

LONGWALKERS
RETURN *of the*
NEPHILIM



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Longwalkers: The Return of the Nephilim

[Enoch 6:1-2, 7:1-6](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

LongWalkers:
The Return of the Nephilim

Stephen Quayle and Duncan Long

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Enoch 6:1-2, 7:1-6

And it came to pass when the children of men had multiplied, that in those days were born unto them beautiful and comely daughters. And the angels, the children of the heaven, saw and lusted after them, and said to one another: Come, let us choose us wives from among the children of men and beget us children.

And they became pregnant and brought forth giants. And when men could no longer sustain them, the giants turned against them and devoured mankind. And they began to sin against birds, and beasts, and reptiles, and fish, and to devour one another's flesh, and drink the blood. Then the earth laid accusation against the lawless ones.

Prologue

Gaul, 109 BC

The battle would be soon. Of that, Consul Marcus Junius Silanus was certain. He wore full armor. Sitting on his horse, the consul squinted toward the sun that glimmered over the hill above them, its beams filtering through the thick morning haze toward the Roman legionnaires arrayed in the forest clearing along the Rhone River Valley. Wisps of fog rose from the river and danced like sprites before melting away with the coming daylight.

Silanus gazed up the hill that the Teutons would undoubtedly charge down before the sun had climbed much higher. They would slam into his men in waves; the barbarians always thought they'd overcome the ranks of Roman soldiers through brute force. But the savages were always wrong. The Roman fighting machine had been carefully honed for centuries and would chew up those foolish enough to try such tactics, just as it had time and time again in the past. There would be a horrible slaughter and for all practical purposes, the battle was already won.

Silanus' scouts had spent weeks searching for the perfect site to funnel the enemy into. Their trap was the thick forest on either side of a clearing with a long slope toward the open river valley.

The Romans had set up camp in the valley in what the barbarians would see as a weak position. With any luck, the Teutons would become overconfident, thinking they could snare the legionnaires in a weak position. In fact, the Romans would be waiting, luring the savages to attack, and the battle would turn to the Roman's advantage.

However, all was not certain.

The majority of Silanus' troops were raw conscripts.

And there were the rumors that threatened to weaken the resolve needed for victory. Camp gossips had been spreading tales; their claim, that giants walked among the enemy. That tales would be proven false the moment the enemy closed with the Roman ranks. But in the meantime, it created fear among those unseasoned by battle.

What stories soldiers will believe. Silanus shook his head. Then, with a grim smile, he reminded himself that one time not that long ago, he had believed the camp gossip as he prepared for his first battle. The enemy had a thousand chariots, he had been told. He had lost control of his bladder that day, before even one of the enemy had come into sight, and then four threadbare chariots had come onto the battlefield. He and the others had laughed aloud that day.

And the slaughter had been great, just as it would be today.

A green soldier will believe almost anything he's told about an enemy. But seeing the massacre dealt by Roman swords quickly demonstrated the superiority of training and tactics. It was not rare to see hundreds of an enemy fall before the Roman *gladii* and *pila* for each Italian who died.

The gods willing, soon his troops would know better, too. Silanus turned toward the centurion next to him. "Do you believe the rumors?"

"Rumors, sir?"

Silanus suppressed a smirk. The centurion's voice betrayed him. "About the giants."

"I have heard stories, general. Some of the men half believe the tales. Even some of the scouts claim it's true."

"They'll see soon enough," Silanus said. "These Teutonic giants will prove to be no bigger than our conscripted Celts. Giants of a sort, yes. But like the Celts, these will fall to our blades just like other men. You'll see. And one day soon, most likely before either of us sees the cold of the grave, what's left of this

tribe we'll fight today will be signing a treaty with Rome. Five years from then, they'll be marching with Roman soldiers to fight other barbarians. Then they will likely hear the rumors of enemies with dragons, or ogres, or some such thing fighting with the enemy. There are always rumors."

The centurion started to reply, but then held his tongue as Silanus lifted his hand.

In the distance, a trumpet warned of the approaching enemy.

Silanus surveyed the ranks on either side of him. The soldiers rose, lifting weapons and checking equipment. Shields were lifted and the men looked worried as they got into formation. Within a minute, they were standing shield-to-shield, silent except for the soft rustle of leather and steel.

This is the time when discipline overcomes fear, the consul thought. This was the time when Roman soldiers proved that training and obedience were worth more than raw might or numbers.

Silanus turned toward the top of the hill where the Teutons were now appearing, casting long shadows that almost did make them look like giants to the Romans far below them. A roar spread up and down the Teutonic line, a crude counterpoint of spears, swords, and battleaxes banged against shields, adding to the din.

The consul smiled grimly. He'd heard this song before, and it had ended with piles of dead Celts who had the mistaken notion that blind force could overwhelm trained legionnaires. Soon the Teutons would learn a very hard lesson.

And so would his men when they stood triumphant on a bloody field.

"Hold your formation!" the centurion beside Silanus warned three wide-eyed troopers who had taken a few steps to the rear, as if driven back by the din above them.

Now it is time, Silanus thought. This was the moment when leadership made all the difference. He kicked the flanks of his horse, and charged down the ranks. "Hold formation!" the consul cried. "Stand fast!" he ordered, continuing his gallop. "Show these barbarians the might of Rome. For our gods and our country."

A mighty yell from the hill above signaled the Teutons' charge.

Silanus slowed his horse and turned to face the enemy. Some of the barbarians were totally naked, clothed only in war paint. Others wore Gothic armor that clanked as they rushed down the hillside, waving their weapons as they charged. Here and there, the clumsy stumbled to be trampled by those behind them.

Silanus squinted into the light. Some of the enemy did look big, perhaps due to the relative shortness of their comrades. *But the sunlight at their backs gives the illusion that some are giants*. Their feet pounded like Hannibal's elephants; the ground seemed to shake.

"Hold your ranks," Silanus yelled, warning a line to his left that seemed to waver. "They're only men."

Only as Silanus turned back to face the enemy did he realize just how mistaken he had been.

The approaching berserkers grew ever larger the closer they came. On and on they came, bigger by the footstep. With horror, the consul realized there truly were giants within the Teutonic ranks. The creatures stood an impossible 15 feet or more tall. Their faces were like something from a nightmare: slits for noses and double rows of pointed teeth.

Silanus' horse reared in terror, blocking his view just as the giants clashed against the locked shield of his legionnaires. Struggling to regain control of his mount, Silanus saw the Roman lines crumble almost everywhere the giants struck. Once the soldiers faltered, the Teutonic monsters wrecked havoc, their long reach and heavy weapons slaughtering his soldiers like men cutting wheat with scythes.

Silanus drew his sword. Before he could defend himself, a giant leaped over the troops protecting the consul, slamming against his horse and bowling it with Silanus over.

The general struggled to rise and found his leg pinned under his dead horse. One of his soldiers sprang forward to defend the consul only to be felled with a single blow from the giant's ax.

The giant stepped over the dead body and stood, towering over the Roman consul, a nightmare grin on

its face. The creature lifted its heavy blade with a single hand.

Silanus searched for his sword and saw it lying on the ground. He stretched toward it and found it was just out of his reach. He turned back toward the giant.

The ax now hung in the air high overhead. The Roman renewed his efforts and his fingers sipped over the hilt of the sword without gaining purchase. He strained to grasp the sword. A hideous laugh came from the lips of the giant.

Silanus looked upward and saw the ax fall with impossible speed, splitting the general's helmet and skull.

Chapter 1

Grand Canyon, Utah, 1919

Professor Franklin Kincaid squinted in the sunlight, feeling as tired and old as the red dust that covered his hat and jacket. The climb down the cliff face had started with exhilaration, but as his middle-aged muscles started to feel the strain, the cool morning air heated up and a sluggish feeling overtook him.

Yet he pressed on. “Almost there, old boy.” Talking to himself was a habit that often brought great discomfort of students and peers. Here by himself with no one to hear, he found it comforting.

Kincaid carefully lowered himself the last ten feet to stand on the ledge that was his destination. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and then opened his canteen for a much-needed drink. As he replaced the cap on his canteen, he examined the face of the cliff in front of him. Not obvious from any distance, up close he could see the chisel marks that had created the ledge and perhaps a large passageway somewhere in the rock face — though now the stone remained fused solid, apparently by some impossibly hot source of energy. The professor tried to imagine what variety of machine could have produced enough heat to melt solid rock.

One thing was sure. “There’s no way I’ll ever get through that.” But he hoped to find a small passage like those often left in ancient structures. The purpose of such passages varied with the culture. For some, it enabled the living to, on occasion, visit the land of the dead. With others, it provided a route for the spirit of the one entombed to later escape and travel to Heaven. Whatever the reason for the passageway, there was a good chance it was here somewhere if he searched carefully. If he discovered it, it might provide a way into the chamber that he believed lay just beyond the rock face.

Finally, he located a cut, filled with rubble, in the face of the rock. “Now we’ll see whether or not this has all been a wild goose chase,” he whispered, removing his rock hammer from his belt. He started prying away the loose rock, being careful to keep it on the ledge so none went careening down toward the Colorado River that flowed far below.

After nearly an hour of work, he had tunneled five feet into the tight passage, pulling one stone at a time from the hole. The only question was what exactly lay at the end of the ancient entrance that he believed had remained hidden for perhaps five thousand years. He labored another half hour and was finally rewarded with the collapse of the last of the rocks that tumbled into what must be a huge cave beyond, judging from the echoes.

“This just might be it!” He wriggled back out of the hole to collect his backpack, a smile on his face. After the years of ridicule from his peers, he might finally be proven right. Yet, his momentary triumph was bittersweet since he knew he could never reveal his secret. “At least I will know. Someday, perhaps, so will everyone else.”

Kincaid removed his crumpled felt hat and laid it on the rock ledge, then weighted it down with a stone so a gust wouldn’t send it tumbling through the air. After tying the end of a hemp rope to his ankle and the other end to his backpack that lay on the ground, he took a deep breath and paused for only a moment to consider what he was about to do. Then he wriggled into the narrow opening.

All went well until he was halfway through the shaft, at which point the rock hammer on his tool belt became hung up on something. With his hands stretched in front of him in the narrow passage he crawled through, it was impossible to reach the belt to release it. It was also impossible, he soon discovered, to scoot backward the way he’d come. The hammer had him trapped.

He fought down the feeling of claustrophobia. “Stay calm,” he whispered. A cold sweat was forming down his back. “Just slow down and don’t panic.”

Then took a deep breath and tried to methodically twist and squirm, hoping he might somehow manage to free himself. He wriggled back a few inches and abruptly the hammer sprang free. "Thank you, Lord," Kincaid said with closed eyes. He started forward again. "Next time, the tool belt stays behind with the hat."

After inching his way several more feet, his fingers brushed the edge of the shaft and he grasped the rim and pulled himself forward. Before dropping into the darkness beyond, he took a small pebble from his jacket pocket and dropped it into the gloom. The rock fell only a few feet before rolling some distance and stopping. There was at least a ledge of some sort if not a whole room ahead of him. He pulled and kicked his way forward until he tumbled into the shadowy cave.

Blinking in the darkness, he rose to his feet as his eyes slowly adjusted to the dim interior lit only by the sunlight filtering through the narrow opening he'd come through. Here and there, gold glittered and even under the shroud of dust that covered everything, he could see the glow of gemstones as well. Even just a casual survey of the area made it obvious that the chamber was one of the greatest archeological finds in modern history. The chamber extended into the darkness hinting at the immensity of his find. "Truly amazing," he told himself as he eyed the ancient artifacts that surrounded him. "Well worth the effort."

Kincaid untied the rope around his ankle and carefully pulled his backpack through the shaft. Once it was beside him, he opened its flap and retrieved a battered kerosene lantern and carefully lit its wick. The light flickered and then grew bright. He turned to see what was in the chamber around him, catching his breath at what he saw.

Some of the treasures were easy to identify, obviously coming from the Early Dynastic period of ancient Egypt: Gold-leafed chairs, statuary of gods, a collection of papyrus scrolls. The place was a literal treasure trove of relics. "At least five thousand years old from the looks of them."

Kincaid's eyes continued to adjust, he shuddered at the huge stone giants that stretched from floor to ceiling; the inanimate figures seemed to watch him as they shimmered in the shadows.

Next, his attention was drawn to the walls. He pulled a whisk broom from a pocket and brushed the dust away from the surface of the closest to expose the lettering and hieroglyphics on the wall. Some of the spiked and oddly shaped characters resembled the so-called; these he couldn't read. But the conventional Egyptian hieroglyphics were a different matter. Possibly the walls would prove to be a giant Rosetta stone for translating the Angel Enochian. *That would be fantastic.*

He started reading the incised forms and, after a few minutes, frowned. "It's even worse than I feared." He continued reading and then stopped, turning toward the giants standing like stone columns around the wall of the cavern. He stepped toward one and examined the copper collars that seemed to bind the statue; its wrists and ankles had similar manacles, all with the green patina that reflected the thousands of years they had been in the cave. "Looks like the bands are still intact, but certainly showing their age." Copper couldn't stand the test of time, it seemed. But at least the bands were still in place now. "At least we can be thankful for that."

There was no more time to waste. He held up his lantern and looked around, trying to get his bearings. If this was an Egyptian chamber, of which he was certain, then what he was searching for would be... Where?

He thought a moment. "There!" he said, almost jumping at the echo of his voice returning from the deep tunnels branching from the main chamber. He stepped carefully over a jumbled pile of bronze statuary toward the archway formed by the outstretched wings of the disk of Horus Behudety. He eyed the snakes representing the goddesses Nekhbet and Uazet coiled at either side of the ancient deity.

Pulling the rock hammer that had nearly got him trapped in the shaft, Kincaid carefully tapped at the center of the archway, now filled with clay bricks. His blows loosened the clay and then the way crumbled and fell in a cloud of dust. With a cough, Kincaid pushed the rubble out of his way and stepped

into the chamber he'd exposed.

The beam of light from his kerosene lantern shown on the flat, pear-shaped amulet lying on a sacrificial table; the golden amulet was just as described in the ancient texts: Three inches long with a hole at the top, ringed with gemstones and having two protrusions on its rim.

The professor stepped gingerly toward the table. Unaccustomed to actually picking up objects at dig sites, he forced himself to break his own rules and picked up the amulet, finding himself holding his breath as he were picking up an explosive. Somewhere ancient machinery creaked, and suddenly the whole cavern was bathed in light.

The professor looked upward, but was unable to see the source of the light. "Edison would be jealous." He turned his attention back to the front surface of the amulet to study the complex geometric design comprised of a triangle, cross and circle, plus two six-pointed stars. On the back of the device was an intricate design with five groups of 72 tiny gems, each group on a ring; at the top was a V notch.

No more time to waste now. He forced himself to put it away, carefully wrapping the jeweled artifact in a handkerchief and placing it into a pocket that he buttoned shut.

He checked his wristwatch. It was getting late — later than he had thought. If he was to ascend the cliff face before darkness fell, he'd have to get moving. He reluctantly crossed to the shaft he'd entered and turned for a moment to look at everything one last time. "How I regret not having the time to explore."

But there was a world to save.

"And, God willing," he said, as if addressing the giants lining the walls of the chamber, "you'll stay asleep for another millennium or two."

Chapter 2

Tempe, Arizona, the Present

Attorney Thomas Armstrong looked at the young man — a boy really — who sat across the walnut desk from him. Joshua Stephen Kincaid's family had been clients of the Armstrong law firm for as far back as anyone could remember.

Certainly as far back as the partnership's records went.

Joshua was following in his great grandfather's footsteps, working on a degree in archeology, specializing in Mesoamerican history at Arizona State University. His boyish good looks were a little misleading, Armstrong decided, sizing the young man up the way he would a hostile witness on the stand.

The young man's eyes betrayed him; Joshua's eyes hinted at his intellectual depth, and perhaps, Armstrong decided, a bit of repressed anger as well. No, he would not enjoy having this young man as a hostile witness.

Armstrong let the mechanical clock in his office tick of three clicks to see if the young man would blink.

He did not, convincing the lawyer there was substance to the boy.

The lawyer cleared his throat and spoke. "As you may know, our law firm handled your great grandfather's will. He was a good man."

The boy nodded. "Thank you. I never met him but have learned a lot about him. I'm not certain how he figures into all this, though. His will was settled a long time ago, wasn't it?"

"All but one item. Before your great grandfather's death, he asked our firm to handle another matter for him. A box that has remained unopened since he gave it to us. Joshua, now that you're twenty-one, and with the death of your late uncle, are the sole male survivor of your family line, you're charged to keep this box that once belonged to your great grandfather."

Armstrong gently shoved a small wooden box on his desk toward Joshua. "Custody of the box comes with a stipend of five thousand dollars a month, with the understanding that you'll protect this box without trying to X-ray, disassemble, or otherwise determine what's inside it. Your great grandfather claimed — and please keep in mind that he was a bit, uh, eccentric — that this box would unseal itself when certain events occurred.

"If it has not opened itself during your lifetime, then it's to be passed on to your son or nearest living male relative." The lawyer pushed an envelope across the desk to Josh. "I've made a copy of the will and his instructions for you to keep as a reference."

Armstrong removed his glasses and looked the young man straight in the eye. "Now that my canned speech is over, I want to say that I don't know what this box contains, but knowing your family, I'm certain it's nothing illegal. My question for you is: Can you agree to these conditions? Can you keep from opening the box as per your great grandfather's instructions?"

Josh picked up the plain-looking wooden box for a moment, examining it intently, weighing it in his hands. Then he set it carefully back onto the desk and nodded. "Yes, sir. I believe I can."

"Then I'm entrusting the box to you with your word as a gentleman that you'll conform to your great grandfather's wishes."

"I agree to do just that." The young man stood, extending his hand across the desk. Armstrong shook his hand, surprised at Josh's strong grip.

"All right then," the lawyer said, sitting back down. "I'm entrusting the safe keeping of this box to you. Please give my secretary your address on the way out. We'll mail out each of your stipends promptly at

the first of the month. Wait one moment. I'll write a check for this month. I suspect a young college student like yourself has more than a few bills to pay."

"I could certainly use the cash," Josh agreed.

Three hours later, Josh sat at his desk in the house he and his college friend Nick Erickson rented so they could live off campus. Josh felt as if the world had staggered in its orbit, as if there had been a polar shift. On one hand his room, filled with a variety of ancient Native American artifacts with a Mozart symphony playing quietly in the background made it seem nothing had changed.

Yet the mysterious box and the check, with another check to follow each month, promised a whole change in the way he lived, from a life of worrying and pinching pennies to one in which he would be free to follow his dreams.

The reality of the term paper due before Spring break grounded his thoughts back in the here and now. He took another bite of his pizza, trying to type with his left hand that had somehow remained relatively free of tomato sauce.

His housemate Nick peeped around the door into the room. "I know this isn't a good time with your paper due tomorrow and all, but we've got to do something about the pool. The copper sulfate we dumped into it turned Sally's hair green. And it smells worse than it did before we added the chemicals."

"I'm surprised you ever looked high enough to notice her hair had changed colors."

"Funny. But seriously, man. That pool is ruining my sex life, man."

Joshua laid down his pizza. "I have to get this paper done tonight. But I'll take care of the pool as soon as I get this paper rounded up. Next Monday I'll use some of the money I got today to hire a pro to clean the pool the way we should have cleaned it two months ago."

"Sounds great." Nick stood in the doorway a moment and then spoke. "I suppose I should leave you alone now so you can finish the paper."

"Goes in the 'would be nice' column," Josh said with a grin.

Nick looked sheepish as he backed out of the room. "Sayōnara, then, dude."

Josh gave his a nod and then turned back to his computer screen, wiped his fingers with a paper napkin, and started typing furiously, hoping to get the paper finished without further interruptions. He'd only typed for three minutes when the lights dimmed and the computer died. Swearing under his breath, Josh fought the impulse to slap the monitor.

He rose to check the fuse box and realized that the room was filling with an ethereal azure light. "What the...?" He searched for the source of the illumination.

The light came from the box the lawyer had given him. Josh had set it on the shelves containing the spear points and pottery from his collection of Native American artifacts. As he watched, the lid of the box slowly rose, letting more light shine from inside, bathing the room in the twinkling brightness.

Josh turned toward the hallway. "Hey, Nick! Come and see this."

"Already here," Nick said from the doorway. "That thing's not radioactive is it?"

"Crap, hadn't thought about that. I doubt it though. But... we might want to check later."

"I can borrow a Geiger counter... Hopefully we won't glow in the dark after this... What is that anyway?"

