ground. A moment later, Dot straddled the other woman's torso, delivering a decisive punch to Deuce's jaw and defusing the threat.

Clark, Woodward, and I rushed into the clearing. As Clark went to assist Pat, I moved to my wife's side, helping her up and holding her close.

With a look of sadness and disgust at the actions of one of her own people, Woodward picked up the pistol, then walked over and handed it to Pat. "I am sorry," she said with heaviness and regret. "I had no idea."

"Nor did I," replied Pat. "But that was a long time ago, and I don't think she knew the full story of my relationship with her brother. The jerk used to get drunk all the time and trash whatever was within reach. It finally took a restraining order to get him off my back."

"So what do we do with her?"

"Let's put her on the Island and give her time to think things over. Then we'll both see if we can reason with her."

"Good idea. And just in case she decides that suicide is better than living, I'll post one of my troops with a tranquilizer gun."

Pat nodded. "Agreed. Thanks."

Chapter Eighteen

The dawn of our final day came quickly. We were packed and ready. All our preparations had been completed, except one very important one.

We'd spread the word to the people in the Valley, and now Clark, Dot, and I stood in the clearing next to the palace, waiting to see who would respond.

King Mordecai spotted us from his window in the palace and came out to investigate.

"We've issued an invitation to join us here for a word of prayer and supplication before we depart," answered Clark.

"Prayer ... to whom?" he asked, suspiciously.

"To the One True God, the Creator," replied Clark with a confident smile. "To Jesus the Christ."

He nodded. "Then I am where I should be," he replied.

Two women from Woodward's group arrived next. The epic events of the last few days had instilled in them a renewed respect for God. Following them, moving at a half-jog up the path from the pyramid, came Amy. She was out of breath. "Am I too late?"

"No," replied Dot, giving her a sisterly embrace. Amy was doing much better than any of had expected, much in part to the herbal treatments of the Mayans. They had allowed her to take samples of the herbs out of the Valley, a rare honor.

Over the next few minutes, others came. Jodie Sims joined them, and Bonnie Clayton. "I've seen too much not to know there's somebody out there coverin' our butts," commented Bonnie. "Puttin' in a word with the Guy In Charge before we set sail into those winds is a good idea."

Several others of Woodward's group approached, but just stood offside and watched. They were there more out of curiosity than participation.

Pat and Woodward arrived together. "So here's where you are," commented Pat.

"Care to join us?" offered Clark.

She hesitated. "Doc, I know you got religion, and I had my doubts because of that. I even called you weak because of it. But now I see there's more to this than I thought."

Next she turned to me and Dot.

Her voice was faltering for a moment, as if it was hard for her to express herself. "I remembered you, from Lincoln City, and New York. You were in disguise then, and you were nothing but an irritant to me. But here ... you've both risked your lives for mine. You had nothing to gain, and everything to lose." She paused. "I don't know how I can ever repay you."

Dot didn't hesitate to step forward and give Pat a hug as I simply said, "It's okay."

"Pat, will you join us?" asked Dot.

Her voice was thoughtful. "If you don't mind, I'd like to watch."

"No harm in that," replied Clark. "What about you, Ms. Woodward?"

"I don't know ... I mean, it doesn't take an Einstein to know that the Man Upstairs has been putting in some overtime hours on our behalf." She paused. "I went to Sunday School a long time ago, but ... I'm not sure ... with all the crap I've done, I don't even know if He'd listen to me." She paused again. "You guys pray, I'll watch with Pat."

"Accepted."

A few of Monja's children walked into the clearing. They told us that there were still a couple of their brothers and sisters who stoutly refused to forgive Pat for her actions, but those who had forgiven were far from giving up hope. "After all," said Miriam with a smile. "We are the children of our mother -- and she was a very stubborn woman."

Clark extended his arms to them. "That she was. I am honored to have you join us."

A few minutes passed without any additional participants. Clark looked as if he would start things, when we suddenly saw a young boy running towards us. Out of breath, he collided into Clark's arms. Panting, he looked up and asked in Mayan, "Honored one, you have not started yet?"

"No," replied Clark. "Why?"

Dot, staring ahead, abruptly put a hand on my shoulder. "Hon -- we're gonna have company!"

"What are you -" I started to say, then followed her gaze and froze.

It was a multitude.

From where we stood, it looked like every man, woman, and child from the village was going to be joining us in prayer. The clearing filled up quickly, and they still kept coming.