"That's the box the lawyer gave me today." Joshua cautiously stepped toward the shelves to get a closer look at the source of light was. "But I don't know what's in there. Looks like a crystal of some sort. There's some sort of lens in front of it."

A hologram-like figure of Professor Kincaid appeared, causing the two young men to jump back from his image.

“It’s some kind of projector,” Nick said needlessly.

The professor stepped fully into the frame of the holographic picture, pushed up his round spectacles, and spoke, his voice thin as it streamed from the small box behind his image. “This seems to be recording now,” the hologram said. “As fantastic as this may sound, I am using ancient, lost technology to create this message. I can only speak for a few minutes as I believe the Matrani have located me and I am fearful this time they will succeed in stopping me, leaving my work unfinished.

“If you are seeing this, then it means certain events have come to pass, endangering mankind and activating this device. The key to ending the danger lies with the amulet that should be contained in this box along with this projection system. Don’t touch any of the jewels or fool with the amulet in any way until you understand what it does. It has amazing capabilities, and accidentally activating it could prove dangerous until you’ve learned about the powers of this device. You must also guard the amulet carefully, wearing it at all times. I don’t have time to explain its purpose now.

“To learn its secrets, you must follow this map to the location I have indicated.”

A map floated in the air. Nick and Josh peered at it. Nick started to speak, but the image of the Professor appeared and the old man continued: “Go to this location on the map and you’ll discover how to stop those who would destroy civilization.”

The camera swung toward an ancient Egyptian device with cogs whirring inside like an insane mechanical clock. A panel at the front of the device had jeweled controls with hieroglyphics and geometric shapes on its surface.

“What is that?” Nick asked. “Looks like a satellite dish designed by a mad clockmaker.”

“Doubt you’re right,” Josh said wryly. “But I don’t have a clue.”

The professor continued. “I’ve stumbled upon a secret society that is plotting to enslave or even destroy mankind.” As he spoke, the image changed to show angels and monstrous demons with leathery wings battle in the sky. The image pulled back to show a battlefield that stretched between planets.

“Before our recorded history, a war in Heaven was waged. Long and bitter, it lasted for a millennium with battles that scarred whole planets, wiping some clean of life. At the end of the struggle, the Angels serving the Hebrew God prevailed. Most of the rebellious angels were chained in Hades. But some escaped punishment, and returned to Earth’s Mount Herman where they mated with human women. The results were monstrous children who grew into a superhuman race of giants called Nephilim. These titans transformed mankind from scattered enclaves of savages into organized societies.”

The holographic image changed again to show giants in ancient Babylon, sitting on thrones in vast hanging gardens, obviously worshiped by crowds of human beings. The super muscular Nephilim each had six fingers, and six toes shown from sandaled feet.

The professor spoke again. “Eventually forsaken by the angels that had fathered them, these giants ruled our planet with savage barbarity, teaching blood-thirsty doctrines and becoming pantheons of gods worshiped by men.”

The picture changed to ancient Egypt where giants carried huge blocks of stone, constructing stepped pyramids. In addition to lifting stones with brute strength, other of the creatures employed harmonic levitation devices that shifted even larger slabs of rock.

“The giants created most of the ancient marvels; and as gods worshiped by men, the Nephilim modified and altered plants and animals into the monsters of legend.”

The picture shifted to reveal winged griffins flying through the sky. One abruptly hurtled close, causing Josh and Nick to duck. The view transitioned to ancient Aztec pyramids where bloody sacrifices took place and giant wing-headed serpents slithering up the temple walls.

The professor continued his story. “The Nephilim spread the brutal cult of the dragon, demanding

human blood sacrifices to appease it. But the ultimate goal of the giants was the destruction of mankind, for they feared that one day humans would surpass their powers. So, the giants corrupted mankind in hideous ways, crippling them spiritually, especially in the Mesoamerican kingdoms where thousands were slain in savage ceremonies to these ancient gods. And there the Nephilim taught men to eat human flesh.”

The holograph showed an Aztec victim about to be slain with an obsidian knife, a bloody priest butchering the man and throwing his limbs to the mob who scrambled after them for food. A red haze of blood blocked out the lens, ending the scene. When that last image dissolved, the lights flickered back on, and Josh’s computer beeped as it rebooted.

“Whoa!” Nick said. “If I hadn’t seen that, I wouldn’t of believed it. Who was that old coot?”

Joshua lifted the ornate, jewel-encrusted amulet from the box beside the projection crystal that now only reflected the light from the room. “That ‘old coot’ was my great grandfather, Professor Franklin Kincaid.”

“Sorry... No offense but...”

“No offense taken. He was an old coot, I guess.”

“Also an archeologist?”

Josh nodded.

“But was someone really trying to kill him. Those Matrani or whatever he said they were.”

Josh rubbed his chin. “He died under mysterious circumstances. The coroner finally ruled out murder, but my parents were always... doubtful. The family thought he might have been murdered.”

“Then he wasn’t just being paranoid?”

Joshua retrieved a map from the bookcase. “Maybe yes, maybe no. I can’t be certain one way or the other. I do know that now I’ll have something to do on spring break.”

“So you think this thing might be on the level?”

“I have no idea. But if it’s a hoax...”

“It’s awfully elaborate for a hoax, right?”

“Exactly. My great grandfather died in 1920. Holograms weren’t even a twinkle in the eye of science back then. Just getting an actor made up to pretend to be him would be a trick. And this projector.”

“Yeah, I don’t think there’s anything available on the market even now that’s capable of what we just saw now. I think I could even *smell* some of the stuff we saw on that thing.”

“Yes, now that you mention it, I remember smelling blood with that last bit.”

“But if it’s not a hoax...” Nick swore under his breath. “Man, that’s too much to even consider. This could set history on its ear.”

“My great granddad wasn’t into pranks, though some of the science community thought he was a little eccentric.”

“I suppose some clown in the science department...” Nick started, but then shook his head.

“I can’t imagine anyone going to this much work as a practical joke,” Josh said.

“So, basically, if you don’t check this out, it’ll drive you nuts. Heck, it will drive me nuts if you don’t check it out.”

Josh rested the box on the shelf, keeping the amulet in his hand, its chain hanging from it. “Think you can quit chasing co-eds long enough to come along on a little trip to the position shown in the holograph?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” Nick said. “But in the meantime, I think there’s a quick way to see if this is on the level. You could press one of the gems on that amulet gadget to see if anything bad happens.”

“Right,” Josh laughed. “Not until I know how much of this is on the level.” Joshua hung the amulet around his neck and then dropped it beneath his t-shirt. “It may be that this thing is just as dangerous as my great grandfather said. But right now, it doesn’t make any difference. Even though I don’t much feel like working on my term paper, it’s got to be done. I’m not going to throw away a whole semester of work at

the last minute on what may prove to be a wild goose chase.”

“I can take a hint,” Nick said, leaving the room with a flash of the rascally smile that co-eds found irresistible.

Two seconds passed.

Nick’s head appeared in the doorway. “Could I maybe take a friend along? Chicks get hot when —”

“No. And don’t tell anyone about this, either. If somehow it’s a hoax, I don’t want to become the laughing stock of the campus. If it’s real, then we’ll need to keep it secret until we get everything sorted out.”

“But if I could tell just one — I know this cool chick that’s into archeology stuff. And —”

Nick barely ducked before 640 pages of *Archeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice* went hurtling past his head to slam into the door frame.

“All right,” Nick called from the hallway. “I can take a hint.”

Chapter 3

Nemrut Dagi, Adiyaman Province, Turkey, the Present

Usi loosened his scarlet robes as he climbed the rocky path up the shallow pyramid summit of Mount Nimrod. The sun was rapidly heating up the terraced mountaintop, and the dancing heat waves rising from the stony ground made the seated giants carved into the rock look as if they were breathing the dusty air.

The ancient pantheon of gods and kings had been carved to entomb Antiochus, and to combine the mythology from both the Persian and Greek empires. The deposed statues had been decapitated by time and the weather; so that now the headless bodies sat at the crest of the peak while their colossal stone heads rose from the dust to stare blindly toward the horizon. Not without reason, the local Turks called the mountaintop the Throne of the Gods.

An entourage of Matrani priests, each also dressed in crimson robes but lacking the insignia that was on Usi's sleeves, accompanied their leader in his silent ascent of the winding path toward the earth-moving equipment and workmen who awaited them. The machinery had cleared away the rocky soil to expose a pair of ancient copper doors that stood thirty feet high. The green patina of the doors hinted at their age, and the heavily incised ancient engravings of gods and goddesses exuded a cold cruelty that made Usi avert his eyes.

The high priest of the Matrani paused at the doors and cautiously reached out to touch one of the engraved figures, running his finger along its face and then across ample breasts. He took a deep breath and then turned toward the priest beside him. "Ask the foreman if they are ready to open the doors."

His translator spoke in Turkish to the foreman who jabbered back a single word and a nod. "They are ready," the translator said needlessly.

"Get on with it then," Usi ordered.

The translator gave the command to the foreman, who in turn yelled orders to his workmen. The sullen men rose to their feet, adjusted their ragged turbans, and lifted pickaxes to attack the seals on the doors. Heavy blows broke the graveyard quiet of the mountaintop, and with only seven strikes the locks yielded to the assault, breaking apart and falling into the dust at the workmen's sandaled feet.

No one moved or spoke for a moment as all eyes turned toward the high priest.

"Open the doors," Usi ordered.

The command was relayed to the foreman who yelled for his workers to continue. Two pairs of gnarled hands shoved at the copper doors but the corroded copper refused to budge. The foreman waved more workers into place and threw water from a canteen at the hinges to lubricate them. The combined force and the lubrication caused the doors to slowly creak open a crack.

The foreman cursed at the workers who angrily renewed their efforts, straining against doors that crept forward on tired hinges, exposing the dead blackness of cavern beyond which had been hidden inside the mountaintop for perhaps five millennium.

"We'll need flashlights," Usi said.

"There was a slight problem," the translator said, opening a large wooden crate and retrieving a long stick with rags soaked in oil on its end.

"Surely you're kidding," Usi said, eyeing the torch his translator was lighting.

"It's all they had," the Turk said sheepishly, handing the torch to Usi after using its flame to light the oiled rag of another retrieved from the crate by the foreman.

Usi took the torch, shaking his head. *Third world nations!* Sometimes it seemed the world was filled with incompetents. He pushed his way past the translator and entered the shadowy cavern, holding the

smoking torch above his head so he could see in its flickering light.

Abruptly his anger evaporated and he forgot all about the inconvenience of the torch. What he saw was even more than he had hoped for. Spread out in front of him was an army of stone giants, still dressed in battle gear, their ranks stretching as far as he could see in the dim light. It was impossible to ascertain their numbers, but there had to be hundreds, perhaps even a thousand or more of the mummified creatures, each armed to the teeth with shield and a spear, sword, or battleaxe.

Usi cautiously paced down the front line of the giants, ignoring the dismayed gasps of the Matrani priests behind him as they entered the grotto and beheld the titans.

Finally, Usi found the figure he was searching for, its red mane barely discernible through the dust shroud that covered it. Unlike the other giants, this one had two horns that gave it a devilish appearance; gold jewelry betrayed its station as well. Like his comrades, he wore copper bands around his wrists, ankles, and neck, all connected to a heavy copper chain.

Usi turned to his men. "You and you. Unbind this one, remove its copper bands. Then stand clear. He'll most likely be angry when we awaken him."

The priests looked doubtful, but obeyed, scurrying forward and, with fear-palsied hands, pulled the pins from the copper bands on the giant's ankles, wrists, and neck so that the constraints fell free, clanging on the floor.

"Now stand back!" Usi warned. "Quickly!"

The two priests scampered away from the giant, looks of puzzlement upon their faces.

For a moment, nothing happened and doubts assailed Usi. *Has our order been mistaken all these years?* Were their beliefs simply a legend, a fiction that had been passed down all the centuries within the order of the Matrani?

Then he heard something. Very soft, like parchment being slowly wadded into a ball. There it was again. His eyes narrowed and in the flame of the torch he held, he could see the creature's skin filling out with a soft crackling, and then there was a soft whine of gas being pulled into the creature, as if the mummy drew energy from the air, its dry tissue expanding and filling with life.

As Usi watched, his heart skipped beats. He felt almost dizzy, as if he were dreaming, watching something that was both impossible yet real at the same time. The absurd was happening before his eyes. Life was flowing into the dead corpse just as the ancient texts said it would.

The giant's fingers moved like those of a child awakening from a nap. Then the creature's eyes opened wide and it roared, its voice thundering in the cavern. It drew a wicked dagger from its belt and stepped forward menacingly.

The priests around Usi fell back, as if trying to hide behind his robes.

"Who dares awaken Alcyoneus?" the giant thundered.

Usi knew he must act quickly if he was to avoid death. He bowed deeply in front of the giant as the primordial inscriptions had dictated he must, and then he spoke in the ancient tongue of the giants, "Oh, Alcyoneus, your loyal followers, the Matrani, have awakened you, my lord. We have prepared for the return of your race. We beseech thee now for your help and wisdom of the demon ways."

"The Matrani have served us well through the centuries," Alcyoneus growled. "What do you wish?"

Usi chose his words carefully, knowing that the giant would be impatient. "Mankind has become skilled and vies to become like gods. We wish to revive your armies of Nephilim, scattered across the Earth, to again become the true masters of mankind, that you may take your rightful place as our rulers, the godhead to the gods men are becoming."

Alcyoneus was silent a moment and then spoke. "If you revive my people, I will make you alone of all the human race, you the Matrani leader, a co-ruler with us."

"As you say, my lord," Usi said, bowing deeply, "so let it be."

The giant stepped closer to the priest. "We must seal our covenant with blood."

The muscles in Usi's jaw knotted, and he forced himself to meet the giant's eyes rather than glancing nervously away as he felt like doing.

Alcyoneus drew his dagger across the palm of his left hand, showing no hint of pain as the gash filled with dark blood.

Usi produced his short dirk from its hiding spot within his robes. Wincing at the pain he knew was coming, he slashed his hand and then extended the wound toward the immense monster, and man and giant clasped hands, the human hand dwarfed in the meaty fist of the Nephilim. The smell of death emanated from the giant's blood. Usi suppressed a shudder. *What have I gotten myself into?*

The giant released Usi's hand. "We are now one in our struggle to reclaim the world."

"And together," Usi added, "we will bring peace and prosperity to both our races."

The giant removed the signet ring from his finger. "This is my seal. Those who have served me in the past will recognize this when you reawaken them. When they see this seal, they will obey you as they obey me."

Usi took the heavy golden ring that was nearly large enough to be worn as a bracelet on a human wrist. "My people will always obey you as they obey me."

"Then the return of the Nephilim has begun," Alcyoneus said.

"Indeed, many things have begun on this day. Now we must tie up some loose ends. We can't afford to have word get out about our discovery here atop Mount Nimrod. We must shed a little blood to protect our secrecy, to keep lips from wagging."

"Perhaps I can help," Alcyoneus suggested, fingering the huge ax hanging on his belt.

Usi considered it. *Why not?* "I believe you can do just that," the priest said, his face a mask that betrayed no emotion. "The workers outside — we can't afford to have them return to their village to tell everyone about finding your army here in the mountain."

The giant exposed double rows of pointed teeth in what Usi thought must be a smile. "Revive two of my warriors," Alcyoneus ordered, "and we three will permanently seal the lips of those outside."

Usi motioned to his priests. "Free two more of the giants." It was time to see how fast and capable the giants really were.

And to tie up a few loose ends.

Chapter 4

Lake Titicaca, Bolivia

The Spetsnaz team climbed the narrow path running along the lake, the night vision goggles covering their faces, transforming the darkness around them into a green and white display. The Russians quietly snaked through the jungle darkness, dim infrared flashlight beams cutting through the fog as the line of men slid through the wet vegetation like a long serpent.

The team traveled light, but each man was heavily armed. Most of the elite troops held silenced PP-19 Bizon submachine guns chambered in 9x18mm Makarov, each with a 65-round helical magazine. Four Spetsnaz carried AK74SU rifles with BG-15/GP-25 under-barrel 40mm grenade launchers. All had fighting knives and hand grenades and all were amply supplied with spare magazines of ammunition.

Captain Leonid Kushnir signaled a half after they'd walked nearly an hour from their drop zone, stopping the team near a huge boulder that served as a landmark on their maps. After checking their map against GPS readings, Kushnir knew they were at the target site. "Set up the equipment," he whispered to his men.

Four of the men took the titanium hydraulic jacks they'd lugged in backpacks and assembled them. Other troopers dug away loose gravel around the rock to be sure the jacks would remain firmly in place. The units were positioned and the slow process of crank levers to raise the massive boulder began. The work went surprisingly fast because the boulder proved hollow, making it much lighter than the satellite photos had suggested it would be.

Forty minutes later, the task was complete. The boulder had been raised to reveal the entrance into an ancient Incan temple, buried in the rock. *How*, Kushnir wondered *did our intelligence sources know this chamber would be here, in the middle of the jungle?*

And could the odd-shaped amulet he'd been sent to find really be worth the risk of an international incident? He decided not to worry about such things and instead concentrate on the success of the mission as he had been trained to do. *Ours is not to reason why*, the captain told himself grimly, remembering the old British poem that was about as out of place as a Russian in a Peruvian jungle. But he had his orders.

He would follow them.

"Be careful — I'm not sure how safe this passageway is," Kushnir ordered his men as they prepared to enter the dark hole they'd uncovered. Looking like monsters behind their night vision goggles, the soldiers slipped into the narrow passage and vanished around the bend.

After leaving two of his men in the shadows to guard the entrance, Kushnir followed the rest of the team, journeying deep into the coolness of the temple, following the infrared glow sticks those at the front of the line dropped to light the path. After they had rounded several corners, Kushnir spoke, his voice echoing off the chiseled walls. "Take your filters off the flashlights. Let's get out of these sweaty NVGs."

The men paused and flicked the filters off the flashlights and raised the night vision goggles, now that visible beams of light cut through the shadows. Like his men, Kushnir felt relieved to have the NVGs raised. They gave a claustrophobic view of the world, like viewing the world through two tin cans that all the while cut into the skin of your face.

Kushnir could hear the gasps and swearing of his men from around the final corner ahead. He knew there must be something unusual to cause such a response from his world-weary soldiers.

He rounded the turn and entered a dreamlike place, immediately understanding what had caused the consternation.

Huge statues of Incan gods and warriors looked down on them, each encrusted with a king's ransom in

cabochoon jade and gold. As the men pushed their way through the space that stretched in the darkness, they discovered huge urns full of carved lapis lazuli and artifacts as well as ornate chests full of trinkets formed from hammered gold, which the Incas believed was the sweat of the sun, and tarnished silver, the tears of the moon. The wealth spilled from the containers like frozen waterfalls of wealth that spread across the floor and scraped beneath combat boots.

It's like something from a fairytale, Kushnir thought, his eyes almost aching at the sight of the wealth around him.

The captain spotted one of his men snatch a jeweled chain and cram it into his combat vest. He almost ordered, "Don't touch anything." But then he thought better of it. He knew there would be no stopping his men. The government paid them poorly and often paid them not at all. The temptation was too great. "Don't pick up more than you can carry out of the jungle," he warned instead, hoping the Mil Mi 8 transport helicopter assigned to take them home could lift the extra weight in the thin mountain air.

Soon, not only were the men pocketing trinkets, Kushnir found himself unable to resist the temptation as well. He surreptitiously placed gems and artifacts into pockets and pouches.

Kushnir thought grimly, *We've been transformed from soldier into grave robbers in just minutes.* Would the gods that guarded this pagan ground want revenge for the invaders' theft?

"All clear!" the point man called, making Kushnir jump as if a bolt of lightning had hit him for his theft.

Flares were lit with the all-clear call, bathing the cavern in flicking white light, making it look even less real than it had appeared in the flashlights. The little remaining discipline that had been in the ranks broke down. His soldiers now openly stuffed gold and jewels into their pockets.

Kushnir knew it would be pointless to try to stop them. Instead, the captain looked around the chamber trying to determine where the alter lay that the experts thought contained the amulet he had been sent to find. He spotted a likely spot and made his way past soldiers that now had confiscated so much gold that they could hardly stand. It would be amusing to see how far down the trail they could go before having to toss their loot into the jungle. *That should be painful for them.*

Kushnir climbed the alter to Manco Capac, the ruler of the Incas who was said to have been drawn from the depths of Lake Titicaca by the sun god Inti to rule his people. The monument lay at the center of the room. Kushnir mounted. The intelligence had said this was where an amulet was most likely to be. But only an empty casket lay at the apex of the altar. Someone must have beat them to the treasure. Or perhaps one had never been here. He turned with disappointment and gazed over the cavern to be sure there wasn't another hiding place he might have missed.

He noted that one of his men had ventured out of the light of the flares and stopped at what appeared to be a giant statue, half hidden in the shadows. "Hey, everyone," the soldier cried, "look at this!"

As Kushnir watched, the soldier removed the jeweled copper bands from the wrists of the giant; like something from a nightmare, one of the creature's stiff arms rose as if alive, and the bony hand yanked the last restraint from the statue's neck. As Kushnir watched with horror, the creature came to life, retrieving a rusty battleaxe from its belt.

This can't be happening, Kushnir told himself. Yet, his senses argued otherwise. He was not asleep. He didn't dream. What he saw was as real as anything he'd ever known.

Without being ordered to do so, the Russians fired their weapons at the monster and the armor-piercing bullets appeared to Kushnir to be dead on, with small holes across the chest and in the head of the creature.

Yet, the giant seemed impervious to the bullets from the automatic weapons. The blade slashed through the air with a low hum, severing the head of the nearest trooper.

The Russians continued to fire to no effect. Thinking perhaps his men were somehow missing their target, Kushnir raised his own weapon just as the giant's ax slashed a soldier's in half, splitting the man from head to groin and splattering blood across the men standing on either side of him.

Kushnir pushed the selector on his Bizon into its automatic setting, aimed as the monster raised its ax for another attack, and held down the trigger, controlling his weapon so the muzzle remained centered on the monster's chest. The front sight danced and the captain was sure most if not all the rounds had buried themselves in the giant's chest.

Yet, it hardly reacted, other than to release another blood curdling growl as the swing of its ax cut a wide, horizontal swath that fell three of the soldiers.

Kushnir got ready to order retreat, and then realized with horror that the giant stood at the entrance to the underground temple, blocking any escape. So instead, he ordered them, "Regroup!"

His men dropped back alongside the captain. "Grenades," he ordered. "On my mark." It was risky. The cavern ceiling might well fall down on them. But at least they could die like men instead of being hunted down like dogs.

The men armed with grenade launchers centered their weapons on the monster than stood watching them. He and the rest of those of his squad who still survived pulled hand grenades from their combat vests and extracted their pins.

"On three," Kushnir said. "One, two..."

The giant roared and charged just as the captain yelled, "Three!"

The hand grenades tumbled around the giant's feet. The grenades fired from launchers didn't travel far enough for the warheads to arm, however their impact caused the giant to stagger back for a moment, swatting at the air with its ax

Kushnir and his men saw no more because they dove under any cover they could find. Two seconds later the blasts began shaking the cavern.

Bits of rock and shrapnel pinged and slashed through the air. Each successive blast loosened a bit more of the ceiling. With the noise and smoke, Kushnir was barely aware of the rock crushing down upon him, ending his life as well as those of his men, each of whom carried in his pockets enough treasure to pay a king's ransom.

Chapter 5

Grand Canyon, Utah

Josh paused on his downward decent of the cliff face and looked up. He and Nick had descended some distance. They had to be almost to the ledge, though he didn't dare look down for fear his mild feelings of acrophobia might take hold. Rappelling down the steep mountain face at a dizzy height over the Colorado River was not his idea of fun — though it seemed to be just that for Nick who also delighted in free climbing, something that nearly terrified Josh just to think about.

Nick's voice came from below. "How're you doing?"

"Hanging in there," Josh called back without looking down. He kicked off and dropped a few more feet on the rope.

"We're almost there. You have about fifteen feet to go."

I can do fifteen more feet, Josh told himself. Just a bit further and we're there.

"Made it," Nick announced. Then, in a TV show announcer's voice, "Joshua Kincaid, come on down."

Josh chuckled and kicked off. Two more kicks and his feet touched the shelf they'd been aiming for, and which the map designated as the location where his great grandfather had discovered the cave of lost artifacts that would provide the explanation of what the amulet was, and where Josh and Nick fit into things.

Or so I hope. Josh was still not sure they weren't on some sort of fantastic adventure that would eventually prove to be a wild goose chase leading nowhere.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Nick asked, helping Josh unfasten his climbing gear.

"Piece of cake," Josh lied, glad it was over. He didn't relish the trip back up, but resigned himself to the fact that it was a necessary evil in their quest for the truth. He looked around the ledge.

"Doesn't look like anyone's ever been here," Nick said.

"Not for a while," Josh said. "But someone, a long time ago, did some digging there, if I'm not mistaken."

Nick looked where Josh pointed. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm serious. See these rocks? They're not in a natural position. Someone piled them there. It was a long time ago. The surface on the rocks has weathered. But I'm guessing that if my great grandfather really did find something down here, that was where he dug into the tunnel and then filled the hole with loose rock after he came back out."

"If you say so," Nick said. "I guess that's why you're the scientist and I'm the guy running the ropes."

"Without guys like you," Josh said as he knelt beside the loose rock, "eggheads like me wouldn't get anywhere. Now let me test my theory." Using the claw of his rock hammer, he pulled the loose stones from the shaft. "This might be it."

"Man, if that's an entrance, it's mighty narrow."

"Muscle man's misery," Josh said with a grin.

"Never thought weight training would work against me. Hey — look at your amulet."

Josh glanced down. The jewels on the device were strobing brightly, even in the sunlight. "Looks like we must be near something that this thing's keyed to."

"That is seriously weird, dude."

Josh tucked the amulet back under his shirt and continued to pull the loose rock from the tunnel. "I'm pretty sure this is going somewhere." He now was into the cliff face up to his waist as he reached and pulled more rock out the hole after him. "Clear away the rock as I bring it out," he told his friend.

“You got it.”

After fifteen more minutes of work, Josh had the hole cleared, the last of the rock dropping into the chamber beyond the tunnel. He backed out, blinking in the bright sunlight. “That’s the last of it. There must be a chamber. Sounded like it might be large, judging from the echoes the last of the rock made when it fell into the cave beyond the tunnel.” Josh retrieved a flashlight from his backpack.

Nick stood beside the hole. “You think I can get through the passage?”

Josh eyed his friend’s muscular frame a moment, and then studied the hole. “I think you’ll just be able to squeeze through. But you’ll want to shed your belt and jacket. Otherwise I might have to kick your head to get you back out.”

“Very funny. I’ll give it a try. But if it gets too tight, I’m backing out.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Within minutes, the two young men wriggled through the narrow passage. Although Josh had little trouble with his wiry frame, it was touch and go for Nick who barely scraped through the narrowest section of the tunnel.

The two stood silent for a moment, and Josh realized he must be feeling the same thrill his great grandfather had felt decades before upon discovering the cave. Recovering from their wonder, the two young men flashed the beams of their flashlights around the dark grotto, spotlighting a wealth of artifacts that made the area look like a crazy museum designed by a Midas. Among the statues and chests were several alien-looking machines with Egyptian overtones to their design.

Josh spotlighted one of the mechanisms. “Hey, isn’t that the machine that was in the background in my grandfather’s message?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. There’s some weird stuff in here.”

The two crossed over to the strange contraption. As Josh leaned over the rail around the machine to get a better look at it, his amulet slipped from under his T-shirt and flashed in what appeared to be a coded pattern.

The ancient machine answered the flashing, humming to life as internal plates and cogs engaged. At the same instant, the chamber filled with light from an unseen source.

“What’s happening?” Nick asked.

“Looks like some sort of interrogatory code — my amulet is ‘talking’ to whatever this machine is.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“We’ll see,” Josh replied.

A beam of light shot from a large crystal in the machine and formed into a foggy hologram of Professor Kincaid, and then the image spoke. “I have failed in my mission. I have bought a few days to make this message along with another that I hope has lead you here without problem. I fear it’s now only a matter of time before the Matrani murder me. But I’m hoping sometime in the future, someone will complete the task I’ve begun.

“My dilemma is that the scientific community has refused to help me. Most have been bribed or hoodwinked. Even the Smithsonian has been compromised. The truth they are hiding is staggering in its implications, and it appears most of our ancient history is a fabrication — a lie. In truth, an ancient race of giants, the Nephilim, once inhabited the Earth, enslaving our ancestors.”

The image of the professor vanished and was replaced by an ancient scene with Nephilim sitting on golden thrones. Then the giants were confronted by armed humans who engaged the creatures in a violent clash. At first the giants prevailed, but eventually the sheer numbers of humans throwing themselves at the monsters overwhelmed and buried the creatures the way army ants engulf struggling beetles.

Nick and Josh watched unrelenting combat, shifting from one battle to another. The professor’s voice continued, “Eventually mankind revolted against these corrupt masters, massacring most of the Nephilim. For a time, mankind regained its freedom. This cavern you’re standing in appears to be Egyptian. Yet, it

was created by some ancient and now lost technology — many of the rock faces appear to be melted, the entire cave may have been cut into the rock. Likewise, the entrance was sealed and carefully reworked to make it appear to be a natural outcropping.

“Now here’s the key point. It’s almost unbelievable, but I hope that you’ll take into account what is around you and listen with an open mind. The armored giant statues that ring this chamber are living things, somehow placed in an artificial stasis that preserves them. They are restrained in this condition by the copper bands on their legs, arms, and necks. They have been transformed into stone-like figures, but they can be revived by removing these restraints — don’t be tempted to do this.

“From time to time throughout history, some of these giants have been unleashed by the Matrani, an ancient demon-worshiping religious sect that often aligns itself with the giants.”

The holographic image shifted to a huge temple where priests in crimson robes conducted a secret ceremony at the base of one of the statue-like giants.

The professor’s voice continued. “The Matrani are a secret society. They plan on betraying mankind to restore the rule of the Nephilim, bringing back conditions that once existed when human beings were enslaved by these monsters.”

The image of the professor returned and he continued to speak. “If you are seeing this message, then the Matrani are again attempting to revive the giants, activating mechanisms that will also trigger my original message to you, bringing you here. That you are here means that I have succeeded in keeping at least one of the amulets from them.” The professor held up the amulet Josh now wore. “Their ultimate goal will be to obtain all six of these amulets. Each of these devices permits nearly instantaneous travel to a Portal of the Gods like this contraption here.”

The holographic image of the professor dissolved, and a large golden dish on a slender neck that ended in four folding stilts floated in the darkness. “Each amulet has a surface covered with a stylized map and studded with jewels.

“Now pay close attention because this is important: I have discovered that each jewel on the outer ring of the amulet corresponds to the other five amulets. The central stone is the activator and also the identity stone for the amulet. I have not been able to determine how to select a portal to travel to, or even how to activate the amulet once a destination is set. But I believe this information must be somewhere here in this cave. I don’t have time to search for it. Just don’t attempt jumping to any portal other than the one in this cavern until you know the destination point is clear of rubble and above water. Jumping into rock or even dirt would prove fatal.

“The greatest danger facing mankind, apart from the resurrection of the giants, lies in the six amulets. If one individual obtains all six amulets, he can combine the six to form a powerful seventh amulet that gives him godlike abilities, even the power over life and death itself. You must keep your amulet safe while securing the five others before they fall into the wrong hands. Never yield to the temptation to unite any of them. Instead, destroy them all once you’ve collected all six.

“I believe the locations of the amulets are given in the texts on the walls of this cavern. You must find them before the Matrani do.

“One last thing. Whatever you do, never remove the amulet and its chain from around your neck after you have destroyed a —”

The message disintegrated into static and then vanished.

“What happened?” Nick asked. “That couldn’t have been the end of the message.”

“The last of the message must be corrupted. But I think we got most of it.”

“I can’t believe any of this is true... But I don’t know how anyone could explain any of this, either.”

“*Lex parsimoniae.*”

“I know that must mean something. Something great gramps said?”

“Ancient logic.” Josh smiled. “Roughly: ‘All other things being equal, the simplest solution is the

best.’ In other words, if we assume what my great grandfather said is true, then all this amazing technology, all we see here in this chamber, makes perfect sense.”

“But if what he said’s true, then history is...”

“Then what we were taught as history was basically wrong. Or even that much of it is a carefully crafted lie.”

“That’s got to be the granddaddy of all conspiracy theories. Better than UFOs and the grassy knoll.”

Josh rubbed his chin. “There’s one way to prove or disprove my great grandfather’s contentions. That thing there is a Portal of the Gods, right?”

“Yeah. But — wait a minute. You’re not going to try it out, are you?”

Josh nodded.

“What if it malfunctions like the holograph just did?”

“I thought you said this was all baloney.”

“Well, yeah. Sure. Probably. But what if it isn’t and you get stuck in subspace or whatever?”

“Logically, it probably is just baloney. But we need to put it to the test. We can stand here and speculate all day and get nowhere.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to risk your neck. You...” Nick stopped for a moment. “You’re not going to listen to me, are you?”

“Nope.”

Nick shrugged. “Okay then. What’s your plan?”

“This jewel on the back of my amulet gets brighter when I near the portal...”

Nick watched as Josh rotated the ring on the back of the amulet so the portal’s corresponding stone was aligned with the top V notch in the jewelry.

“I’m guessing,” Josh continued, “that’s how you dial in the location you want to go to.”

“Guessing?” Nick asked, his voice taking on just the trace of a quiver.

“What I can’t figure out, is how to activate it.” Josh pressed the center jewel on the front.

“Crap,” Nick said, holding up his hands as if to shield himself. “You can’t just play around with this. What if it works?”

Josh pushed harder. Still nothing. “I guess it was crazy to think such a thing was possible. But with all this here in this cavern, anything seems possible. Wait a minute. Maybe...” He give the amulet one more try, squeezing the two prongs on its sides while pressing the jewel at the same time.

And Josh vanished with a low rumble and a flash of light.

“Whoa!” Nick cried, seeing him disappear. He looked all around Josh was nowhere in the cavern. “Crap!”

Then the portal started to hum, and a moment later, Joshua re-materialized in front of it with another flash of light and a breeze created by the air displaced upon his arrival.

Nick raced over to him. “Are you all right?”

Josh steadied himself against the portal. “My head’s spinning. But I seem to be in one piece.”

They were both silent for a moment and then Nick spoke. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“It means a lot of things, I suppose.”

“But it means... If the portals and amulets really work — and they do — and the message has been activated—”

“Then someone must be looking for the amulets. Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.”

“They might have some of them already.”

“Maybe. But until we know otherwise, we’ll have to operate on the assumption that there’s at least one still left to find.” Josh turned toward the nearest wall covered with script and hieroglyphics. “My great grandfather said the locations of the other amulets are to be found in this text.”

“You’ve been studying Mesoamerican languages. What’s it say?”

“This isn’t any language native to the Americas.” Josh removed a digital camera from his jacket and flashed pictures of the wall. “Can’t read it. A little of it is Egyptian. But most of it looks more like some sort of a cross between Hebrew and some other Middle Eastern script.”

“If you need a linguist who’s an authority on ancient languages...”

“No!” Josh said, turning to face Nick. “Don’t even—”

“But Josh, she’s—”

“Not another word.”

“‘The smartest linguist on the planet.’ Those were your exact words.”

“It’ll be a cold day in Hell before I ask her for help again.”

Chapter 6

Tempe, Arizona

It seemed to be a cold day in hell, Josh reflected as he pushed his way through the glass doors of the Arizona State University campus library and savored the cool air that countered the savage heat of the outdoors. He had vowed never to have anything to do with “her” again, and now it was time not only to eat his words but also do some groveling. If it hadn’t been an emergency he would have found some other way.

He took the stairs to the second floor where “their table” had been a year before. Their table had become Stephanie Wallace’s private table after the two of them had parted ways.

And they’d parted over the most petty of reasons.

But Josh pushed that from his mind. Today the dealings would be strictly business.

He rounded a shelf of books and, sure enough, there was Stephanie, wearing a Sun Devils Athletics t-shirt that showed off her curves, and studiously ignoring everyone around her, a pile of books creating a formidable barrier between her and the world.

Josh slowed his pace and nearly turned and left. Seeing her was like opening an old wound.

But Nick was right. Stephanie was a genius when it came to ancient tongues, and she was someone he could trust to keep a secret. Stephanie was the logical choice and he’d just have to swallow his pride.

He sat down across from her, laying the manila envelope he’d been carrying on the table in front of him.

Stephanie didn’t even look up.

He cleared his throat and then coughed.

She glanced up and then, to Joshua’s amusement, did a double-take before skewering him with a raised eyebrow. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Time to cut to the chase. “I — we — need your help.”

Stephanie rolled her eyes. “I don’t know what screwball scheme you have now, but the answer is *no*.”

Josh had expected such a response and had the perfect bait to capture her. Rather than say anything more, he removed the photos he’d taken of the writing in the cavern. He shoved the pictures across the table so she could inspect them.

She looked at the first one. He watched her eyes and was amused to see them narrow as she examined the picture. *Gotcha!* he thought. She’d swallowed the hook. Now to slowly reel her in.

Stephanie met his eyes for a moment and then returned to the pictures as if she couldn’t quit looking at them. “If these are real...”

“They’re real. I took them yesterday.”

“Yesterday? How’s that possible?”

“What do you make of them?”

Stephanie tapped a photo. “This script is what’s known as Angel Enochian. But scholars have always assumed that script was a fabrication created during the Middle Ages. Yet these artifacts look like... what? Middle Egyptian Dynasty?”

“More probably Early Dynasty.”

“Right. This isn’t some elaborate hoax, is it?” She looked him in the eye as if trying to find some hint of a joke.

“It’s all on the level. But it gets weirder. The site’s here in North America.”

“I don’t see how that’s even possible. But if they’re here in North America... That means...”

“It would rewrite history.”

“If it were true. I have trouble believing that’s possible.” She studied another photo intently and then pointed to a section of it. “This phrase here... that’s the phonetic spelling for *Abathur* which in ancient-Iranian mythology—”

“Is the god who judges and weighs the souls of the dead, I know,” Josh said, feeling a little exasperated that she was once again treating him like a retard.

Apparently oblivious to his irritation, Stephanie pointed toward another section of the picture. “And this must be—”

Josh reached across the table and plucked the photos out of her hand. “So, are you interested in helping decipher these?”

Stephanie stared intently at him for a moment and then spoke. “If we work on a strictly professional basis.”

Joshua frowned. “Wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“So where did you take these pictures?”

“I can’t say more here. We’re trying to keep this under wraps until we can make sense of it. I have more pictures at my house and some artifacts from the site as well. When’s a good time for you?”

“This work can wait until next semester. I need to study for a final, but that can wait until Sunday. How about showing me your pictures and artifacts now?”

“Now works for me.” Josh pushed his chair away from the table and stood as Stephanie collected her pens and books.

He wondered if he’d made a terrible mistake in seeing Stephanie again.

Florence, Italy

Usi stood like a child in the mammoth hall leading to the central dome of the Matrani headquarters. The ornate marble pillars along the way stretched into the dark vault of the ceiling, reflecting the Renaissance ideal of construction that left the illusion of being outdoors. The giant Alcyoneus trudging along next to him completed the illusion. Usi was a grasshopper to a the giant humanoid, and the priest felt just as vulnerable as his physical size suggested.

But at least, here in the heart of the Matrani headquarters, they could move and speak freely without detection, now that they’d caught and executed the American spy they discovered two months earlier. Usi suppressed his fear of that incident from his mind so he could concentrate on extracting more information from the giant. “Our ancient records tell of 72 portals, each named after a major demon of our pantheon.”

“The Nephilim of old became demons upon death,” Alcyoneus answered in his gravelly voice that was often hard to understand because of its inhumanly low pitch. “These dead ancestors became the demons that mankind will learn to worship once again.”

Tell me something I don’t know, Usi thought. He would have to guide the giant’s thoughts. “And you know where the amulets are?”

Alcyoneus smiled, sending shivers down Usi’s spine. “I most certainly know where they are.”

Usi gestured and two of his men who had been quietly following the priest and giant stepped forward and held out a large map between the two of them. Alcyoneus leaned over the surface, studying the map for a long minute. Finally he spoke. “Much has changed on this planet while I slept in bondage. But the amulets were hidden in these locations, one on each of the continents.” Alcyoneus sausage-like finger pointed to the first location on the map while one of the men, armed with a highlighter, prepared himself to carefully mark each of the positions.

Alcyoneus indicated the first: “The Wandjina stronghold...”

“In Australia,” Usi said.

Alcyoneus ignored him and continued. “Here, in the Mayan Kingdom. Here, under Zoser’s Pyramid in Sakkara where my largest army awaits revival, and here, under the Stonehenge. This spot unmarked on your map...”

“In the Grand Canyon,” Usi said. “We may have a lead on that one already.”