I looked over at Clark. There was a look of awe and wonder on his face, and tears of joy slid freely down his cheeks.

"It's a beautiful thing to see what your father started," I commented.

"Both of them," he replied, and I understood.

As the people settled in around us, Clark leaned towards me and asked, "Do you think you could translate my prayer from Mayan to English?"

I looked at the growing crowd, overwhelmingly Mayan, and nodded. "I'd be honored. Just keep it simple, okay?" I grinned.

Clark raised his arms high, and the crowd hushed. He looked out at the people, then upwards, and a smile came to his lips. Then, with a deep breath, he began in fluent Mayan: "Dear Heavenly Father, God of all Creation, we thank You ..."

Clark and King Mordecai stood on the bank of the river by the blue Osprey. They faced one another as friends and brothers, and clasped arms.

"Goodbye, Doc Savage, and safe journey."

"Before your mother died, she told of how proud she was of all her children, and that she knew you would be a fine successor. She was right. Do well, King Mordecai."

"Thank you."

"Once this is all over, I will return. I would like to visit here often. I regret being too busy to do that before."

"I will welcome your return," he said. "My Valley is your Valley, my people your people. You and your friends are always welcome."

"Thank you again. Farewell."

In years to come, many would refer to this as the Day of the Metal Birds.

Either out of curiosity or excitement, few could keep away. The natives lined the sides of the lake, showing a fond farewell to the famous Man of Bronze and his friends. The chopping of the many rotors was a strong enough image in itself, as the combined sounds of two Ospreys and three helicopters reverberating off the walls of the Valley was unavoidable.

Blue Thunder was the first to move, cruising across the lake and suddenly taking to the air. It banked right and began a slow circle about the inner rim of the Valley.

Then the small Huey took to the air, followed by the larger Chinook helicopters. They hovered, and took their position on either side of the river.

Finally, Pat's pilots professionally lifted the Osprey into the air and hovered a moment over the golden pyramid.

"Okay, Gumball," said Clark from the co-pilot seat. "It's your show."

"Thank you, Doc." He keyed the microphone. "Blue Thunder to Exodus Wing," he addressed the newly-named group of aircraft. "Okay, everybody -- here we go! Valkryies, cue the music!"

From the Chinooks' sound system, music played. It was a familiar piece for those inside the aircraft, and brought a grin to Gumball's face.

"The 'Raiders' March?" asked Clark with a tilt of the head.

Gumball nodded excitedly. "Yeah, ain't it somethin'? I had the CD and they had the sound system! So I thought we might as well head out in style!" He keyed the microphone again. "Okay, Exodus Wing ... FOLLOW ME!"

Blue Thunder made once last curve and went straight up the lake and through the narrow mouth of the Valley. Behind it, as if caught in its wake, was Pat's Osprey, then the three helicopters. From the ground, it was a magnificent sight, augmented by the dramatic music.

It would be an image that would long be remembered.

Chapter Nineteen

Twin Ospreys cruised the sky over the Mediterranean, moving as one with a single goal in mind.

It had been thirty-one hours since our departure from the Valley of the Vanished. We made several stops, especially one at an private air field in Florida where Mitchell Drake and his professionals awaited us. It was here where Blue Thunder had been miraculously re-converted from seaplane back to airplane.

"We're coming up on five minutes to the drop zone," announced Woodward. "Everybody ready?"

"Ready," replied Gumball. "Let's do it."

I stood with the others in the passenger area, dressed in black, wearing an eerily familiar paraglider. As I thought about our destination, I knew what God had in mind when He inspired us to learn skydiving several weeks ago. I glanced around at those who were jumping with me, and saw the same bold determination in their faces.

"Does this all look familiar?" asked Dot, leaning in close and placing a hand on my shoulder.

"Our dreams." I nodded. "Amazing how God works things out."

"Yeah. You ready?"

"Only by God's grace," I replied with a grin.

She smiled and leaned in for a kiss.

"OPEN THE DOOR!" called out Gumball. "SIXTY SECONDS TO DROP!"

The Bronze Saga #2: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

Because the side door of the Osprey was dangerously close to the rotors when in horizontal flight, it was decided that we would hover briefly high above the island and parachute from that platform.

Clayton opened the door, and we felt the sudden rush of air. As we lined up behind the doorway, she went from person to person, making one last check of our gear. As she checked mine, she gave me a toothy smile, and a thumbs-up.

"Good luck!" she yelled above the roar of the wind.