“And in Nemrut Dag where you found me. In each of these places, we left an amulet and several portals. The south-most continent—”

“Antarctica,” Usi offered.

“It will become the kingdom of the One who creates the seventh amulet by assembling the six into a whole.”

“I am puzzled,” Usi said. “We found no amulet when we revived you. Where is the one that you left at Nemrut Dag?”

“We hid it.”

“So it’s still there?”

“It’s here. In me.”

“I don’t understand,” Usi said.

The giant drew his massive dagger, causing the two Matrani aides in charge of the map to hastily put space between themselves and the giant. Alcyoneus ignored them, turning his arm over to expose a long scar that ran from wrist to elbow. He shoved the point of his dagger into the scar and commenced sawing at his flesh, seemingly oblivious to the pain and blood. Usi found himself unable to look away, watching with morbid fascination in much the same way he might stare at a corpse beside the road at the scene of a terrible traffic accident.

Finally, the giant stopped his butchery and sheathed his knife. Then he sunk beefy fingers into the wound, fished about for a moment, and then extracted a bloody amulet, its chain snaking out after it.

Usi fought to control the wave of nausea he felt after witnessing the bloody retrieval of the device. One of the aides nervously handed a handkerchief to the giant who wiped the amulet clean of gore.

“An unusual hiding place,” Usi finally managed. He collected himself and continued. “Our records tell us that with that amulet it is somehow possible to travel to a device called a portal. If that’s correct, could we not jump to the places you indicated on the map and collect the rest of the amulets?”

“It is not quite that simple,” Alcyoneus replied, tossing the bloody rag on the floor.

“But if there’s a portal in each of these places.”

“There is.”

“Then why couldn’t we...”

“Each portal must be in the open, sitting on the ground with only air around it. Air can be displaced. Rock or earth cannot. Much can change in thousands of years. Caverns can fill with sand and ice. Jumping into such a place would prove fatal.”

“And we’d lose the amulet as well.”

“That is correct.”

“Then we must travel to each site?”

“It is the only way,” the giant replied.

“I will deploy search parties to the sites you’ve indicated immediately.”

“That would be prudent.” Alcyoneus nodded and flashed one of his blood-curdling grins. “But most likely you are too late for one of them.”

“What?” Usi said with alarm.

“See, this jewel on my amulet glows.”

“I’m not sure what the significance of that is.”

“It means that someone has recently used one of the amulets.”

“I believe I know who that would be,” Usi said. “And it may not be as big a problem as it would seem. My people have been watching a certain family for generations. Perhaps it’s time to take care of the young heir if he’s found an amulet. Excuse me a moment.”

Usi turned from the giant and retrieved his cell phone from the pocket inside his robe. He selected the special number and called the man who had been tracking the Kincaid boy.

There were two rings on the other end and a voice answered. “Yeah.”

“It is time to break the egg,” Usi said.

“Consider it broken,” the voice on the answered in Italian. “The kid just left, but should be back soon.”

Chapter 7

Tempe, Arizona

The moment Aldo Alessandro had trained his whole life for, came with a single phone call. Now the *assassino* pocketed his cell phone. Joshua Kincaid was to die.

Always the professional, Aldo went into what he thought of as his *modo dell'assassino*. He took his time, carefully examining each room in his apartment to be sure he would leave nothing behind that might provide a link to him or his client. He had been careful from the start. No police agency in the entire world could link his fingerprints to his name. Indeed, his recent client had seen to it that no police agency in the world even had a record of his fingerprints on file.

It is nice to work for clienti potenti. This *clienti potenti* had also paid very well. It was *perfetto*.

Satisfied nothing incriminating would be found in the apartment, Aldo tapped his button-down shirt pocket to be sure his passport and driver's license were safely tucked away for later use. Then he took a spray bottle of Clorox bleach, put on some rubber surgical gloves, and proceeded to spray and wipe down the whole apartment, just to be on the safe side with the fingerprints. Such thoroughness was the secret of the *professionista*, the system that had kept him out of jail all the years he'd been at his bloody trade.

The other trick that separated the pros from the *dilettanti* was escaping the scene of the crime in a hurry. Amateurs seldom planned adequately for their escape, and thus they regularly got caught.

Not Aldo.

He had his escape worked out, the route to the airport, committed to memory. A newly purchased airline ticket rested inside his passport. He felt his trouser pocket; the key to the stolen getaway car was ready, too. He was prepared.

All the preliminaries out of the way, now Aldo would simply wait patiently until the target exposed himself. Which he regularly did since he suspected nothing.

How did the American's say it? Aldo asked himself. "This job is a piece of cake." That was it. He liked that expression.

The assassin stationed himself at the window with its sash halfway up, the screen beyond it cut away, leaving a hole for the barrel and a clear view for the scope. He cradled his M501 sniper rifle after chambering a single hollow-point cartridge. One shot was all he'd need.

The sun shone from the back of his apartment. There were no trees between him and the house across the street. *Semplice*, Aldo thought with a chuckle, *a piece of cake*.

He lit a cigarette and calmly smoked it.

It was not his first murder for hire. Not by a wide margin.

It wasn't even the first in the month since he'd come to the states. First, he'd had to kill the current tenant so he could rent the apartment that now would give him a clear shot at his target. The killing of the tenant had been the tricky one since it had to look like an accident so the authorities wouldn't become suspicious. Then, there'd been the first murder today, necessary to secure his getaway car. The previous owner now slept the *sonno della morte* in the trunk of the vehicle.

Soon, there would be a third death. But this one he couldn't hide. It would be sudden and noisy and public. Thus, the need to leave quickly in the ensuing confusion, before the police had a chance to cordon off the area and start searching for suspects.

The street was almost empty. Heat waves danced over the concrete and the only sign of life was a pest-control van parked half a block away. He had been concerned the first day the van had been on the

street. But it appeared to belong to someone living in the area. Now it was a part of the neighborhood routine.

Fifteen minutes passed and then the target's car arrived.

The curtain rises, Aldo told himself, tossing his cigarette to the side. He kneeled at the window and shouldered his rifle, bringing the crosshairs onto the front windshield of the car, then raising the point of aim a little above the door on the driver's side.

Josh appeared in the crosshairs as the young man and a woman — his girlfriend perhaps — exited the car. Aldo's finger tightened on the trigger ever so slightly as he waited for that perfect moment that always occurred when a person slammed a car door shut. Then, for just a second or two, his target would stand still before initiating movement away from a vehicle. It would be in that instant that Aldo would take his prey.

Josh slammed the door shut.

Aldo's finger tightened on the trigger as he prepared for his killing shot. Before he could fire, there was a wet "thunk" and then his finger relaxed, and the gunman crumpled backward onto the apartment floor, his head slamming on the floor, the rifle dropping from his limp hands. He lay there, one leg twitching with the last threads of life as a dark pool of blood rapidly formed around the back of his head, draining quickly due to the hole in his forehead that let air seep into the cavity where brain tissue had suddenly turned into pulp.

"I think I took him out," Specialist Howard Samson said, lowering his silenced M40A3. The rifle's recoil had made it impossible for him to see his bullet actually impact, even though the sound suppressor soaked up a lot of the recoil.

"Confirmed kill," Sergeant Barry said, lowering his spotting binoculars for a moment to locate the couple the enemy had been targeting. He lifted the lens and studied the two. "And it looks like your shot didn't attract any attention. That Kincaid kid looks as clueless as ever. Got some kind of looker with him."

"Ah, the life of the college kid," Samson said, double-checking the window he'd sent a bullet through. He could just pick out the splatter of blood on the windowsill. No doubt about hitting the target.

"You stick in here and keep an eye on the windows just in case there's a second guy holed up in the apartment. I'm going to scout out the apartment and then I'll call in a cleanup crew."

"Just don't go sticking your head out the window," Samson said. "It'll look bad on my record if I accidentally snuffed my spotter."

"Funny," Barry replied. He put on the baseball cap that completed his Sam's Pest Control disguise, then pulled the door of the van open and quickly exited. He crossed the street and, after checking to be sure no one was watching him, ducked into the apartment.

Five minutes later, the sergeant called his contact in military intelligence who relayed an order for a CIA cleanup crew to dispose of Aldo Alessandro's body and sanitize the apartment. Then Barry returned to the pest control van so he and Specialist Samson could continue their vigil.

"Still a confirmed kill?" the sniper asked as the sergeant closed the door to the van.

"Definitely. Shot for the record books. From the looks of his weapon and passport, it looks like we have new players in the game. I don't think he had anything to do with the Russians."

"Good news or bad news?"

"Bad for the time being. I'm betting we'll have reinforcements with us before long. So keep sharp for a

few more hours and then maybe we'll be able to relax a little after that."

Josh, Stephanie, and Nick stood in the center of the living room.

"You guys are crazy," Stephanie said.

"Compliments will get you nowhere," Nick cracked.

"Seriously," Stephanie continued. "It would take us all day to drive to the site. And all day Sunday to drive back. And you don't have any supplies other than some sandwiches and potato chips. You two chow hounds would probably be through the provisions before we even get out the driveway."

Josh winked at Nick, and then said, "We've got some new rules for this outing. We only need enough gear to hike from the cavern to the nearest car rental after we're through."

"What are you talking about?" Stephanie asked. "And how, exactly, do you propose getting to the cave in the first place? Fly?"

Joshua smiled. "Put on your backpack and I'll show you how we'll do it. Go on, put it on."

Nick and Josh donned their own packs, and after a few moments, Stephanie did as well. "I don't see what this is going to prove," she said.

"Better put your hat on, too," Nick said, winking at Josh.

"All right," Stephanie said, jerking her hat on, leaving it crooked atop her head. "Now what is this earth-shaking idea you have? I still don't see how—"

"Put your hand on my shoulder," Josh interrupted. "And then hold Nick's hand."

"You've got to be kidding," Stephanie said.

"Just try it," Josh said. "I think you'll be surprised."

"I supposed next you're going to sing 'Kumbayah,'" she said. "And why does Nick have to wear his revolver? You look like a kid playing cowboys."

"That's a Smith and Wesson Model 327," Nick said. "And there are snakes and cougars where we're headed."

"I think you're both crazy." Reluctantly Stephanie took Nick's hand and put her hand on Josh's shoulder. She looked puzzled as Josh held the amulet he wore around his neck in his hand. "What's that supposed to do?" Stephanie asked.

"You'll see," Josh said. Then he tapped a glowing jewel in the amulet.

Stephanie gasped as the living room faded out and the three of them vanished.

Chapter 8

Florence, Italy

Usi and Alcyoneus continued down the hallway toward the central dome, aides in crimson Matrani garb following a short distance behind them. Abruptly, the giant stopped and lifted the amulet it wore on the chain around its neck.

“The amulet has been activated,” Alcyoneus said.

“Are you certain?” Usi asked.

“I could feel its power. See, this glowing jewel there? It warns that the other amulet is in use.”

Usi pondered the situation a moment. “Is there some way to track it? If we knew...”

“Where is north?” Alcyoneus asked.

Usi pointed northward and the giant aligned the markings on the back of the amulet, using it like a sort of compass before he spoke. “On the back of each amulet... The jewels for each port glow when they have been recently used. If a port is being used, then we can assume that jumping to it will be safe.”

“So you could jump and discover who is using the portal. Can you tell where it is?”

The giant studied his amulet for a moment, and then pointed to the West and downward. “The portal they just used would be there, were one able to extend a line through the planet.”

Usi considered the direction a moment. “That must be the port in North America. Can you make the jump to where the port’s been activated?”

Alcyoneus nodded. “But first, I will need a map. The portals don’t give all the data required for a jump.”

Usi gestured toward one of the two aides following him. “The map. Quickly.” As the giant continued to study its amulet, Usi glanced upward toward the location where he knew a hidden video camera recorded all they were saying. He smiled for a moment, knowing that the information the camera secretly taped would soon give them the secrets to controlling the amulet the giant now held.

Grand Canyon, Utah

Nick, Stephanie, and Josh had materialized inside the cavern, the amulet having taken them directly there via the Portal of the Gods that Josh and Nick had tested thoroughly before leaving the cavern. It had taken Stephanie about five minutes to quit screaming and pounding on her two companions.

“That was a terrible thing to do!” she cried, becoming almost hysterical. “Letting me get... get *vaporized* like that without warning me — It was criminal!”

The apologies had not worked well. That Josh and Nick never managed to keep a straight face at the same time when asking for forgiveness made Stephanie all the more furious with them.

Her anger soon evaporated at the sight of the cave. After surveying the collection of artifacts for almost a half hour, the two young men commenced the task of taking photos of both artifacts as well as the walls, while Stephanie tried to make some sense of the hieroglyphics and Enochian script that encrusted the walls. Eventually hunger had overtaken their excitement, and the three sat in a circle on the cool floor, eating sandwiches and bottled water, a bag of potato chips being split among them.

There was a lull in their conversation and Nick couldn’t suppress another snicker.

“It wasn’t funny.” Stephanie fumed, her memory of her ordeal spurred on by his laugh. “I still can’t

believe you used that contraption without warning me. I about lost my lunch.”

Joshua chimed in, talking around a sandwich. “You held up very well — once you quit screaming like a two-year-old.”

“*It was not funny.*”

Nick decided it was time to change the subject. Otherwise, the two former love birds would be trying to peck each other’s eyes out. “Just to change the subject, Josh, if your gramps was in a hurry to collect all the amulets, why didn’t he just push the buttons to the various portals and go get them?”

“I’ve been wondering that, too,” Stephanie said.

“In theory that would work,” Josh said. “But there’s a catch. If — ”

“If, the cavern had caved in,” Stephanie interrupted, “then a jumper could end up inside a boulder. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Exactly,” Josh said.

Nick thought a moment. “Hammer, rock, skin — rock wins.”

“You’d resemble something like spaghetti sauce,” Stephanie said.

“That would cramp my sex life,” Nick quipped.

“Hey, I’m trying to eat,” Josh protested.

“The odds are against the jumper,” Stephanie said. “There’re what? Sixty different ports on your amulet, right?”

“Seventy-two. With only six of them actually being where an amulet is.”

“So,” Stephanie said, “if there are only six amulets altogether, then the odds of hitting a cavern where one was would be small. Offset that against a cave filling with rock, sand, or water after several thousand years — the chances of catastrophe and no pay off must be high.”

“Like Russian roulette,” Nick said. “Only with five bullets in the cylinder and only one empty chamber.”

Josh wadded up his paper napkin and jammed it into a pocket. “We better get with the show. We still have to find the —”

“Map showing where the other amulets are,” Stephanie said, finishing Josh’s sentence for him.

Josh snorted. “You know how annoying it is when you—”

“Finish your sentences.” Stephanie giggled.

Nick laughed as well. “That’s a slick trick. Do it—”

“Some more.”

Joshua got to his feet, a frown on his face. “Just stop—”

“It!” Nick and Stephanie yelled in unison.

Josh made a terrible face even as Stephanie and Nick dissolved in laughter.

Fifteen minutes later, Josh had forgotten his anger. Stephanie strolled along the wall as if in a trance, reading the script from the surface of the cave and translating aloud into English. “*Malka* — that’s the spirit of Power or an angel — took *ptula* — virgins — as wives and the *zira* — offspring — were giants, Nephilim. That explains all the statues of giants here. They must have worshiped them.”

“My great grandfather,” Josh said, “contended the statues in this cavern are actual, living creatures in suspended animation.”

Stephanie raised her eyebrows. “*That* would be a tough sell in academia. Just that giants are real would be a tough sell.”

“Why’s that?” Nick asked. “Almost every culture has stories about giants.” Nick crossed over to one of the giant statues. “I mean, look at this guy. You don’t need much imagination to believe he could be the real McCoy.” He reached up and patted the giant’s hand.

“Don’t touch anything,” Josh warned. “This is an archeological site.”

“Okay,” Nick said, holding both hands in the air. “I’m no archeologist, but this guy looks more like a

mummy than a statue. I swear, you can see the pores and wrinkles on his skin. I can't imagine how a sculptor could have done *that*."

"It's a statue," Stephanie said. "It has to be." She turned toward Josh. "But I can see how your great grandfather might have *mistaken* them for mummified giants."

"But why not believe in giants?" Nick persisted.

Josh sighed. "Artifacts that look like they belong to giants are occasionally found in Greece as well as here in the New World. But the theory that there really were giants hasn't been taken seriously since the mid-1800s. My great grandfather was one of the last holdouts."

"Today," Stephanie added, "the scientific community's closed-minded and tight-lipped when it comes to giants. Don't fit into the evolutionary time scale, for one thing."

Joshua nodded. "My career would be toast before it ever started if I ever suggested such creatures once existed."

Stephanie motioned toward the writing on the walls. "I hate to rain on your parade, Josh, but it would take us decades to decipher all the inscriptions in here. And some of this is beyond my capabilities. I'm not that cognizant of Persian, for example and this section here is ancient Persian without a doubt. Egyptian hieroglyphics are sprinkled in with regularity, and some of them are symbols I've never seen anywhere before, possibly unique to this site."

"We'll just take our time," Josh said. "We can't call it quits just because we have a wealth of material to choose from. We should at least collect some key data before we make it public."

"But what are you going to do for money in the meantime?" Nick asked. "That five thousand you're getting isn't going to stretch that far. You need some sort of funding."

"And to get funding," Stephanie said, "we'll have to bring others in on this. There's too much here for just three of us."

"We can handle it ourselves," Josh insisted.

"That's crazy," Stephanie said. "Listen to yourself."

Nick said nothing and shook his head. He'd heard this duet sung by the two prima donnas before. It *always* led to a tragic swan song.

"Why are you being so negative?" Josh asked.

"Because you're so anal."

Josh turned away from Stephanie. "I refuse to fight."

Stephanie stepped around him and put her face just inches from his. "And the amulet, our government should have that technology. We could send a portal to the Moon and travel between the Earth and the Moon in just seconds with that technology."

"The amulet's not open to negotiation."

"This isn't the time to be pigheaded," Stephanie whispered.

"Pigheaded?"

"If the hoof fits!"

"Giving something like this to government bean-counters would be crazy."

"Anal, anal, anal," Stephanie taunted.

"You should know," Josh hissed. "You're full of crap."

"Just the word I'd expect to hear from someone who's anal."

Nick decided it was time to step in. "I hate to interrupt your love fest, but..."

Joshua and Stephanie both turned toward him and, in perfect unison, demanded, "What?"

"Could you guy's give my ears a break? I think my eardrums are bleeding."

After that, the two fumed, but they fumed silently, and that was worth a lot to Nick. Lacking the scientific background of his friends, he resumed his examination one of the giant statues — or mummy. More and more, he thought it might be the latter, the expert opinions of Josh and Stephanie

notwithstanding. For one thing, the clothing though old and stiff appeared to be fabric. While it was possible that some ancient dingbat had taken the trouble to sew clothing over a statue, Nick thought that was unlikely.

What had the old professor said? Something about the giants being held in stasis. The old scientist had claimed the copper bands on the giants' wrists, ankles, and neck were what kept them in their stone-like condition.

But was there anything special about the bands? They looked like regular copper that had been exposed to the elements for a long time; a blue-green patina on their surface, but little else. Nick checked to be sure Josh wasn't watching, and then ventured to touch one of the copper bands.

He jerked his hand back, startled at how hot the metal felt. It was almost like touching a living thing. As he jerked back his hand, the locking pin on the band dropped half way out, leaving the shackle in place by the slightest of margins.

Nick swore under his breath. Checking to be sure Josh still couldn't see him, he reached to push the pin back into place. But when his fingertip brushed the pin, it slid completely out and the bracelet opened and then fell loose, swinging free on the chain connecting it to the other restraints.

"Crap," Nick whispered, half expecting to see the giant come alive.

Nothing happened.

He let out his breath. The old professor's stories had him going.

There was still a worry: *Josh will give me hell if he finds out I've disturbed one of his precious artifacts.* Better try to quietly put the thing back together. He'd never notice so there was not reason to say anything.

Nick bent over and picked up the pin, then stood to see if he could reassemble the bracelet around the massive wrist of the statue. It was then that he noticed that when the chain from the loosened bracelet had swung loose, the pin of the other restraint had slid part way out.

"It just keeps getting better," Nick whispered. Josh would have his hide if he saw what had happened. *I can't believe this!*

At that moment, Nick noticed that the skin on the giant's had had changed color and continued to do so right before their eyes, as if life were creeping back into it.

Nick threw caution to the wind. "Hey, guys, you better come and see this."

"Just a minute," Stephanie said.

"Now!"

Nick felt frozen in place as one of the giant's hands twitched, then its arm moved, fingers reaching up to release the bindings on the creature's throat.