I nodded and returned the thumbs-up, but knew luck would have no part in our success. Prompted, I offered up another quick prayer on our behalf.

Then it was time.

Clark was first in the doorway when Clayton smacked him on the back. Without hesitation he stepped out of the doorway and vanished.

Next was Dot. I saw her disappear into the night sky, and knew that I was the next to jump.

As I stepped forward, I suddenly remembered a verse about God's angels keeping guard over us, so that we wouldn't even dash our foot against a stone. Then I felt the slap on my back, and took the step of faith.

It was really quite nice up there, as Caroline Island loomed beneath us. I could see the forms of my wife and friends, as one by one they opened their canopies and took the reins of control.

I finished my counting and pulled the ripcord. There was the initial jerk as the canopy caught the air, then it filled out and I began my glide.

I looked down at the island, and marveled at how God had led us every step of the way, preparing us for this very moment. It was like having *deja vu* for something that never had happened in the first place.

I saw a few of the canopies heading for the base of the large house on the hill. These were Woodward's people, who would neutralize any opposition and secure the house. Then my attention turned back to my own flight path. I was aiming for the large terrace on the very top of the hill. I saw two -- then three -- touch down successfully. They quickly released their chutes and pulled them aside for the next one down.

That would be me.

The ground came up swiftly, and I made one last appeal for a soft landing. Then my feet made contact, and I ran a few steps as I came to a halt. I started collecting my canopy, assisted by Clark's sudden appearance.

"You okay?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes," I nodded.

I released my harness, ditched my canopy offside with the others', and followed our black-suited leader as she led us expertly around the side of the structure and through a door.

Inside the hall, we became still and waited. Our leader removed her hood, smoothed out her hair and straightened her outfit. A moment later, she opened the door at the end of the hall and silently walked into the room.

She left the door ajar, as we waited for our cue.

"Daniel, dear," she said, just loud enough to be heard. "Time to wake up."

The figure under the covers in the master bedroom stirred. She switched a desk light on and his eyes opened from the glare. Seeing the woman standing at the foot of the bed, he sat up with a start and gasped, "Pat!"

"Yes, dear," she cooed sweetly. "I'm back. Did you miss me?"

"But how ... who ...?" he stammered.

"How did I get here? How did I get free? Well, I had help ... from some new friends ..."

That was our cue. All but one of us walked into the bedroom and filed behind Pat, dressed from neck-to-toe in black outfits, our faces and hands streaked with black camouflaging. Needless to say, we were sufficiently intimidating.

Then the last of us walked in and took her position next to Pat. The man in the bed appeared to have stopped breathing for a moment, and his expression went from merely scared to absolutely terrified.

"JILL?" he blurted.

"Hello, Danny," the other figure said sweetly.

"But what ...," he started to say.

Woodward cut him off. "What am I doing here? Well, my new friend Pat and I have been comparing notes, and your name came up often." Her face went stone cold, and her eyes bored straight through him. "We're here to settle accounts."

"BUT I CAN EXPLAIN!" he squealed loudly, his hands out in front of him as if they could push the image away from him.

"Oh, don't bother," replied Pat, smiling. "It wouldn't help things, anyway." She and Woodward produced two nasty-looking pistols. They lifted them simultaneously, their laser sights making little red dots on Franklin's chest.

"Goodbye, Daniel ... you're fired!"

His mouth opened and he released an ear-piercing shriek of terror as they fired as one. The shells impacted with a sickening thud, and Franklin was thrown backwards. He didn't move.

The two women exchanged a high-five.

Woodward lifted her pistol. "Not bad. Very satisfying. What about you?"

She smiled. "Works for me."

"What did you call these?"

"Mercy bullets," explained Pat. "Although mercy wasn't what I had in mind."

Woodward nodded. "So, now what --" she started to say, but was interrupted by a buzz from the radio at her hip. A moment later, she announced, "The house is secure. No injuries, no casualties. I'll radio the Ospreys and let them know it's safe to land."

Pat nodded. She looked back at Franklin in the bed, sighed heavily, then walked out through the bedroom's glass double doors onto the terrace. She stood at the stone wall and looked out over Caroline Island. After a few seconds, she heard Clark's heavy footfalls, but didn't turn around.

"This spot looks out over the whole island," she said. "I always got a rush standing here, knowing it was all mine. But not now."

Clark put his hands on her shoulders and started to gently massage them. "We've both gone through a lot, Pat."