Stephanie let out a surprised scream just as Nick stepped back, unable to believe what he was seeing. The monster seemed like something from an impossible nightmare; it continued to grow more animated, bending over to release the copper bindings on its ankles.

And then it was both alive and free. The giant extracted a long sword from the sheath at its waist.

Nick didn't remember drawing his magnum revolver from its holster, yet the gun was ready in his hand when the giant took a menacing step toward Nick who took careful aim at the creature's head, figuring that as large as the creature was, that was likely its only vulnerable spot. "Don't come any closer," Nick warned, wondering idly whether or not the creature could possibly understand his words, but knowing that his actions should be clear enough to it.

The monster hesitated for a moment and then charged, sword lifted high over its head, the tip of the blade scraping across the ceiling with a shower of glowing sparks.

Nick squeezed off a single shot before dodging the massive blade that hissed by, just inches from his scalp. As the giant wound up for another strike, the young man fired two more quick shots before rolling away, the monster's blade clanging into the rock where Nick had been standing only a moment before.

The giant's third swing missed Nick, but hit a large chest and the heavy fragments of wood and gold bowled the young man over. Rolling onto his back, Nick discovered the giant standing over him, sword reverse and raised in both hands with its point downward, ready to skewer the young man to the earth.

Nick swore, knowing there was no way he could avoid the blade centered over his chest.

The giant raised his weapon for the final plunge downward, but before he could complete the attack, Josh, brandishing a copper spear he'd apparently picked up from one of the piles in the corner of the room, charged the monster with a loud war whoop.

The giant swung its sword underhand to deflect the spear point away from its chest, then swung its weapon in an arc that slashed toward its new attacker.

Josh dodged, backing against a wall and raising the spear in front of him.

Nick used the distraction to roll away, hiding under a table to reload his revolver, extracting a speed-loader of .357 Magnum cartridges from its belt pouch. He loaded the cylinder and snapped it home, then glanced up to see the giant advancing toward Josh who desperately threw the javelin, managing to get it past the creature's sword so that the point lodged between its ribs.

The giant roared and clutched at the spear sticking from its chest, falling to its knees.

"What the hell?" Nick asked, rising to his feet and covering the monster with his revolver.

As the three college students watched, the monster threw back its head, roared in anger, and then seemed to age a hundred years in a fraction of a second, its skin growing leathery and then disintegrating into dust to expose the creature's bones that, in turn, crumbled apart so the entire monster collapsed upon itself, leaving a mound of dirt where it had been.

"What the hell just happened?" Nick asked, still covering the mound of dirt with his weapon, half expecting the nightmare creature to somehow reappear.

"I don't understand this," Josh said. "How did that thing reanimate itself?"

"And why didn't Nick's bullets have any effect on it," Stephanie said. "Did you miss it every time you shot?"

"No way," Nick said, holstering his weapon, hoping the others didn't see how violently his hand was shaking. "My aim was dead on. I saw the bullets strike, but the thing's skin just seemed to swallow them without effect."

"More importantly," Josh said, "why did that small wound I inflicted with a dull copper spearhead have such a detrimental effect on the creature?"

"Maybe it just disintegrated because it was so old," Stephanie suggested.

"It didn't seem too decrepit when it was trying to take my head."

"What sort of ammunition were you using?" Josh asked.

"Soft lead hollow points — reloaded them myself. The bullets are designed to do maximum damage. They would stop an elephant. But they didn't even seem to phase this thing."

"Yet my javelin... For some reason it caused it to —"

"Disintegrate," Stephanie finished.

"Pure FM," Nick said, shaking his head. "Pure FM."

"What's FM?" Stephanie asked.

Josh and Nick looked each other in the eye and answered in unison. "Freakin' Magic."

"You guy's are missing something big," Stephanie said. "I don't want to ask the obvious question—"

"But will anyway," Josh interrupted.

Stephanie gave him a withering look and continued. "How did the giant come to life?"

Nick looked at the ground and kicked at a splinter from the chest the giant had smashed. "That would be my fault."

"What do you mean?" Josh asked.

"Well, the bindings on the giant's wrists, ankles, and neck... I saw that one of the pins on the wrist

shackle had come loose, so I tried to push it in, only it fell out instead. That started some sort of reanimation process. The thing just — its skin was like a sponge soaking up water. It came to life right before my eyes, almost as fast as it disintegrated after you poked it with the spear.”

“Until we figure what’s going on, stay away from the giants,” Josh ordered.

“No, problem,” Nick said. “No problem at all.”

Chapter 9

Shaken by their battle with the giant, Nick, Josh, and Stephanie gave the other statue-like Nephilim standing around the cavern a wide berth. The three students forced themselves to finish their exploration of the cave, capturing pictures of the walls and various objects within it. But the inscriptions that showed the information about where the other amulets were was nowhere to be found.

“Josh,” Stephanie finally said. “It’s getting late. We’re going to have to come back another time to continue our search for the map — if it exists at all. I have finals next week I need to study for and I can’t afford to be getting back at the last minute.”

“I don’t suppose you’d consider getting an incomplete,” Nick said. “I mean, this sort of dwarfs anything you might be—”

“I would not.”

“But you could just do a makeup test. Then we’d have time to keep on exploring here.”

“No way. I only agreed to look at your pictures, if you’ll recall. Not to a full-fledged expedition.” She checked her watch. “It’s six PM now. By the time we make the drive home...”

“All right then,” Josh said. “I think we’re all worn out anyway.”

“It is a long drive home,” Nick added. “But what Josh and I discovered a little while ago should make things a little easier on the next leg of our journey.”

“What do you mean?” Stephanie asked.

Josh smiled as he pulled his rock hammer from his belt. “Give me a hand with the exit hole,” he told Nick. “Then we have a little surprise for you.”

“I’m tired of surprises,” Stephan said.

Josh looked at Nick and rolled his eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, Josh and Nick had pulled the rock from the entrance tunnel into the cave and the three students had wriggled out onto the ledge. After replacing the rocks to prevent anyone else from easily discovering the entry, Stephanie and Josh waited while Nick rappelled up the cliff face, using the metal pitons he and Josh placed in the rock on their earlier climb.

Stephanie took one look down and stepped back from the edge with a look of panic. “You’re crazy if you think I’m going to climb out of here.”

“That was the original plan,” Josh said. “But you won’t have to do any climbing.”

“We’ve got you covered,” Nick called back over his shoulder as he neared the top of the cliff.

Stephanie turned toward Josh. “I don’t understand.”

“Nick has the second Portal of the Gods we found in his backpack.” Josh dodged a pebble that tumbled down the rock face as Nick scrambled over the top of the cliff and vanished from sight.

“So we’re going to... teleport to the top of the cliff?”

“That’s pretty much it.” Josh’s cell phone rang and he fished it out of his jacket.

“All ready up here,” Nick’s voice told him.

“Be there in a moment. Stand back so we have room.” Josh closed the phone and pocketed it, then turned to Stephanie. “Collect your gear and put your hand on my shoulder.”

“I hope I don’t lose my lunch.”

“It’s not so bad after you make your first jump,” Josh told her. “At least that’s how Nick and I have experienced it. Ready?”

Stephanie nodded, putting her hand firmly on his shoulder and looking him in the eye.

Josh looked away, uncomfortable with her closeness, and pulled the amulet out from under his t-shirt and activated the device. The two of them vanished from the ledge and reappeared at the top of the mountain where Nick waited for them next to the portal.

Stephanie caught her breath and then blinked in the sunlight, staring at the breath-taking panorama of the Grand Canyon spread out around them. The sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows over the orange cliffs; the valley far below was lost in the shadows. “This is beautiful, isn’t it?” Stephanie said, a sense of wonder in her voice.

“I’m afraid there’s no time for site seeing,” Josh said. “We have a long hike to town to get a rental car.”

“And then we’re headed home,” Nick added.

The woman at the ACER car rental desk raised an eyebrow. “So your car broke down and you need to rent another to get home?”

Josh could see that she was hesitant to rent them a car. Before he could say anything more, Nick stepped up and started giving her a snow job. Josh decided to just keep his mouth shut and let the BS artist take over.

Ten minutes later, they had a Chevrolet Aveo for the drive home. Half an hour after that, they were headed down Highway 89. The sun was setting, casting long shadows ahead of them as the three college students traveled.

Nick drove, Josh sat in the front passenger seat, and Stephanie was spread out in the back seat, trying to ignore the conversation in the front of the car while she studied for her finals, having slipped a text book into her backpack before starting the expedition.

“So how’re we going to find the other amulets?” Nick asked from behind the wheel.

“Stephanie and I will have to keep studying the writings on the cave walls until we find something,” Josh said.

“That doesn’t sound easy.”

“Needle in a haystack. We’ll just have to hope that sooner or later we find a clue.”

“And forty years later,” Nick said, his voice sounding like a documentary commentary, “The two scientists tripped over what they had been looking for.”

“It might take some time,” Josh admitted. “But hopefully not forty years.”

“Wait a minute,” Stephanie piped up from the back seat. “I think maybe I saw a map but didn’t realize what it was at the time. Let me see your camera.”

“I didn’t photograph everything in the cave,” Josh countered. “And I think I’d remember a map if I took a picture of a map.”

“I saw you flash a picture of it,” Stephanie said. “Let me see your camera.”

Josh leaned over the floor and fished the camera from his backpack. While he extracted it, Stephanie leaned over the seat and reached for the camera just as Josh sat up and turned, placing his nose practically at her chest. He couldn’t help but look down her blouse to see her shapely torso right in front of his face. He felt like his eyes were trapped like a deer in an approaching car’s headlights. Finally, he averted his eyes, a blush creeping up his neck. He handed the camera to Stephanie who seemed unaware of what had

happened.

“How do you turn this thing on?” she asked, jabbing at the buttons on the back of the camera.

“Careful!” Josh yelled. “You could erase all the photos if you press that.”

“I wasn’t going to press anything.”

“Well, I remember the time you managed to erase three weeks’ worth of photos when —”

“That was your fault because you didn’t make any backups.”

“You were the one that erased all the pictures.”

“But if you had —”

“Guys!” Nick shouted. “Give me a break, will you? Don’t you two ever do anything without arguing like a couple of spoiled brats?”

“He started it,” Stephanie protested.

“I swear,” Nick said, “one more argument and I’m going to run us off a bridge to put myself out of my misery.”

Stephanie said nothing more, concentrating on the camera that she now had turned on, spooling through the pictures on the view screen at the back of the camera. “Here it is,” she said a minute later. “Look.” She leaned over the back of the seat holding the camera under Josh’s nose.

Joshua studied the display screen a moment. “I don’t see anything other than some weird ornamentation.”

“That’s what I thought. But look closer. Imagine you’re looking at the bottom of a globe.”

Josh was silent a moment. Then, “Man!” Josh said. “How could I have missed that?”

The car lurched to the side.

“Watch the road, Nick,” Stephanie ordered.

“Sorry,” the driver said, getting the car back on course.

“Everything’s at some weird perspective,” Josh said. “I know that’s Antarctica in the middle — but something’s not quite right with it.”

“That’s what it would look like without its ice covering,” Stephanie said. “I saw a radar map of the actual continent once. Unless I’m mistaken, that’s just how it looked.”

“So... Somehow, whoever made this map knew what was under the ice.”

Stephanie pointed to another place on the map. “See, that’s Australia, there’s South America. But what I don’t understand why they put Antarctica in the center of a map? That seems counter-intuitive.”

“That one,” Josh said. “I can explain. The ancients thought God lived in the north. If the Nephilim considered themselves the enemies of God—”

“Then setting up their main base in Antarctica is logical,” Stephanie said.

“I hate it when you do that,” Josh said. “Now give back the camera.”

“Hang on a minute. I think there’s something else that—”

“You said you need to study. So give me the camera.”

“Just let me have it for a few minutes.”

“You’re going to fool around and erase all the pictures.”

“No, I won’t..”

Josh snatched at the camera, but Stephanie jerked it out of the way. “Ha! Thought you could get it from me. But you didn’t.” She made a face and stuck out her tongue.

“Quit playing games,” Josh said, his voice taking on an edge. “Give me the camera.”

As the two continued to bicker, Nick gripped the wheel until his knuckles turned white. Then he gritted his teeth and wished he were deaf.

In the air far above the car Nick drove, a Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter shadowed the three college students. Crammed with eavesdropping equipment, the chopper carried technicians who carefully recorded the conversation in the car via a bug placed in it. As the Chevrolet continued down the highway, the helicopter crew relayed the data they collected to a military satellite overhead. Not even those aboard the helicopter knew where the information went after that.

Chapter 10

Grand Canyon, Utah

After Stephanie, Josh, and Nick had left the cavern, it grew dark as the ancient system that lit it closed down without living tissue to activate it. Machinery, built before the pharaohs, carried out the unseen tasks necessary to maintain the giants ready for reanimation.

A half hour later, the walls again started to glow, and the Portal of the Gods vibrated and shimmered, and then shook violently. Just as abruptly the device stopped, and a Matrani search team, led by Usi and Alcyoneus, materialized in the cavern. The men were visibly shaken by the jump, and it took a few seconds to recover; the giant straightened his huge form and sniffed the air.

Usi was the first of the human beings to regain his composure. “Fan out!” he ordered his men. “The intruders may be hiding somewhere.”

His bodyguards, dressed in crimson jump suits and each armed with a Beretta ARX-160 assault rifle sporting a GLX-160 grenade launcher under its barrel, moved with practiced precision.

Usi turned to the giant. “The cavern appears empty of anyone but us. Are you sure they were here? Could your amulet have been wrong?”

“They were here,” Alcyoneus replied, his gravely voice echoing from the walls. “Less than an hour ago. I can still smell their scents.”

Usi said nothing as he studied the wealth around him, his eyes glistening. He turned back to the giant. “How many of them were there? Can you tell?”

The Nephilim flashed his evil smile. “One was a lush, ripe female.” The giant licked his lips.

“I wish you wouldn’t remind me of your gourmet tastes,” Usi said, a grim look on his face. “If we are to catch them, we must be prepared to jump right away next time. I want their amulet.”

“Sir,” one of the Matrani guards said, attracting Usi’s attention.

“What is it?” the leader asked, walking over to where the man stood so he could see what had attracted the bodyguard’s attention.

“I think you should see this.” The soldier pointed toward a clean imprint in the dust.

Usi’s eyes narrowed. It was obvious from the outline in the dust that a portal had been sitting there and was now gone. Usi turned to the giant. “It looks like they took at least one portal with them.”

“And they left the other behind,” Alcyoneus said, pointing to the one they’d arrived in.

“They plan to return,” Usi said.

The giant nodded. “My thinking exactly. I suggest we revive some of my warriors here in this cavern and let them guard it until these intruders return.”

“Good plan,” Usi said. “One way or another we’ll get their amulet.”

Alcyoneus flashed another of his sharp-toothed grins. “And perhaps a luscious meal.”

Fort Mead, Maryland

General Thomas Grogan was a career intelligence officer who’d served tours in Panama, Germany, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. He’d seen plenty of action and his job behind the desk often irritated him. But he was one of the few officers with the exact qualifications needed. In addition to experience on the battlefield, he held a master's degree in history, where his thesis had been *Unconventional and Mythic*

Viewpoints In History. Later Grogan had received a second master's degree and finally a doctorate in mathematics, with an emphasis on code-breaking algorithms. The latter degree had secured a position in military intelligence, working in conjunction with the NSA (National Security Agency).

But it was Grogan's history thesis, coupled with the reputation that he'd earned at the NSA that had made him the logical choice to head up the Longwalker Project. Ironically, he'd signed onto the project thinking it would be more academic than security related.

Instead, it had turned out to be a witch's brew of mind-boggling proportions that now involved the Russians as well as a nefarious Italian secret society — with more than a few very odd “corpsicles” stored in extra large compartments in the morgue. The discovery of actual giants lying in suspended animation in Afghanistan had transformed the project from one of academic interest into a sticky quagmire.

Worse, Grogan was nearing retirement. He faced the distinct possibility of being forced to leave with the job with lots of loose ends and basically in a shambles. He slammed a muscled fist on the desk in front of him. *I refuse to let this get my goat!* One way or another he was going to resolve things, even if he had to kill off half the elite troops in the Russian army and all the Italian spies and assassins that seemed determined to thwart him every step of the way.

There was a knock at the door.

“Enter!” Grogan said.

Captain Harvey entered. “Sorry to bother you, sir,” the captain said. “But I thought you should see this.” He laid a thick file in front of the general.

“I'll read this later when I'm ready to fall asleep,” Grogan said in his usual gruff style. “In the meantime, give me the rundown.”

Harvey swallowed and launched into his explanation. “Our counter-sniper team outside Kincaid's house saw some action. Took out a sniper working from an apartment — looks like the guy probably killed off the original renter and also killed several other civilians as near as we can tell. He was armed with a Beretta M501, according to cleanup.”

Grogan opened the folder and looked at the corpse of the sniper who sported a hole in the center of his forehead. “Nice shot. Any witnesses?”

“Our guys took him out without anyone noticing.”

“I was wondering when we'd get a nibble with Kincaid. Any idea who the sniper belonged to? That rifle suggests our Italian friends.”

“He was pretty clean. But the pathologist discovered a unique tattoo that we haven't been able to place. If you'll allow me.” The officer leafed through several documents in the folder and stopped at a photo of an arm with a hexagon tattoo.

“I recognize it. Damned Matrani. Continue.”

“Our contact says Kincaid has an amulet.”

“It just keeps getting better.”

“He and his friends popped up in Utah half an hour ago.”

“Utah! But that means that...”

“Yes, sir. The amulet must be operational. One of our teams picked him up after our spy called in. Kincaid's enlisted the help of a young linguistics genius named Stephanie Wallace. She's there in the file.”

Grogan looked at the black and white photo of Stephanie and shook his head. “If I were a hundred years younger... Kincaid is one lucky devil.”

“I checked her records and she's as smart as Kincaid. Smarter, maybe. Had scholarship offers from Harvard, Oxford — all the big name schools.”

Grogan scanned her file. “Yet she went to Arizona State? Any reason for that?”

“I'm not certain, sir. But the school has a collection of Tocharian manuscripts she studied. Translating

the manuscripts was thought impossible; she cracked them by the end of her freshman year. Similar feats since then. She's a real linguistics genius."

Grogan rubbed his chin. "So Kincaid, with a little help from his intellectual friend, might lead us to more of the amulets if we keep everyone off his back. Any word on the Russian team?"

"None, sir. They seem to have vanished in the Peruvian jungles, never to be heard from again."

"That's weird." Grogan closed the folder and thought for a moment. "Of course this is *all* weird."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Captain Harvey, see if our satellite can locate the Ruskies. In the meantime, we'd better scoop up these kids before someone turns them into road kill. Get an extraction team together — yesterday."

"Yes, sir!"

Grogan thought a moment after the captain left. *I should never have given up smoking*, he decided. He unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk and extracted a Colt .45 automatic pistol, carefully loaded a full magazine into it, then retrieved three spare magazines for it as well, hoping he'd have no cause to actually use the weapon.

Chapter 11

Tempe, Arizona

Josh, Stephanie, and Nick sat in the kitchen in Josh's house. The portal was on the kitchen table they sat around. They were debating the best place to hide the device. Its jeweled rim and intricate inlays of gold made the artifact a prime target for a thief, and the three didn't want to entertain the idea of having it stolen.

"Maybe we could spray paint it black or something," Nick suggested. "It sort of looks like a television dish."

Josh shook his head. "We don't know how sensitive some of those tiny circuits in it are — look at how fine those etched areas are. Paint might mess the whole thing up."

"Or mess you up," Stephanie said. "Imagine what would happen to you if this thing malfunctioned when it should be reassembling your atoms when you rematerialized."

"So basically," Nick said, "all we need a really good hiding place where a burglar would never think of looking."

"It's late." Stephanie rose to her feet. "And I still haven't studied. So I'm leaving it to you two to sort out where to hide the portal."

Josh snapped his fingers. "I've got it." He picked up the portal and Nick followed him out the kitchen door into the back yard that was enclosed by a tall privacy fence.

After a moment of indecision, Stephanie followed them, calling after them, "What's that horrible smell?"

"Our pool," Nick said. "We need to get it cleaned."

"I'll say. Smells like something died in there."

"Something did die," Nick said very seriously. "My love life. That stench killed it."

"I don't see where you could hide the portal out here," Stephanie said. "Except maybe in the bushes."

Josh said nothing as he stopped at the edge of the pool and kicked off his shoes.

"You're not getting into the water?" Stephanie asked, her disgust obvious in her tone.