She didn't resist the contact. "Yeah, that we have."

"I love you, Pat."

Her hand reached up, touching his and squeezing lightly. She smiled.

Chapter Twenty

Doc and his friends had been the last to leave the island, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Pat Savage was home.

Her company was hers again.

That rat Franklin was in the custody of Mitchell Drake, temporarily, until he could be delivered to the Valley of the Vanished, to face some poetic justice under King Mordecai's rule. When she found out he had set up Deuce Robinson as a backup to kill her in case there was a possibility of her returning to her company, she practically went through the roof, but picturing dear Daniel on the Island of Shame quenched that and brought a smile to her face.

That night, she slept in one of the guest bedrooms, not ready for the memories her master bedroom brought. In the morning, she made herself something to eat, having discovered that her entire household staff had been dismissed by Franklin shortly after his takeover of the house. Oh, well, she thought, at least I have some peace and quiet in my own home again.

By the end of that first full day back, she discovered an ugly reality that faced her. Restoring order to her company hadn't been a problem. Several phone calls rescinded Franklin as Acting Director, and had put

the controls in the hands of administrative heads who could be trusted. When asked about Franklin, Pat was quick to explain that he had taken ill and would be on an extended leave of absence. They bought that.

But then they asked about Penelope.

Pat was stumped. So she kept the story going, that Penelope was still in the hands of Apex, waiting for the payment of ransom. Actually, she just wasn't ready to deal with it.

So the company was safe for the moment.

She, on the other hand, wasn't.

Penelope couldn't just show up and declare herself freed. The media would not give up until they were satisfied -- and they rarely were -- with the full story of Penelope's release.

But, because of that, it meant that she couldn't go anywhere she might be recognized -- including the little hamlet at the bottom of the hill, where her world-famous spa was.

So she was exiled to her own home, until something could be done about Penelope.

She busied herself by going through the house and obliterating every reminder of Daniel Franklin, mostly by building a fire with them. When she found his computer, with its tie-in to the tracer within the Osprey, she made a quick trip to her room.

She placed several items on the bed -- that would have to go, too -- then took careful aim and emptied her six-shooter into the defenseless computer. After that was done, she used the steel fireplace poker and a heavy cast-iron fry pan to finish the job.

Covered in sweat and panting with exertion, she smiled wide and said, "I got YOU, babe!"

The excitement was over. The cleaning was done. And now Pat had to face the truth.

She was alone.

She'd tried finding some solace in the view from the terrace wall, or in working out in the weight room.

She had time to think. About trust. She'd been burned bad by the one she thought was her closest friend. It made it hard to trust people. Not all people, she corrected herself. She could trust her employees; they were getting paid to do their work, and they did it well. And a big exception was Doc. She saw so many things in him now that didn't exist before, especially a form of compassion that took her by surprise. She figured it was due to that religious thing of his, but she didn't want to get into that now. He'd always been intuitive almost to the point of psychic, but he knew what she needed. Right before they left, he promised to call every day, and see what he could do to help her through the rough spots. And he kept his promise. He called her twice a day, seeing how she was doing, and tying up some loose ends.

Woodward and Apex had stayed on in Florida, and were currently working with Mitchell Drake. He saw a lot of talent in them and promised to help as best as he could.

Doc also told Pat about a fiend of his, a woman, that he wanted her to meet.

"You need a companion," he said.

"You make it sound like you're sending me a robot," she remarked snidely.

In times past, Pat knew, a comment like that would've embarrassed Doc. But the loud open laugh she heard through the phone was unexpected. "That's good, Pat! Okay, so I don't know what they call it these days, but the fact is, you need a friend. Another woman." He paused. "Her name is Carrie, and she knows about me. I trust her explicitly."

The serious tones of his last sentence wore through much of her stubbornness. Still, she responded, "Yeah -- that's what I thought about Franklin."

But Doc wouldn't let the matter die. He continued to offer his friend's companionship until he got through to her. Reluctantly she accepted, and he replied that Gumball could fly her there by the next day.

So now she was standing on the terrace, and saw the blue Osprey circle the island once before landing. Five minutes later, it lifted off and headed east back towards the States. Soon after, there was a buzz from the front gate. She was here. Pat instructed her to be directed upstairs, then waited. The sound of footsteps coming up the stone steps along the side of the house heralded the woman's arrival.

"Ms. Savage?" called a woman's voice. "Pat?"

"Up here," she called back. "At the top of the stairs."

The woman came within view, and Pat gave her the critical eye. The woman was in her 40's, dressed in a casual outfit and a wide-brimmed hat. Her professional eye saw her as a handsome woman who wore very little makeup. Her body language suggested a strong self-confident attitude. It should have bugged her, but it didn't. She also wore glasses, the yellow-tinted type that Pat had seen before.

"My name's Carrie," she said, as she approached with her hand outstretched. "Clark called ahead about me?"

"Yeah. He thinks I need a babysitter."

Carrie shook her head, her red hair waving gently. "No, that's not it. Clark cares a great deal for you, and he just wants to help. Besides, I'm not a babysitter any more than you're a baby."

Pat chuckled; she had a point. She accepted the hand; the grip was impressive. "Okay. So where do we start?"

"Well, you've just been through a bad relationship. You've been burned by someone close." She paused, looking her in the eye. "Why don't we sit down, have a cup of coffee, and I'll tell you all about myself."

"That's a good idea. And I've got a special blend I get from a coffee dealer in Rome."

"Practically next door," the other woman quipped.

They both smiled, then Pat led the way down to the kitchen.

The smell of coffee beans was wonderfully heavy in the air. The kitchen had a small table-for-two near a window and a lower terrace with a garden. Carrie sat at the table while Pat fixed the coffee and brought down some pastries.

"So what's Doc told you about me?" she asked.

"That you're his cousin, and you've been through quite an ordeal lately. That you've gotten burned by a close friend and were almost killed. He cares for you very much, you know."

She nodded. "Yes, I know."

As they sat and enjoyed the repast, Carrie opened up about herself. She told about her marriage and premature widowhood at the hands of a drunk driver; about her daughter Dorothy, now grown and married; and about her career as director of the Serenity Drug and Alcohol Freedom Center in New York.

"That's how I came to meet Clark," she explained. "He and Perry brought in a homeless man for detox. After the man got cleaned up, he was sent to a group home in Portland, Oregon. Last I heard, he's doing just great."

"Sounds like Doc, all right," Pat commented with a smirk. "He hasn't changed, he's just adapted to the times."

"Yes," agreed Carrie. "He's a wonderful man."

"You sound like your interest in him is more than a passing friendship," intoned Pat.

"I will admit, he'd make a good catch for any woman. But, truly, we're just good friends."

"What about your parents?" asked Pat.

"My father's still alive. My mother deserted me when I was a baby," she replied with a hint of bitterness that Pat avoided commenting on.

As they continued, Carrie related the Central Park story, when Clark foiled a purse thief, intercepting the runner while wearing rollerblades. "They were the skates with the really big wheels for tackling any terrain, and he sailed through the park like he was born with them!"

"Rollerblades? Doc?" she laughed. "I'd love to have had a picture of that!"

Carrie shared in the laugh. "So would I, and I was there!"

Pat changed the subject. "Did you know when they visited me in disguise?"

Carrie paused briefly, and her face got serious. "I knew they went, but I never did get all the details. What happened?"

"I was surprised and angry when I saw him for the first time in fifty years. I blamed him for a lot of my problems." She paused and shrugged. "He wasn't there, so he made a good scape goat. And I ... was stupid." She let her voice drift off, and the subject drop. She didn't mention the fact that she had had them both knocked out, and planned to fly them to the island on a one-way trip. The thought even now embarrassed her.

As they talked into the evening, Pat was careful about opening up to Carrie. She didn't want to be vulnerable again.

She was looking for a reaction, good or bad, before continuing. But she was surprised. Carrie was extremely diplomatic, and never reacted negatively. As a matter of fact, hardly anything shocked her. Pat attributed the unflappable exterior to years working with all manner of substance abusers in New York City.

That evening, Clark called as usual.

"Okay, I'll admit I was very apprehensive of you sending Carrie to me," she started, speaking from a separate room. "But she's okay. I've asked her to stay in one of the guest rooms while she's here."

"Good, Pat! I'm glad! She's a very special lady, and I knew you two would get along well."

"Yeah, you may be right," she agreed.

Carrie stayed in the guest room for the next two weeks, and they became fast friends. There was something about her, something Pat couldn't put her finger on, that made Carrie easy to be around -- and to open up to.

They spent their days working around the house, exercising in the weight room, and laying out in the Mediterranean sun. Both of them checked in with their offices, to see how things were running in their absence. They had leadership in common, and shared their struggles without hesitation.