"It just stinks because of the copper sulfate we dumped in it to kill the algae."

"But it smells horrible!" Stephanie said.

Josh ignored her and waded into the pool, portal in hand. When he was waist deep, he pushed himself forward into the deep end and then swam through the murky water, the weight of the portal dragging him to the floor of the pool in the deep end.

He carefully positioned the portal upright in the corner where it would be in the shadows during the day, then kicked his way back toward the surface, finally swimming to the rim where he pulled himself up to sit on the edge, his legs still in the water.

"Won't the water corrode the electronics?" Nick asked. "That copper sulfate smells like it could eat its way through glass."

Stephanie shook her head, speaking before Josh could. "Gold doesn't corrode even in salt water."

"All the gunk in the water will keep the portal hidden," Josh said, getting to his feet, the water running off his clothing.

"Poor pool maintenance finally pays off," Nick said.

"That's for sure," Stephanie said. "No self respecting criminal would ever set foot in that smelly brew."

"Speaking of which," Josh said, "you two will have to excuse me while I go shower and change

clothes.”

“I’d suggest you burn, not wash, your clothing,” Nick said.

Stephanie just rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Florence, Italy

After thoroughly searching the vast cavern in the Grand Canyon, Usi and the giant Alcyoneus returned to the Matrani headquarters, materializing in front of the portal they had placed in a hidden room.

Usi had a vague idea he decided to bounce off the giant. “If the college kids who took the amulet from the Grand Canyon also took a portal with them, then the portal’s probably hidden on their property somewhere.”

Alcyoneus grinned, sending shivers down Usi’s spine. The priest continued speaking. “So, I’m wondering if there isn’t some way to quickly find them and take their amulet from them.”

The giant nodded. “I could use my amulet to go there via the portal. But I would need some idea of where the portal is located. Do you have that information?”

“We have been monitoring the Kincaid boy for some time.” Usi motioned to an aide. “Bring us the map with Kincaid’s rental on it. And a world map.” The priest turned back to the giant. “The family has been under our surveillance for four generations. The great grandfather discovered many of our secrets and stole and hid one of our amulets. We knew it was only a matter of time before one of his offspring would betray the location of the amulet.”

The aide returned with the maps. “Spread them here on the table,” Usi ordered.

The priest and giant leaned over the maps and studied them.

Usi tapped the world map. “Here’s the state and city where the boy lives. That is most likely where he’ll keep the portal. This map has a more detailed look at the city itself.”

“The larger map will do,” Alcyoneus said. “There are not that many portals in that part of the world. I can set the amulet to the approximate coordinates, and then it will home in on the closest portal at that position. If the boy has a portal there, I will be taken to it. If not, nothing will happen or I will go to the cave we just came from since it would be the closest portal.”

“I don’t understand how you figure the coordinates,” Usi said. “It looks complicated.”

“Easy work once you understand how it is done.” Alcyoneus placed the amulet on the table over the map. “Your modern system is actually derived from ours. In both, the globe is divided into five divisions —”

“A pentagram,” Usi said. “Of course.”

“And,” Alcyoneus continued, “that pentagram is subdivided with the magic number of 72 divisions for each side. This yields a total of 360 degrees. The ancient system is oriented differently from yours, but otherwise the old system remains. Your people normally adopt systems based on ten. Our twelve digits,” the giant said, lifting his two huge hands, each of which had six fingers, “enabled us to use the magic system based on twelve more easily. That you continue to use our twelve based system shows how hard the old magic dies.”

“So we still divide the world in the old ways,” Usi said, rubbing his chin. He glanced toward the hidden camera and then caught himself, lest the giant realize their conversation was being recorded. He studied the giant who remained clueless, still concentrating on the map.

“I only need to shift your measurements to our ancient alignment through the Stonehenge — that is our degree one, whereas today you have the zero point here.”

Usi looked at where the giant pointed. “Yes, Greenwich Prime Meridian. So basically, you add or

subtract the difference and have the coordinates for the amulet?”

Alcyoneus nodded. “Exactly.”

“What about latitude? The distance around west and east?”

“Nearly the same. We count from the icy south as one and continue the count to the northern pole — a simple transposition from your map coordinates. Once I have these numbers, I enter them into the amulet, turning this ring to harmonize the two. There. It is ready. I can now go and see who has the other amulet.”

“Perhaps some of my men should accompany,” Usi suggested.

Alcyoneus chuckled and removed the huge battleaxe from his belt. “I am certain I can handle three humans by myself.”

“Good luck,” Usi said, hating the idea of letting the giant operate on his own.

The monster once again flashed his terrifying grin, exposing the double rows of pointed teeth. “Mmmm. I can almost taste the female.” Thanks to his six fingers on each hand, Alcyoneus squeezed the activation bars with the palm of his free hand, then pressed the glowing gem with a finger.

The giant vanished with a thunderclap as air rushed in to fill the vacuum created when he departed.

Usi gazed at the portal for a moment, then turned his attention toward the hidden camera. “The fool has shown us how to operate the amulets,” he told the men who had secretly been recording the conversation. “Did you get all of that.”

A voice came into the room over a hidden speaker. “Yes, your excellency. We captured the whole process. Our experts here in the booth are confident we can now operate the amulets.”

“Make a backup of the tape and then seal them both so no one else can view them. Not a word to anyone.”

“We understand, your excellency.”

With any luck, Usi thought, the giant will kill the Kincaid boy and his friends and bring their amulet back, and then his plan could be set into motion.

Chapter 12

Despite the smell of the pool, Nick decided sitting next to it was preferable to staying in the house and listening to Josh and Stephanie carry on their verbal duel. He settled into a lawn chair. The breeze coming across the water was cool and offset the warmth radiating from the concrete that had been scorched by the sun during the day.

Nick closed his eyes. It was hard to believe Josh and Stephanie had once been lovers. They had been so close. They probably wouldn't be fighting now if the two hadn't started comparing notes about their hobby, a love of sword fighting. Josh felt that the Western style of fencing was the apex of the combat sword; Stephanie argued that the Japanese style developed by the Samurai was the best of all styles.

Rather than agree to disagree, the two had bickered for hours, throwing a wet blanket over the party and eventually causing most of the guests to quietly leave. Finally, the two decided to determine which form of fighting was superior. *That was when the fit hit the shan*, Nick thought, opening his can of beer with a wet fizzing.

They'd at least had the good sense to put on the old fencing masks and leather chest protectors and jackets — Nick had insisted they do that if he was going to be hogtied into acting as referee, otherwise he figured he'd be taking one of the other of them to the emergency room.

Then they'd argued about what would constitute a strike or kill since the Japanese weapon generally did damage with the edge of the blade while the more modern Western sword made use of its point.

On and on the arguing went until Nick was nearly ready to stab them both and put an end to it.

Finally the mock combat started. Josh was good. Really good.

But Stephanie, despite her shorter reach, was better. Little by little she bested him. Nick didn't even have to say anything as the impartial judge because it was painfully obvious to all that she had the upper hand.

Then Stephanie had tried to avoid hurting Josh's feelings by belittling her talent.

"Don't patronize me," Josh had yelled, throwing his mask across the room. "You're better. I admit it. Are you happy now?"

And with that, he had stomped out of the room. Stephanie became angry as well, muttering "Big baby" as she left the house.

The two of them had never dated again.

But they have continued to fight, Nick thought, wishing he could close not only his eyes but his ears as well. *I'll just stay out here until she goes home to study*. If there was a merciful God in Heaven, the time of her departure would be soon.

Nick dozed without realizing it. He awoke to a strange noise. He sat up to see the pool churning at the deep end. *Crap, the water must be damaging the portal*.

He stood to call Josh, but then stopped in his tracks as the head and shoulders of a giant rose from the water. Nick yelled bloody murder the same instant the monster threw back its head and roared. Trying to put as much distance between himself and the creature, Nick upset the lounge chair as he scrambled backward.

The same instant, Alcyoneus threw his ax. It chopped through the lounge chair where Nick had just been.

The college student turned to run, but slipped in a puddle of water left from when Josh got out of the pool. Nick fell, remained on his back a moment collecting his sense, then rolled out of the way just before the blade of the sword the giant now held crunched into the cement.

Not having time to rise to his feet, Nick backed away on all fours, moving away from the monster

wading to the edge of the pool, brandishing its sword for another strike.

Nick backed away, then stopped, his back against the privacy fence.

The monster grinned, seeing his prey cornered and continued forward, to the edge of the pool. As Alcyoneus readied to lift himself from the pool, the water around him began to bubble, steam rising to the surface. He paused to glance down, puzzled that the water had started boiling. Then he threw back his head and bellowed in pain and rage.

The water continued to churn violently around Alcyoneus who now sank into it, his legs dissolving into slime.

Nick stepped forward for a better look, vaguely aware that Josh and Stephanie were beside him.

“What happened,” Josh asked. “We thought we heard—”

“The roar of a giant,” Stephanie finished, watching the monster’s bubbling skull sink below the water.

“I don’t know how it got here,” Nick said. “Or what happened to it. One minute it was trying to split my skull.”

“And then,” Stephanie said, “it just started to dissolve.”

“I want to get a closer look at what’s down there,” Nick said, kicking off his flip flops.

“Hang on,” Stephanie said. “How do you know the water’s safe? Something killed that thing.”

“Good point,” Nick said, bending down and touching the surface of the water like it was a hot iron. “It took a few minutes for the water to start — to start whatever it did to that monster.”

“I’m not sure how wise it is to use your hand to experiment with,” Stephanie said. “And how the hell did a Nephilim — or whatever that thing was — get into your pool?”

“One mystery at a time,” Josh said. “How does your finger feel, Nick?”

“So far I don’t feel anything other than wet. In for a penny, in for a pound,” he said, dipping his whole hand into the pool.

Stephanie gasped. “I don’t know how wise that is.”

Nick screamed as if in pain.

Stephanie screamed.

“Only kidding,” Nick laughed, along with Josh. “It’s okay,” Nick said with a wink.

“You guys are jerks,” Stephanie said evenly.

Five minutes later, Nick had experienced no adverse reaction. “I think it’s safe to check on Moby Dick’s remains.”

Josh nodded. “I’m going, too.” He pulled his t-shirt off over his head and then dove into the pool.

“I think you’re both crazy,” Stephanie said as Nick followed him into the water.

The two swam downward, paddling through the murky water. Through the foggy liquid, Nick could see the giant’s bones, white and free of tissue — as if they’d been lying in a desert for a hundred years. Armor and clothing lay around the bones; an oversized dagger lay beside them. The two young men circled the bones like underwater vultures, and then something glistening under the skull attracted Nick’s attention.

He shoved himself deeper, pushed aside the giant’s massive jawbone, and grasped the jeweled disk from the pool floor. His lungs now felt as if they would burst as he broke the surface and gasped for breath. Josh bobbed up a few seconds latter.

“Found something,” Nick said, dog paddling toward the deck with an amulet in one hand. When his free hand touched the edge of the pool, he held the object up.

Stephanie stepped close to the edge and Nick handed the bejeweled device to her. “Another amulet!” she cried, holding the device out as the two climbed from the pool.

Josh stepped closer to inspect the second amulet. As he neared it, both the amulet he wore as well as the one Stephanie held glowed brightly and sparks crackled between the two devices, causing Stephanie to cry out as Josh jumped back.

“Are you all right?” Nick asked, taking her by the elbow.

“Just surprised me. What in the world was that?”

“My great grandfather claimed the amulets could combine, giving the wearer some sort of power — that’s why we need to find them before the giants do. So we’d best keep them apart, for the time being.”

“You take it,” Stephanie said, handing the amulet back to Nick. “I don’t want any part of these things.”

“What I can’t figure out is how that thing found us here,” Nick said, placing the amulet’s chain over his head so the device hung over his chest.

“And are there more that might find us as well?” Josh asked.

“You guys are creeping me out,” Stephanie said. “I feel like I’m in a bad dream. I really don’t feel like studying anymore. Frankly, I’m a little frightened to be by myself.”

“You could crash in our spare bedroom,” Nick offered.

“Are you sure that would be okay?”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea,” Josh said. “You might be safer somewhere else. I mean…” His voice ran out and there was an awkward silence.

“There probably won’t be any more giants,” Nick said. “That last one could have brought a whole army with him if there were any more of them, same way we can get all three of us through the portal with just one amulet.”

“So you’re saying,” Stephanie said, “That since he was alone, that means there aren’t likely to be others.”

Nick nodded. “That’s my theory.”

“I’d like to believe that.”

“I’d bet on it,” Nick said. “So go ahead and crash here. In the meantime, I’m going to go get this crummy smell washed off and a new change of clothing.”

“I’m not sure you should stay here,” Josh said quietly to Stephanie after Nick had walked down the hallway.

“Worried I might make moves on you?” Stephanie asked.

“Don’t kid yourself, sister,” Josh answered, anger in his voice. “If you were the last woman on earth I wouldn’t even consider…”

“Well, if you were the last man, the human race would certainly face extinction,” Stephanie countered.

Down the hall, Nick shook his head, entered the bathroom, and turned the shower all the way up, hoping it would drown out the loud angry voices coming from the kitchen. Nothing rounded out a day of giant slaying like a heaping serving of bellyaching served by mistress rear chewers and Forest Grump.

Nick carefully removed his clothing and threw it into the hamper. He could still hear the arguing over the roar of the shower. *I’ll be glad when this tour of duty is over*, Nick told himself, stepping into the hot water.

Chapter 13

Florence, Italy

This must be the frustration Hitler felt, Usi reflected, pacing the long hallway that smelled of aged granite and old tapestries. Glorious plans seem always to be dashed by the incompetence of those around genius. Usi's expensive leather shoes clicked with each step, each footfall echoing off the marble floor and bouncing into the maze of corridors around him. He was not sure why — let alone how — the three flunkies accompanying him walked so quietly. Possibly it was self-preservation, an adaptation they had developed to avoid his wrath at times like this.

“Alcyoneus should have been back by now,” Usi fumed, half to himself. He checked his watch. “Something's wrong. I should have insisted that our people went with that foolish, arrogant giant. He makes the mistake of thinking we're the same dumb brutes of the past. Now he's probably managed to lose the amulet.”

“We still have the portals we brought back after reviving Alcyoneus,” Raul, the aide slinking alongside Usi, ventured.

“Yes,” Usi said. “And we will continue to place those at key targets for the day when we again have an amulet. How ironic that I have a wealth of portals from the caverns we've discovered, yet we haven't a single amulet. I can't believe it!”

“Things could be worse,” Raul offered, trying to interject some hope into the conversation.

Yes, Usi thought. *I could be Raul who had been in the hereditary line to become the next high priest, but was passed over because of his deformed spine.* The odd thing about it was that Raul never seemed bitter. He always seemed perfectly happy to be Usi's lackey, serving the person in the office that was all but stolen from him.

No one said another word for a few minutes. Usi continued to walk. He didn't have to look at any of them to know they would fail to meet his eye, trying to avoid having to commit themselves in any way while he remained angry.

“Perhaps Alcyoneus will still return,” Raul finally ventured.

“I doubt it,” Usi said. “Somehow that Kincaid brat... Probably killed him the same way they managed to kill the giant in the cavern they discovered — has anyone learned *how* they killed the first one? It is hard to see how three college kids could bring down one of these brutes.”

“Our technicians thought perhaps they used a copper weapon at the cavern,” Raul replied.

“There were stacks of weapons in the cavern,” Usi said. “And if Kincaid and his friends know about the giant's weakness, then they may very well have two amulets now instead of just one.”

“Two?”

“Alcyoneus' and the one they had before,” Usi said in exasperation. How could his aides be so dumb? “Leave me alone.”

The aides quietly withdrew as Usi exited the hallway to the balcony overlooking the main courtyard of the palace. Usi swore loudly, resting his arms on a marble railing overlooking a wide courtyard. What course of action should be taken next? The Matrani order had prepared for thousands of years for this very moment, and now he was seeing the opportunity slip out of his hands. He could go down in history as the high priest who had failed to bring in the new order.

He looked upward toward the stained glass dome where a dragon twisted around attacking angels, some of which the monster swept from the sky with its tail, while another it grasped in a clawed paw. As a child, Usi's father had brought him here, to the very spot where he now stood. The boy's eyes had gazed

upward, and he had he instantly identified with Draco.

Now it seemed that emotional attachment had been prophetic. Like Draco, he was being dragged down by lesser beings, the college students and the imbeciles that worked for him. How he longed to sweep them all from his sky, dashing them against the earth.

“Your excellency,” Raul said, intruding into his musings. “About our expeditions. Should we call them back?”

“Of course not!” Usi turned toward him, examining him as if the sharp-faced cripple had lost his wits. “We must push ahead with all haste. We must beat the Americans and Russians to the last amulets. Keep in close contact with our teams. I must know immediately when any new covens of giants are found. I want to be there when the chambers are entered.”

Raul bowed, “I understand, my lord.” He turned, and limped away like, Usi thought, a wounded animal. Usi noticed one of his technicians nervously waiting to speak to him. Usi motioned for him to approach. “Did your team follow all the steps the giant was using to program the amulet?” Usi asked.

“Yes,” the technician replied. “The pictures we captured were quite sharp, and we fully understand the technique of operating the devices. We’ve taken the liberty of programming a hand-held computer to process the calculations.” The technician produced a small computer from the pocket of his jumpsuit, and handed the instrument to Usi. “It’s very simple to operate.”

“So simple even *I* could operate it?”

“With all respect, your excellency, that was not what I meant.”

“I understand. But I am not known for my technical expertise.” Usi flashed a humorless smile. “Continue.”

“The user simply types in any major city and country, and the coordinates needed to operate the amulet appear on screen. Or global positioning data can be entered for an even more precise placement.”

“So there’s no longer any need to use a map or do any calculations by hand?”

“That’s correct.”

“Excellent,” Usi said, taking the small device and pocketing it. “Make five more of these.”

“We are already creating them.”

“If there’s nothing else, you may go. I know you are busy in our technical department. Tell your team you’ve all done well. I only wish my other priests were so talented.”

“Thank you, your excellency.” The technician bowed, turned, and left.

Usi continued his stroll down the hallway, musing to himself. *Perhaps these giants have become useless relics of the past.* Or perhaps... Just maybe he could use them to his advantage one last time.

Nick stood in the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist, steam from his shower fogging the mirror in front of him. Satisfied that Stephanie and Josh were still continuing their heated discussion down the hallway and thus could never overhear him, Nick dialed a number that was unlisted in his cell phone — the device being programmed never to display the number after it had been dialed, thereby keeping it secret should the phone fall into the wrong hands.

“Go ahead,” the emotionless voice on the other end replied.

“Looks like there’s another major player in the game,” Nick said. “Whoever it is, they’re working with the giants. Or maybe the giants are on their own. At any rate, one of the Longwalkers came here tonight. Scared the—”

“You must have managed to kill it, right?”

“Negative. We didn’t do a thing to it. Something happened to him — literally dissolved in the water right before my eyes. Only left its bones and clothing behind. Anyway, I have its amulet.”

“You have an amulet in your possession?”

“Yes. So, with Kincaid’s, we’ll have two amulets. How soon will your team be here?”

He listened to the reply and then quickly got dressed, pocketing the cell phone as he stepped into the hallway to hear the never-ending argument coming from the kitchen.

The high-pitched whining of hummingbird wings had ceased with nightfall and crickets struck up their melodies, slowing their creaking as the night’s cool air dispelled the heat of the day. Two men dressed in leather jackets sat in a car in which the interior dome lights had been unscrewed. Each wore night vision goggles. They had been carefully observing the van a short distance away in which an American sniper team was hiding.

Given that the Italian assassin sent to kill the young Kincaid had vanished so thoroughly that there was no longer any sign he’d ever even existed, the men in the car believed the team in the van must have had something to do with that. There could be little doubt the team was there to protect Kincaid and the knowledge he possessed.

One of the men in the car reached into his jacket, briefly exposing the holstered GSh-18 he wore. He withdrew a disposable cell phone that could never be traced to his leaders. He dialed a number, and then waited for an answer.

In the earpiece, the voice of a former KGB official spoke softly in Russian.

The man in the car also spoke in Russian. “If Kincaid has the device we’re looking for, now is the time to snatch him and it. It appears that the Americans already have guards in place, and if what our spies say is true, more may be on the way. Kincaid is unlikely to be more vulnerable than they are now.”

“I understand. Put your plans into motion. Keep your position and report your progress after the attack begins.”

“I understand,” the man in the car replied. He closed the phone and turned to his partner. “Looks like things will become interesting now. Signal everyone to begin our operation.”

Chapter 14

“This whole discovery is more than we can possibly deal with,” Stephanie said. “You don’t know when another of those... those *things* may come through that gate. We were lucky this time. But maybe the next one won’t... won’t... won’t whatever that one lying at the bottom of your pool did.”

“You’re full of it,” Josh said.

Nick entered the kitchen from the hallway. “I hate to take sides,” he said. “But I tend to agree with Stephanie, Josh. My mom didn’t raise no giant killers. Or pool cleaners. We are in over our heads, dude.”

“This is uncharted territory,” Josh said. “What makes you think anyone would be able to do any better than we can? This whole situation would be new to anyone.”

“But it would be their necks instead of ours,” Stephanie said.

“If we did turn it over to someone else,” Josh continued, ignoring what she’d said, “our research would be sidelined and marginalized.”

“These things are trying to kill us,” Stephanie said, “and you’re worried about getting credit for your research?”

“You’re jumping conclusions. You always do that and—”

“I do not!”

“I most certainly am not that shallow,” Josh said.

“Then why not ask for help?”

“Because things get mucked up when a bureaucracy gets involved. We’d be buried in red tape.”

“Even for you,” Stephanie said, “that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard in—”

The doorbell rang, causing everyone to jump. Josh turned toward the living room and headed for the front door.

Nick called after him. “Careful.”

Josh called back over his shoulder. “Doubt giants ring doorbells.” He clicked open the deadlock on the door, grabbed the doorknob, and opened the door.

He had trouble believing his eyes.

There on the stoop stood a squad of soldiers armed with M4 carbines. A man who was obviously in charge and in the military, despite the civilian clothing he wore, held up a wallet with a Military Intelligence ID. “You would be Josh Kincaid,” the man in civilian clothing said.

“Yes, sir. How can I help you?”

“I’m General Sam Grogan, “May I come in?” Before Josh could answer, the officer pushed his way into the house and continued speaking as several of the armed soldiers followed him into the living room. “We need to talk. I’m here representing the US government I believe you and your friends are in grave danger. I’ve come to protect you three, and also to take possession of the two amulets.”

“How do you know about the—”

“And since you’re in danger, my soldiers are going to escort you to a safe house.”

“I don’t think we’ll be going anywhere,” Josh said evenly.

“Listen to the general,” Stephanie said. “We *are* in danger.”

Josh shot Stephanie an angry glance, and then noticed that Nick was nodding in agreement. Josh glared at them, wondering why they were so willing to side with the general. He turned back to the officer. “You can’t make me leave my own home.”

“If you don’t cooperate, I’ll simply obtain a court order to take possession of the two amulets and put you in protective custody. Let’s not make a federal case of this. Listen, kid, we just want to protect you. Make it easy on everyone.”

“How did you know we have *two* amulets?” The significance of that fact suddenly occurred to Josh. He turned toward Stephanie. “Someone must have told you.”

“You’re always blaming me,” Stephanie protested.

“Look,” General Grogan said. “It doesn’t matter how I found that out. I’ll give you an hour to pack your things. Stephanie, we picked up your stuff from your dorm already.”

“You what?” Stephanie asked.

“In the meantime,” the general continued, “I’m placing guards around this house for everyone’s protection. There’re some tough eggs after the three of you. Not just the giants you’ve seen so far. In fact, yesterday we stopped one guy that was about to blow your head off just in front of your house.”

Josh frowned and went down the hallway and into his bedroom, softly closing the door behind him.

“Should I follow him, sir?” one of the soldiers asked.

Grogan glanced toward Nick. Ever so slightly, the young man shook his head.

“No,” Grogan replied. Then he turned toward Stephanie. “You’ve got one stubborn boyfriend, there.”

“He’s not my boyfriend!”

Nick and Grogan exchanged glances with raised eyebrows, but neither said anything more about the matter. The room was silent a moment and then Grogan patted his flat stomach. “I haven’t eaten all day. You guys got any food?”

“You’ve come to the wrong house,” Stephanie said. “I looked in the refrigerator while ago and there’s just some beer, a loaf of moldy bread, and something that resembles blue cheese with bones in it.”

“Tasty, no doubt,” Grogan said. “But I think I’ll step out for a bite to eat. I’ll be back in our hour. You two want anything?”

Nick shook his head, Stephanie said, “No, thank you.”

Grogan turned toward his junior officer. “Lieutenant, I’m leaving you in charge. Stay sharp.”

“Yes, sir,” the green-looking officer replied.

With that, Grogan left the house.

Five minutes after Grogan had left, a pizza delivery car pulled up a block down the street, behind the van with “Sam’s Pest Control” emblazoned on its side. A delivery boy stepped from the car, picked up the pizza warming bag from the seat beside him, and cautiously walked to the back of the van and rapped on its door. “Your pizza’s here.”

There was a flurry of activity in the van, but the door didn’t open. The kid pushed up his glasses and rapped again. “Pizza!”

The door opened a crack and a burly looking man with a pistol strapped to his belt glared out. “Beat it kid, we didn’t order any freakin’ pizza.”

“Uh... But I’m supposed to get paid for this. It comes out of my salary if I don’t get paid.”

“Judas H. Priest.”

A voice from the back called out. “I wouldn’t mind some pizza. I’ll pay for it.”

“All right, kid,” the burly man said. “Today’s your luck day. Hang on a minute.”

The second man came to the back door of the van and fished his wallet from a hip pocket. “How much we owe you?”

Before either of the soldiers could react, the delivery boy pulled a PB/6P9 silenced pistol from the pizza warming bag and skillfully downed both men with a single shot to the chest, then placed a second bullet through the brain of each of them as they lay on the floor.

Satisfied the two were dead and that there was no one else in the sniper post, the young man slammed the back door of the van and returned to his car. He lifted an arm and spoke in Russian into the microphone hidden in his sleeve. “Snipers taken out.”

Chapter 15

Josh tossed more clothes into his suitcase, and tried to decide what else he should pack, feeling so angry and betrayed that his hands shook and it was hard to think clearly.

Stephanie had come in and now sat on his bed. She’d been trying to sooth Josh’s anger — and he found that made he all the more furious. He couldn’t believe she wouldn’t just take a hint and leave. He wondered if she was the one that had revealed to the government the secret of the amulets, and that there were two of them.

“Josh,” Stephanie said, breaking his train of thought, “I know how much your discovery means to you. But —”

“No, you don’t know how much this means to me. You don’t have an inkling of how much it means to me.”

“Maybe not... Of course not. But the government’s going to take the amulets one way or another. So maybe you should try to make the best of it. Maybe it’s time to...” She sounded like she had more to say, but instead just stopped speaking.

Josh said nothing, instead tossing a copy of his research paper into the suitcase so he’d have it to turn in. His classes seemed like they’d happened a hundred years ago, he reflected. In fact, everything had become surreal, from giants in the pool to combat troops in the kitchen and front yard.

“Josh,” Stephanie said softly, bringing him back to reality. “You know I’m right at turning everything over to the government.”

“Yes, you’re always right, aren’t you?”

“I’m not always right. But you know I’m right about this thing, this time.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Could you quit being such a jerk for a minute?”

Josh started to make a harsh comeback, and then stopped himself. She was right, he was beaten, and he was acting like a jerk, just like he had when she’d bested him at sword fighting.

He sighed and snapped the suitcase shut and sat down on the bed beside her. “I’m sorry. You really are right. I really have been acting like a jerk. But it’s hard to see how anything good will come of this.”

“They might still ask you to explore the cave. They’d be crazy not to use you as good as you are at—”

“Please, don’t patronize me.” He got to his feet, the anger surging through him again.

“I swear, you’re always the pessimist.”

“Pessimists are never disappointed.”

Stephanie frowned, rose to her feet, and moved toward the door. “Guess I’ll see you later.”

Josh started to follow her. “Wait. I didn’t...”

Stephanie stopped, turned, and faced him as he continued a step forward. Suddenly they were standing nose to nose. Reflexively, he leaned toward her and she closed her eyes and leaned toward him, and their bodies seemed to return to a moment when they were still lovers.

There lips nearly touched, and then they both stopped, eyes opening wide, and each awkwardly turned away. A moment later, Stephanie left without a word.

It’s probably better this way, Josh told himself, ignoring the ache in the center of his chest.

Outside Josh's house, a Spetsnaz team moved with the oiled precision of a killing machine. The Russian soldiers wore black and were easily missed on the poorly lit street. Each was equipped with night-vision goggles and armed with a silenced PP-19 Bizon submachine gun.

The elite force approached the home from two directions and their precisely timed assault caught the American soldiers guarding the house by surprise. Four of the US troops outside the house dropped with the withering first salvo, dead without ever even becoming aware they'd been under attack; the other six dropped before they could engage the intruders, weapons never reaching their shoulders.

The Russians checked for wounded enemies, and dispatched the two who remained alive with single shots to the head of each. Then the Spetsnaz troops replaced partially spent magazines and regrouped around the house, positioning themselves for the final assault, lining up at the back door, side door, and front door.

The military intelligence service GRU officer listened on his radio headset as each team reported it was in position for the final assault, and then he coordinated their entry into the house via the headsets each wore, giving them the go ahead.

A Russian demolition expert at each of the entrances blew charges positioned at hinges and locks, propelling doors into the house. Stun grenades followed the doors. The Spetsnaz waited for the grenades to explode, and then entered shooting at the confused American soldiers frantically trying to defend themselves.

In the confusion, one US trooper still managed to bring his carbine to bear, cutting down three of the attackers before being riddled in a hail of fire.

The last three American troopers who escaped the entry team's initial salvo retreated into the family room, bringing their guns to bear in time to stitch the first three Spetsnaz attempting to enter the room.

"What's that!" Stephanie yelled as she stood in the hallway.

"Get down," Nick ordered, shoving her and Nick into his bedroom. "Gunshots — and grenades."

"Crap," Josh said.

Nick entered the room behind his friends, then turned, slammed the door shut, and locked it.

"Why would anyone be shooting?" Stephanie asked, refusing to duck down once inside the room.

Another flurry of shots caused bullet pockmarks to appear as if by magic in the wall near her head. Stephanie looked at them, paralyzed with disbelief.

Josh pulled her down to the floor.

"What's going on?" Stephanie yelled.

"Guess the general wasn't exaggerating about us being in danger," Josh said, looking around for a weapon but seeing nothing he could use.

He turned to spy Nick crawling across the room to yank out a drawer from the dresser. He then scrambled to retrieve cartridges from an ammo box and insert them into his revolver that had also been in the drawer.

There were now only spasmodic bursts of fire. Josh wondered if the American soldiers were prevailing or about to be defeated.

The shooting stopped and there was shouting outside in the hallway. The shouting was all in Russian.

Nick dropped two more shells into his revolver and was picking up the final round to insert into the gun when the door behind him was kicked in. Nick dropped the last cartridges and flipped the cylinder into place.

Too late.

A Russian soldier pressed the warm barrel of his gun against the back of Nick's head. The soldier's thickly accented voice ordered, "Drop gun so no one more get hurt."

Nick set the gun on the floor and raised his hands slowly, as did Josh and Stephanie.

"Stand up," the Spetsnaz soldier ordered, motioning with the barrel of his submachine gun.

The three complied.

"Into kitchen."

Without a word, Josh, Stephanie, and Nick entered the kitchen to find the Russian GRU officer sitting at the table, now flanked by two soldiers with their submachine guns held at the ready.

"Just make yourself at home," Josh said evenly.

"Judging from your smart mouth, you must be the Kincaid boy." The officer slapped his PB/6P9 silenced pistol onto the table before continuing in his thick Russian accent. "There is no need for formalities. We are not going to waste your time or ours. Give us the amulet and tell us if you have any portals here."

"Why should we do that?" Josh asked.

"Perhaps you haven't noticed the bodies lying around you. Three more would make no difference one way or other to us. But there no need you die. Cooperate and I spare your lives."

Josh smiled grimly and pulled his amulet out from under his t-shirt and fingered a glowing jewel on its face. "You understand that I can press a gem and be out of here before you can do anything."

"Perhaps," the officer said. "But that would leave your two friends behind. I promise we kill them if you try any tricks. My men kill them before they move close enough to leave with you. They must touch you to go. No?"

"There's something you don't know," Nick said, taking a step away from Josh and pulling his amulet out from his shirt as well. "We now have two amulets."

The Russian officer suddenly looked worried, and made no effort to hide his concern.

Both young men now held up their amulets, fingers poised over jeweled activators. Stephanie reached out and held onto Josh's arm.

"So what's to keep us here?" Josh asked, noting the growing look of alarm on the Russian's face.

"Once you have the amulets," Nick said, "you'll kill us."

"I order my men to shoot if you try to leave."

"I'm guessing," Josh said evenly, "that we can activate these even if we're wounded. We might die, but you still won't have the amulets."

"Don't be silly. You have no idea where you might end up. Maybe inside mountain, or kilometer under ocean. A jump would be suicide. Now hand over amulets." The Russian forced a grin. "No one else need die."

"Time to say goodbye, Gracie," Nick said.

"What?" the Russian officer asked. Then he clamped his mouth shut, and grabbed at the pistol he'd laid on the desk. Before he could pick it up, Nick and Josh, with Stephanie holding onto his arm, pressed the jump gems on their amulets and vanished from the room, a thunderclap of air filling the vacuum where they'd been.

The Russian officer pounded the table with his pistol, swearing loudly. Then he stood and kicked over the chair he'd been sitting in. Noticing his men exchanging nervous glances, he forced himself to calm down, holstering his pistol with shaking hands. "Foolish youth. They're probably dead and the amulets are lost as well. I would not have killed them. I would not have killed them."

Sirens wailed in the distance.

"Time to leave," the officer said. "Everyone out." He shook his head. The fools undoubtedly had killed themselves. The officer looked around the room one last time. *All these brave men, Americans and*

Russian alike, had died for nothing in this battle tonight.

Chapter 16

Salisbury Plain, England

Stephanie materialized in total darkness, prone with rough gravel cutting into her skin. She tried to get to her feet and discovered she was pinned down in a tight passage, almost flat on her face with barely enough room to breath. The rocks below her shifted and a wave of dizziness ran through her body. It was damp and chilly.

“Where the hell am I?” Stephanie’s voice betrayed the panic she felt. “Josh? Are you here? I can’t see. I can’t move!”

“Calm down,” Josh’s voice called from somewhere ahead of her.

“Take us back to the house. We’re going to suffocate if we stay here.”

“Can’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for one thing you’re not touching me.”

“I think maybe I can wriggle toward where you are.”

“Don’t move. I’m not sure this whole ceiling isn’t about to collapse.”

“Then why don’t you leave. There’s no need for both of us to die here.”

“I wouldn’t ever leave you. But I can’t reach the amulet with both hands, anyway.”

They were both silent a moment.

“Let me see if I can get to you.”

“No,” Josh said. “It wouldn’t do any good. I’m pinned. I can’t reach the amulet to activate it.”

Stephanie closed her eyes and tried to collect herself, fighting the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. Then she said evenly, “We’re going to die, aren’t we?”

“We need to be quiet to conserve our air.”

“But we’re not leaving here, are we?”

“I don’t know.” There was a long pause, and then he added. “Maybe not.”

Another thought occurred to her. “Where’s Nick? Is he...”

“Somewhere else. He was holding his finger over a different jewel in his amulet when we left — he jumped to a different destination. He went somewhere else, but I don’t have a clue where.”

“I hope he’s better off than we are.”

“I’ll second that.”

Neu-Schwabenland, Antarctica

Nick shivered in the cold, wishing he’d had something other than a thin t-shirt, Bermuda shorts, and flip-flops on when he’d made the jump. But at least his flip-flops had come with him. Barefoot standing on ice was more than he cared to imagine.

“Cold comfort,” he said, his breath forming a cold fog as he spoke. One thing was sure, he wouldn’t last long in the cold. He had to find some sort of shelter.

He surveyed the frigid cavern around him. Everything was covered in ice, frost, and snow, tinted blue by the light coming through the icy dome overhead. Here and there, large, threadbare banners sporting Swastikas hung, half covered by ice. Vintage military equipment lay scattered around the ice cavern. In

the distance, if he wasn't mistaken, were some Nazi U-boats frozen in the ice. It was as if he were standing in the middle of a madman's WWII museum.

A skinhead paradise, he thought grimly.

Then he spotted possible salvation. A white winter parka was sticking up in the snow just ten yards from him. He quickly crossed to it and yanked it from the snow. He shook the ice from the coat and then donned it, oblivious to how ridiculous he must look in his shorts.

The inside of the coat was cold. Even when it started to warm from his body heat, he was still freezing. *Got to get out of this cold.*

He continued his visual search of the area for a few moments and then decided to head for a high brush-polished stainless steel door embedded in the face of an ice cliff. Unlike the equipment around him, this door looked both alien and new, and at least held a slight promise of a possible haven.

The door proved larger than it had at first appeared — and also farther away. Big enough to accommodate an army tank from the look of it, the door dwarfed Nick once he came alongside it. He felt frozen and was starting to be concerned about frostbite on his exposed skin, especially his toes. He felt weak and his whole body shivered.

There was no hint as to how to open the door. The stainless steel was thick, hardly making a sound when he hit it with his hand. Then he spotted a control panel mounted into the frame next to the door. The panel had one green button, and one red button. There was no lettering or any clue what the buttons might do, but Nick couldn't imagine they were anything other than controls for the door. "Nothing to lose anyway," Nick told himself through chattering teeth. Whatever might lay on the other side of the door could be any worse than freezing in the open. He pushed the green button.

Nothing happened and Nick felt all hope sinking. He pressed the red button.

Still nothing.

He pushed the green button once more, wondering if the door mechanism was inoperative. Then he heard the faint hum of a tired motor inside the door. The mechanism came to life, finally coming to speed. Then the surface of the door shimmered and started cracking the ice around the bottom of the frame. The steel plate inched upward, slowly creaking open.

When the door had raised three feet from the icy surface, Nick slipped through the opening and found himself in a well-lit hallway with decorative elements that seemed a cross between Albert Speer's architecture and that of the 1930s Art Deco style. Nick stood and looked along the frame, spotting another panel with the red and green button controls. He pressed the red button and the door began back down, closing out the cold.

Nick rubbed his hands together and blew on them, trying to bring feeling back to his fingers. At the same time, he stamped his feet that now felt numb from the cold.

"Now to figure out where the hell I am," Nick whispered, looking at the odd hallway he stood in. It was bleak, constructed of brushed stainless steel like the door, with odd cut outs along the ceiling that somehow made him think of his grandfather's old tube radio from the 1930s. "Curiouser and curiouser."

Nick started down the hall, but paused when he heard the commotion coming toward him: The pounding of boots. But at least they didn't sound like giants. Military boots from the sound of it.

He pulled the amulet out from under his jacket, fingers poised to activate it. *Would it be wise to jump blindly again?*

Probably not. It was a miracle he hadn't ended up inside a boulder or underwater as it was. No, he'd better wait until there was no hope at all before jumping anywhere again.

Back to Josh's house?

The catch with that idea was that he didn't know which of the glowing jewels represented the Portal of the Gods hidden in their pool. Or if it was even still there in the pool. What would happen if the Russians found it and locked it in a small steel vault — and he tried to jump into it.

What had Stephanie said of such a jump? *A guy would end up looking like spaghetti.*

And what about Stephanie and Josh? What had happened to them? Were they even still alive?

He didn't have time to ponder his questions. A group of soldiers came around the corner down the hall, wicked-looking weapons resembling submachine guns held at the ready. One who appeared to be an officer pointed a pistol at him and ordered, "*Setzen Sie oben Ihre Hände.*"

"Do you speak English?" Nick countered.

"*Setzen Sie oben Ihre Hände!*" the officer yelled, repeating his order. His men clicked the safeties off their weapons.

Uncertain what the man wanted, Nick held up the amulet, "You know what this is?"

"*Setzen Sie oben Ihre Hände!*"

"Stay back. If I think you're really going to fire, I'll make a jump. I don't really want to make another jump to God only knows where. But I will if I have to..."

The soldiers stood motionless, weapons centered on him.

Mexican standoff, Nick thought grimly.

Chapter 17

Salisbury Plain, England

Josh couldn't believe that he and Stephanie were trapped in a narrow black passageway. But he could believe that Stephanie and he were once again fighting. "Look," he continued. "I didn't *know* we would end up here. Those Russians had already killed the soldiers guarding us. It was jump or be killed."

"Why do you always think everyone's going to do the worst thing? And I wasn't trying to be critical of you, just saying maybe we should have waited before jumping so soon."

"Right."