Then one day, Carrie knew the time was right.

It was afternoon, and they were doing a little martial arts sparring in the weight room.

"I have to confess something to you," she said.

"What?" answered Pat, sending a straight-arm punch to Carrie's head.

Sweeping roundhouse blocked the punch. "We've met before." Punch.

Forearm intercepted the punch. "Really? Where?" Kick.

Leg swing deflected the kick. "A little place on the Oregon coast." Straight-arm punch with her right fist to Pat's face. "Lincoln City."

Pat's block froze far short of the intercept. Carrie pulled her punch, and her knuckles lightly brushed against the tip of Pat's nose. The effect, however, was explosive. Pat's head snapped back as if she had collided with the business end of a baseball bat. She staggered back and fell in a clumsy heap. Pointing an accusatory finger, Pat yelled, "YOU!"

Carrie casually folded her arms across her chest. "Yes. I was the one."

Pat was instantly overcome with emotions: frustration, anger, fear, betrayal, confusion. Suddenly her lips pulled back in a feral grin, and she took off in an animal-like leap for Carrie.

But the redhead had expected this move. She sidestepped the woman, causing her to crash into some exercise equipment. Unfazed, she got to her feet and charged again. Carrie went into a low crouch, grabbing Pat's outfit as she passed close, and used her own weight against her. She hit the floor in a wild tumble. This went on for a full ten minutes as Pat charged like a rabid bull and Carrie ducked, dodged, or otherwise kept from being hurt. The final move was when Pat landed flat on her stomach, knocking the wind out of her, and Carrie pinned her arms to her side and landed on her back.

"You done?" asked Carrie, not even out of breath. "I have a few things to tell you that you probably won't like."

Pat's response was a barrage of cursing while bucking like a wild bronco. But she didn't have a third of the strength left, so was tired within a minute.

"Good. Now listen up. I work with substance abusers every day. And God knows I've seen enough over the years. So I know what I'm talking about when I say that you fit the profile."

"I don't ... take drugs," grunted Pat between profanities.

"What about the silphium?"

"Silphium is an herb!"

"So's cannabis. But both can be dangerous if abused."

"I don't abuse silphium!"

"Don't you?" A laugh exploded from her mouth. "Look at you. You're over eighty, yet the silphium has made you look half that. You've even had to invent a daughter so you could walk around in public safely."

"But you don't see what it's doing to you. It's eating you alive. Your body requires larger doses just to maintain your youthful image. Eventually the doses will become so large that you'll need them constantly just to keep the illusion alive." She paused. "You're no better than a Skid Row crack user. You're both slaves to your 'drug of choice', and you're both running away from something."

Pat's breathing had increased, and she shifted uncomfortably under Carrie.

"You're afraid -- afraid of getting old, afraid of being alone. Well, you brought this on yourself. You gave away everything close to you. Your life ... your love ..." She paused and lowered her voice. "And your daughter."

Carrie wasn't entirely prepared for the strength of Pat's reaction. She bucked like a pack of mules, tossing Carrie ungainly onto her backside. The two of them wrestled about the floor of the weight room, finally resulting in Pat being pinned again, but on her back. "WHAT GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO TALK TO ME LIKE THAT?" Pat screeched.

Carrie said nothing. She simply swept her red hair away from her face and looked at Pat.

For several seconds they looked at one another. Then, suddenly, the strength seemed to drain from Pat. "Your ... eyes. Flecks of gold?" she observed.

"It's a family trait," explained Carrie, standing up and sitting on the floor a few feet away. "I got mine from my mother."

Pat sat up, her face pale. She looked over at the other woman and squeaked, "Caroline?"

Carrie took a deep breath, exhaling it in a sigh. "Mother?"

Pat sat still, looking at Carrie from a whole different perspective now.

"Clark called me into this to bring us together, to give us a chance to finally talk." Carrie rubbed a sore knee. "Well, we've talked."

Pat's mouth opened a couple of times, but no sound came out.

Carrie continued. "Be honest with me ... were the things I confronted you with true, or not?"

Pat looked down at the floor. "True." Then she sighed heavily, "I'm scared. I've screwed up my life and I'm scared that there's no hope for me now."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," she said almost jovially. Then she changed the subject. "Have you met Perry and Dot?"

"Yeah." She looked up and smiled. "They both saved my life. They put their own lives on the line ... for me."

"Dot ... is the Dorothy I told you about. She's my daughter."

"My ... granddaughter?" she gasped, and went dead pale.

Carrie nodded, and watched as Pat sat motionless for almost four minutes. Then the emotional barrier Pat Savage had built around her and kept maintained for decades, fell like the Berlin Wall. She took in a sudden deep breath, lowered her head into her hands, and exploded into uncontrollable sobbing.

Carrie watched her biological mother's tears for only a few seconds before her own heart was broken. A moment later she crawled over to Pat's side, put her arms around her, and they cried together.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Bronze Saga #2: MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

It can be so cool being part of history in the making. And, on that significant day, I would be one of the few who could say 'I was there.'

The location was the familiar terrace at the top of Caroline Island. Dot and I were there, as was a slightly disguised Clark. And so were half a dozen media camera crews, all here to record this event. They had been waiting for a little while.

I glanced down at the black armband worn just above my left elbow, then looked up as I heard a sound, followed by a dozen voices talking in reaction. The door to the master bedroom had opened, and Carrie stepped out. She gave us a subtle nod, then moved aside. The instant Pat stepped into the sunlight, the cameras started clicking like a Geiger counter reacting to a chunk of uranium.

She was clothed in a simple dress befitting the mild weather. The media people caught every movement on film and video as she moved with exquisite grace from the door to the small dais with the row of microphones. Slowly turning her head to view the viewers, she caught our eyes and -- with a smile -- lowered her head to acknowledge us. She raised a less-than-smooth hand to her hair, brushing aside the bronze hair -- now streaked with silver -- from her lined face. There was a peace on her face that could only originate from one place, as she faced the world.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you all for being here today.

"Two months ago, my daughter Penelope was abducted by members of the terrorist group Apex -- in conjunction with a member of my own staff -- and was held for ransom.

"A special paramilitary operations team, at great personal risk, penetrated their stronghold in an attempt to rescue her.

"They failed.

"The terrorists detonated an explosive device which killed most of their group, several of the operations team -- and my daughter." There were assorted gasps and murmurs from the crowd. She paused several seconds, then continued. "Over the last few weeks, I've been doing a lot of thinking. As a result, I wish to announce some major changes.

"Due to my encounter with Apex, I've 'reconsidered' my position on Patricia, Inc. as a cosmetics giant. Therefore, I will be dissolving the company shortly. I wish to assure my loyal workers all over the world, I have not forgotten you, and I guarantee a satisfactory outcome all around.

"I am an old woman, although I may appear to be younger than I seem. Through the years I have been receiving special herbal treatments which have produced the woman you see before you. But I am well beyond my child-bearing years. I will no more be able to produce an heir to carry on the Savage name.

"Instead, I have decided to direct my attention outward, to the children of the world. I will be sponsoring foster homes, adoption agencies, child relief agencies, children' hospitals -- and I will even support those agencies who would choose life for the unborn. As a result, I'm afraid I'm going to make those who visit my island spa very disappointed, in that I will soon be undertaking a project to convert Caroline Island into a haven for children all over the world to live safe, and free.

"Soon, from this very terrace, you will hear the laughter of children. Happy children, no longer scourged by fear and hate, but who will know security, and hope ... and love.

"I have lost a daughter, but I have gained ... a family." A tear slid down a wrinkled cheek, as her voice cracked. "Thank you all."

She swiftly turned from the dais and through the doors of the master bedroom, with Carrie at her elbow, assisting.

Several people tried to rush in for more personal questions, but four brawny women with SECURITY tee-shirts kept them at bay. Grudgingly, the news crews finally broke down their stuff and were escorted to vehicles that would take them to the helipad.

I caught Bonnie Clayton's eye. Her hair shorter and swept back, and dressed in her white SECURITY CHIEF tee-shirt, she smiled at us, then assisted someone from CNN with their gear.

Clark and Dot had maneuvered through the security line and were heading for the 'wrap party' in the master bedroom. I quickly followed. As my eyes adjusted to the light change, I saw Pat hugging both Carrie and Clark. They were laughing with relief.

"I'm sure glad that's over," commented Pat.

"Amen," sighed Carrie. "Penelope is gone for good. And I'm definitely not going to miss her."

"If I recall, there wasn't much there to miss," Clark added with a grin. "I like Pat much better. And I think you settled at just the right age."

Someone else got Pat's attention. She excused herself and broke away.

I joined Clark and Carrie. "She looks good," I said. "But how is she REALLY doing?"

Carrie smiled proudly. "She's over the worst of it. The last three weeks at Dad's place was just what she needed to get her through withdrawal. And we've all gotten a bit closer through it." Her smile spontaneously burst into a wide grin. "What's amazing is how Pat and Mom are quickly becoming good friends. I can't believe how Mom stayed up all those nights while Pat literally kicked and screamed through withdrawal. I tell you, it made me really respect them both." She paused and stood a bit taller. "Y'know, I think I got a good mix, genetically and environmentally."

"I think you're absolutely right," replied Clark with a nod.

"Well, congratulations! I have to admit, you really pulled it off."

"Jill," she said, hugging the black woman. "I can honestly say that I could not have done it without you and the others."

"Thank you, Pat."

"Hey, I heard you got in with that Drake guy. How's that working out?"

She sighed with a smile. "I'm a scientist, Pat ... I'm not cut out to be a terrorist ... and I'm back doing what I do best. Plus it's such a relief not having to worry about who's coming up behind me." She paused, glancing to the left and right, leaning in closer. "And besides ... Mitch is a hunk, and he's single!"

They both exploded in laughter.

Several minutes later, Pat came alongside me and Dot.

"So what's the next move?" asked Dot.

"Well, now that the gold's restored, the sky's the limit. I'm confident that many of my employees will want to be part of this new endeavor, especially if I offer them fully-paid schooling and reemployment assistance." She smiled at the thought. "I'd also like to get involved with the Institute. And I have a family to get to know, a daughter ... and a granddaughter."

Clark came alongside us as someone came in from the terrace.

Bonnie Clayton announced with pleasure that the media had left the island -- signifying that the coast was now clear. Then she sauntered over to Clark and smiled.

"Clarkie. I just wanted to say somethin'. Back there, in the Valley, you whipped my tail with some dynamite moves. And I like your style. So what d'ya say, tall, bronze and handsome, 'bout you an' me goin' out on the town sometime? You like music?"

He nodded. "You like jazz?"

She grinned. "Honey, I was born in New Orleans -- we invented it."

He reached out a large hand. "Then it's a date."

She took his hand. As they stood face-to-face, of equal height, they actually looked normal. "I better get back to work, honey. Bein' Chief of Security is a big responsibility," she said proudly.

But before she left, she took Clark's head between her hands and planted a World-Class kiss on his mouth. Several seconds later they separated, and she said with a grin, "Later, sugah!"

As she sauntered out of the room, Pat suddenly exploded with laughter. "Better watch yourself ... Clarkie," she quipped. "This could spoil your amateur standing."

Clark blushed and gave Pat a nasty look and a sideways hug. "Welcome back, Pat."

Suddenly, the door from the hallway opened and a teenaged girl ran in. Her sandy brown hair was stylishly short, and her smooth, clear face was the picture of youth. She called Pat's name and rushed into her open arms. "We were watching it on tv, Pat! You were awesome!"

"Thanks," she replied sincerely. Then her tone took a serious, concerned tilt. "How about you? How are you feeling?"

"Like a million!" she squealed happily. "It works, it really, really works!"

With tears rolling down her face, and her voice cracking, she looked into the girl's eyes and said, "Everyone deserves a second chance, Jodie. I'm glad I could help."

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"Me, too," she replied, also in tears. "Thanks, again! The girls are waitin' for me! I'll see you later ... Aunt Patty!"

Exchanging kisses on the cheeks and a final hug, they separated.

As Pat watched her go, she suddenly felt Clark's hands lightly squeeze her shoulders from behind. "You did good," he whispered.

"Yeah," she nodded, tears streaming down her smiling face. "She used to be the big sister to Jade, Pooh, and Lizzy," she reflected aloud. "Now she's their age ... again."

THE END

TO MY READERS: I INVITE ANY SUGGESTIONS and/or IDEAS YOU WOULD HAVE FOR FUTURE ADVENTURES. CONTACT ME VIA EMAIL AT SKYLAB@E-Z.NET .

*** DEDICATION and ACKNOWLEDGMENTS **

* TO MY LORD AND GOD JESUS CHRIST: without Him I would be nothing, and this story would not be what He wanted.

* TO ALL OUR READERS, old and new: our thanks now and in advance.
We have touched your hearts, and you have touched ours.
You are the friends we have never seen, you are our Extended Family of Bronze.

* TO MY WIFE, MY KAREN, helpmeet, co-writer and proofreader, who never gave up on me.

Mark Eidemiller -- February 7, 2001