"Why are you always so angry?"

"I'm not!"

They were both quiet, and then Stephanie started to giggle.

"OK," Josh said sheepishly. "I guess I was. I don't know. This is one tight spot we're in."

"Why do we argue about everything?"

"We don't."

"See?"

They were both silent. Then a low moaning echoed in the darkness.

"I wonder what that was," Josh said.

"My stomach."

"Oh, Lordy. I'm going to die listening to your intestines growl."

"There're worse things."

"Like what?"

"Like having to listen to you grump endlessly."

"You should talk," Josh said. "You find something to bellyache ever inch of the way."

"Just shut up."

They were both quiet a few moments. Finally Josh spoke, "My eyes are adjusting to the darkness."

"That's not much help if there's no light."

"What I mean is, I think I can make out some sort of an opening ahead of us. Maybe there's a way out. Let's see if we can get to it."

"I can't even crawl!"

"Wriggle like a snake." He lowered his voice so she couldn't hear. "You should be good at that."

"I heard that!"

Josh grunted and started to push with his feet, trying to make some forward progress toward the faint blue luminescence ahead.

“My new jeans are going to be ruined,” Stephanie muttered.

Josh started to speak, but then thought better of it and continued inching forward.

It took the couple twenty minutes to squirm through the tight space they were trapped in. But the blue light grew brighter as they neared it. Finally, Josh called back to her. “There’s an opening... Looks like a cavern. Just a little farther and—”

There was the sound of sliding rock and Josh yelped and fell out of sight ahead of Stephanie. “Josh?” she called. “Are you all right?”

There was no answer.

Neu-Schwabenland, Antarctica

In the hallway, just inside the exit from the Nazi submarine base, Nick still held the amulet in front of his face. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

Finally, the officer ordered his men to stand down. “*Senken Sie Ihre Waffen.* Then he spoke again to Nick, “*Wir verletzen Sie nicht. Folgen Sie uns bitte.*” The officer motioned down the hallway with his pistol.

“You want me to go with you?” Nick asked. “Might as well. But don’t think I’m going to let my guard down.”

The officer motioned for Nick to head down the hallway with the guards.

“We’ll all just chill then,” Nick said, forcing a smile but still cautiously holding the amulet at the ready in case things turned ugly. The guards formed behind him, and he was painfully aware of the muzzles undoubtedly trained on his back.

Things just kept getting more interesting.

After trudging for several minutes down the hallway that Nick had about decided wasn’t going to come to an end, the officer stopped and touched a panel on the wall. The door opened into another hallway. The officer took only two of his men with him through the door with Nick, leaving the others to stand guard. From there, the soldiers escorted Nick down another long corridor, taking several turns. “If you’re trying to get me lost, you’ve succeeded,” Nick said.

His captors said nothing.

Eventually they came to a halt and the officer spoke into a speaker beside the door; *Kommen Sie herein*, the voice ordered from the speaker.

The officer pressed the green button alongside the door and it opened more efficiently than the one at the entrance he’d come in through. Inside was a somewhat austere office decorated with the same Speer/Art Deco style he’d seen throughout the hallways. In the center of the room was a large, expensive-looking wooden desk. Couches and chairs adorned the room as well.

Another officer, this one obviously superior to the man standing beside Nick, sat behind the desk. The man had a number of military decorations pinned to his chest, and was obviously at home with command. He had a thin and distinguished face that seemed to Nick a bit too smug. The officer was speaking into a phone-like device, the same language that the other soldiers did.

German? Nick wondered. The American tried to pick out some of the words the officer was saying

into the phone. Nick didn't understand most of it. But two phrases stuck out: *Der trick* and *das amulet*. Were they going to try to trick him out of the amulet? Or did the "der trick" mean something much different than he thought? That they were talking about the amulet suggested they must know its purpose. If that were true, then it would be tricky to come through this ordeal alive.

The officer finished on the phone and placed it into its cradle. Then looked at Nick and said, "*Sprechen Sie Deutsches?*"

"English?" Nick asked.

"English it is," the German officer replied. "You're American, from the sound of your accent."

"And you... German?" Nick asked.

"More or less." The officer continued. "When you arrived, you created quite a stir, setting off the alarms by the portal outside. We thought perhaps a giant had arrived hence the armed welcoming committee that met you. Are you armed?"

"No."

"As one gentleman to another," the officer said, "I will take you at your word." He waved his guards away as he stood.

The soldiers saluted with a clicking of heels and outstretched arms in a Nazi salute before leaving the room.

Neo-Nazis? Nick wondered. Where was this place?

"I am Commander Heinz Heisenberg of the Borean Colony," the officer said, reaching across the desk and offering his hand. "And you are?"

Nick took his hand. "Nick. Nick Erickson."

"Well, Herr Erickson, welcome to the Borean Colony, Antarctica."

"Antarctica?"

Heisenberg smiled. "One moment." The officer pressed a button on his desk and spoke into what must have been a speaker. "Could you send Doctor Zündel in here please?"

"The doctor will be there in a moment," a woman's thickly accented voice answered.

Commander Heisenberg turned back to Nick. "I'd like you to meet Doctor Zündel who can answer the many questions you undoubtedly will have. I'm afraid my more pressing duties make me a poor host."

The door to the office opened behind Nick.

"Ah," the commander said, "here s Doctor Zündel now."

Nick turned and nearly did a double-take because Zündel was a knockout, appearing to be in her twenties, and dressed in a skin-tight white jumpsuit sporting military insignia.

Heisenberg continued. "Herr Nick Erickson, this is Doctor Leonie Zündel."

Zündel held out her hand and Nick took it, hoping his hand didn't feel as clammy as he thought it might. The doctor looked unblinkingly into his eyes, and seemed to hold onto his hand an uncomfortably long time after the handshake was initiated. Nick swallowed hard, unable to believe how attractive she was.

Heisenberg spoke again, breaking the spell the doctor seemed to have cast over Nick. "You may leave your coat here as you won't be needing it."

Nick removed his parka and draped it over a couch. Heisenberg and Zündel exchanged glances and then the doctor flashed a smile toward the American as if a secret joke had been told.

The doctor stood close to the American, taking his elbow and gesturing toward a door. "This way, if you please. We have much to show you here in our Shangri-La."

Chapter 18

Tempe, Arizona

“Cripes,” General Grogan said. “All hell broke loose while we were gone.” The officer approached the door frame of the front entrance to Josh’s home, surveying the damage, and soberly eyeing the blankets lying over what must be the bodies of his dead soldiers. Flanked by his military bodyguards, the general pushed past the police line and entered the house, looking around at the carnage as well as the policemen who were trying to conduct an investigation and looking as if they didn’t know where to begin with the impossibly chaotic crime scene.

The general winced when he saw his own men lying in pools of blood. He carefully studied the dead Russians, sizing up what unit they most likely had been from. “Who’s in charge here?” he asked the nearest policeman who pointed toward a meek-looking man who resembled a high school music teacher more than a crime scene detective.

Grogan crossed over to the plainclothes detective. “You in charge?” he asked.

“Yes. And you are?”

Grogan flashed his ID. “These were my soldiers. I want them treated with respect.”

The detective nodded. “Maybe you could help us. We think maybe the guys living here were part of a terrorist cell or something. The neighbors said these two guys were raising quite a ruckus a few hours ago before all the shooting started.”

Grogan looked the detective in the eye, stepping up to him so their noses nearly touched. “There were three kids here, not two. All three have squeaky clean records; they weren’t terrorists. Russian soldiers took out my soldiers, which I brought here just a short time ago.”

“That explains the Russian cartridges and weapons,” the detective said. “But I’m not clear why the US Military Intelligence would be involved in —”

“This is a matter of national security,” Grogan interrupted. “Meaning that you and your Keystone Kops need to clear out of here right now. Because my men have work to do.”

“Can’t do that,” the detective said. “This is a murder scene.”

Grogan looked daggers at the man, then motioned to his soldiers who pointed their barrels at the detectives. “We already have too many bodies here, so I’m hoping more bloodshed won’t be necessary. Get out and contact your superiors. They will have heard from my people by now. You are no longer involved in this case and if anyone mentions any of this to the press, they are apt to find themselves on extended vacation in GITMO.”

The detective started to speak, then thought better of it. “Everyone, clear out,” he ordered his men.

Grogan watched the police start to leave, then turned to his lieutenant. “First the Matrani sniper, now a Russian team, and Tempe’s finest. Kincaid should’ve put a revolving door into his house. Are the kids dead, too?”

“There’s no sign of them, sir.”

“Well that might be a good thing,” the general said. “Maybe they’re still alive.”

A soldier entered the room and made a beeline for the general. “Sir, we’ve found something you should see.”

“Let’s see what you’ve found. Nothing can surprise me today.”

“This might, sir. Bones in the pool. Looks like some sort of giant ape. And there’s some sort of golden machine that looks sort of like a satellite dish.”

“Bones?” the lieutenant asked as he accompanied the general into the back yard. “Longwalker?”

“Probably,” Grogan said.

“Sir?” the soldier asked.

“A giant,” the general said.

“Giant what, sir?”

“Like in Jack and the freaking Beanstalk.”

The soldier didn’t ask any more questions.

Salisbury Plain, England

Josh dusted himself off and got to his feet.

“Josh?” Stephanie’s voice called from the narrow tunnel he’d fallen from. “What happened?”

“I’m okay,” he called back to her. “But that first step’s a lulu.”

Stephanie appeared in the tunnel a moment later.

“Let me help so you don’t fall on your rump,” Josh said, offering his hand.

“I can make it by myself. I’m not as clumsy as you.”

Joshua threw up his hands. “I forgot. Perfection.”

Stephanie managed to climb from the narrow passage. “My hair’s full of cobwebs. And my mouth is full of dirt.”

And yet she still talks endlessly, Josh thought.

“If that space had been a few inches tighter,” she continued, “I hate to think what would have happened.”

“No argument there. We barely missed being killed. But it was the only chance we had.”

And then his eyes grew wide with wonder at what lay around them and he and Stephanie fell silent for a few moments.

“It looks like a Megalithic passage tomb,” Josh finally said. “Never touched by grave robbers.”

“And bigger than anything else ever discovered,” Stephanie added. “This is magnificent.”

Carved into the rock, rough-hewn rectangular platforms rose in the center of the room, each platform bearing a skeleton dressed in Celtic armor. Around the outside wall stood mummified giants, bound by copper chains. In the center of the chamber was a raised dais upon which sat a golden box embellished with Celtic knots and ornamentation. A ray of light from the ceiling bathed the box in blue light.

“This looks like something out of a fairy tale,” Stephanie said. “Ogham writing on the stones... Josh, we’re going to be in the history books.”

“If we survive.”

“Hey, I’m going to get some pictures,” Stephanie said, fishing her cell phone out of a pocket.

“I don’t suppose you can call out?”

“Already checked — no reception bars at all. But I can take some pictures just in case we get out of this somehow.” She flashed several shots and then spoke again. “Hey, what’s that pattern on the ceiling? It seems familiar.”

Josh studied it a moment, and then realized what he was looking at. “That’s the same layout and spacing of Stonehenge — only as seen from below.”

“We’re under Stonehenge? Is that possible? That can’t be the actual stone, can it?”

“They’re only in the same pattern. I suppose we might be somewhere else, but I’m betting we’re below the actual Stonehenge. But we must be hundreds of yards below or someone would have discovered this by now.”

Stephanie pointed toward the wall. “The armor’s copper.”

“So are the weapons.” Josh paused. “That’s really odd. Both this and the cavern my great grandfather found have copper weapons and bindings on the giants even though copper was not commonly used in either culture. The Mesoamericans normally employed flint for tools... but all the others used bronze or iron. None of them worked with pure copper all that often.”

“So even though the design of the armor and architecture screams Iron Age, they only used copper?”

“For some reason.”

“But why?”

“Wait a minute... “ Joshua snapped his fingers. “The giant in our pool, the one I killed in the cavern. There’s a common thread.”

“You lost me.”

“Copper.”

“I still don’t follow.”

“Nick and I haven’t been cleaning the pool.”

“That much was obvious from the smell.”

“We tried killing the algae with copper sulfate. The water’s full of copper sulfate.”

“And you think the giants are super-sensitive to copper?”

“Their Achilles’ heel. Like pouring salt on a snail.”

“So the copper weapons were necessary to keep them in check or kill them if necessary. It makes sense — if any of this can possibly make sense.” Stephanie pointed toward the dais in the center of the chamber.

“What do you think is in the chest? An amulet maybe?”

“If one’s here, that would be the likely place. But there’s only one way to find out.”

“Lead the way.”

The two climbed the stairs toward the chest at the center of the cavern. Stephanie reached toward it.

Josh grabbed her hand. “Wait a minute. Might be booby trapped.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No. Ancient people often used booby traps — especially the Celts.”

“You’ve read too many fairy tales.”

“Just hang on a minute.” He went back down the steps, picked up a copper sword from the floor, and then returned to cautiously poke at the chest.

There was a dull click below the platform.

The couple jumped off the dais and then turned to look at it, expecting some sort of trap to be sprung. Nothing happened.

They looked at each other and then they both laughed.

“Guess I’m getting paranoid in my old age,” Josh said, stepping toward the chest.

And then there was a loud *snap* as the trap he’d sprung earlier finally overcame the corrosion that had kept it in check. Sharp spikes shot up from the floor, just inches ahead of his foot.

Both Josh and Stephanie remained silent for a few seconds, looking at each other in shock.

Stephanie finally whispered. “I think you just saved our lives.”

“More luck than anything. Let’s see what’s in the chest.”

“Is it safe now?”

“Should be. I think. Want to open it?”

“You open it. You and your great grandfather have brought us this far. You deserve the honor.”

Joshua smiled and said nothing. He poked the lid open with the sword, just to be on the safe side, then reached out and raised the lid.

Inside was another amulet, twinkling in the light streaming down from overhead. The jewels flashed more brightly as Josh leaned forward and his own amulet came closer to the device. He carefully removed the amulet from the box, and then turned and placed its chain around Stephanie’s neck. “I believe

this one belongs to you,” he said softly.

Stephanie’s eyes glistened. “Thank you,” she whispered, her voice almost breaking.

Joshua smiled. “Talk about irony, now we both can travel around the world in seconds—”

“Only we don’t know if we’ll survive the trip.”

“One wrong jump could kill us.”

“Very nearly killed us already.”

“I’m sorry I got you mixed up in this. It’s just that... for all these years, people have been laughing at my family. It’s so humiliating to have a professor in class ask if I’m related to that Dr. Kincaid and then see him roll his eyes when I answer yes, and have my peers look at me like I have two heads.”

“It has to be frustrating,” Stephanie agreed.

“Anyway, I’m sorry for all this. I’m sorry to have put you into such dangerous situations. I didn’t realize what I was getting us all into when I started all this.”

Stephanie placed her hand on his arm. “It was my choice to take part in this. And I was sort of having fun up until the killers broke into your house.”

The two amulets they wore glowed. Josh reached down and pulled his amulet around on its chain so it hung over his back, then leaned forward and then embraced Stephanie for a moment before she pulled away from him.

“We got a little carried away there,” she said. “Guess maybe I’m a little tired. And chilly.”

“Yeah,” Joshua said, turning away from her. “It’s been a long day. I guess we need to figure out how to get out of here.”

“I’m betting there isn’t an obvious exit, otherwise tomb robbers would have looted this place,” she sat down on a wide hewn stone. “I think first we need some sleep. I know I can’t think straight any more.”

Josh was not sure he’d be able to sleep, but certainly felt exhausted. He decided perhaps he should at least sit down and let Stephanie get some rest if she could sleep. He knew from past experience that she didn’t do well if she hadn’t had enough rest, getting too cranky to endure. They both needed to be thinking clearly if they were going to escape this. They were most likely facing a very tough decision: Where to jump to escape this tomb.

So, he sat down next to her. “It’s chilly in here. We’re going to have to snuggle up to stay warm.”

“But no hanky panky.”

“None planned. Our adventure is strictly business as agreed at the outset.”

“Alright then.”

She got close and Josh smelled the perfume she was wearing. It had been a long time since he’d smelled that. It stirred up memories he wished would remain forgotten.

“What do you think happened to Nick?” she asked.

“He has a way of landing on his feet,” Josh said. “I have a feeling he’s okay. Probably sitting in Ali Baba’s Cave, trying to figure out whether to fill his pockets with gold bars or jewels before commanding ‘Open, Sesame’ and leaving for home.”

Stephanie giggled. “Yes, that sounds like Nick.” She closed her eyes and leaned against Josh, seeming about to say something more, but remaining silent instead. Then her breathing became rhythmic, and Josh realized she’d fallen asleep in his arms. He recalled the time, not that long ago, when they’d been in love, and he wondered for a moment if they might once again be lovers.

He decided the answer was, and must remain, “no.” They’d hurt each other too many times; there was too much history to overcome.

He closed his eyes for a moment wondering what the best course to take might be if they were to escape from the predicament they found themselves in. Before he realized it, he’d fallen asleep, too.

Chapter 19

Borean Colony, Neu-Schwabenland, Antarctica

Nick forced himself to close his mouth so he wouldn't look like a hayseed. He gazed from the high walkway that Heisenberg, and Zündel had led him onto. The suspension bridge hung over and overlooked a valley containing a small village of stainless steel and glass homes and businesses sprinkled among farmland and industrial complexes. Stretching overhead, a breath-taking vault of ice filtered bluish sunlight.

Nick turned back to Heisenberg, and Zündel who were strolling alongside him on the walkway.

"A beautiful sight, no?" Heisenberg asked.

"An unbelievable site," Nick replied. "But I don't see how you can keep all of this a secret."

Heisenberg smiled smugly. "We don't keep it a secret. Your government and all the other major powers keep us a secret. They don't want their citizens to know the truth. Look, there's one of our trade ships coming in."

Nick gazed across the valley to where Heisenberg pointed, and was flabbergasted to set eyes on what, for all the world, appeared to be a UFO of gigantic proportions slowly entering the valley through a mammoth doorway the ice. The craft floated above a landing strip and slowly settled toward the ground.

Nick tried to find the words. "That looks like a..."

"Flying saucer." Heisenberg laughed at the young man's expression. "Only it's manned by a very human crew, members of this Borean colony."

"Borean? I don't understand."

"American citizens have been lied to for the last sixty years or so," Heisenberg replied. "I'm sorry I don't have time to explain. Dr. Zündel, perhaps you'll do the honors while I continue my rounds."

"It would be a pleasure, commander."

"Good day, then." Heisenberg turned on his heel with military precision and retreated back down the walkway toward the office complex where his headquarters were.

Nick turned to Dr. Zündel. "I really can't believe any of what I'm seeing. Or hearing. Let me tell you, I have seen some pretty weird things the last few days. How did all this come into being?"

Zündel gazed at him with unblinking, almost hypnotic ice-blue eyes. "Our colony dates back to the dark days at the end of World War Two," she said, taking Nick's elbow and sauntering down the walkway beside him. "Seeing Hitler was losing the war and was too pigheaded to listen to the strategic advice of his officers, a group of German generals and scientists who had been under the command of Rudolph Hess secretly started moving assets by U-boats to our Neuschwabenland base here in Antarctic.

"Once here, the scientists continued their research aimed at reviving and exploiting the secrets of the ancient giants, including the refinement of an anti-gravity machine first proposed by Max Planck in 1937."

"Anti-gravity? The UFOs?"

"An outgrowth of that research. By the close of the war, several of these projects had met with success. We no longer considered ourselves part of the disintegrating Third Reich. So we didn't surrender with the rest of Germany."

"I don't see how the US government would have allowed that."

"As a matter of fact, in 1947 President Truman took action, sending a US task force under the command of Admiral Richard Byrd. With over 5,000 sailors and infantryman manning twelve ships including a carrier and 26 aircraft, the action became known as Operation Highjump."

The pair stepped off the walkway and went down a street that branched from it. People going about

their business walked past them and several small vehicles that floated rather than running on wheels hummed by as well. Nick spoke, "I've never heard of any of this — including Operation Highjump."

"Little wonder. It was somewhat of a black eye for the US military. The mission ended in a stalemate, thanks to the anti-gravity machines we had perfected by then. It was really no contest between the crude US aircraft of the time and our saucers. Admiral Byrd returned to the US in disgrace and shortly thereafter, we had our own nuclear weapons. Thus, a stalemate was imposed, even though no official truce was ever signed. Since then, the US, Britain, and other nations have had an uneasy, and very secret, trade relationship with us. Let's go through these doors here. You should see some of the research we're currently engaged in."

Zündel led him through double glass doors into a communications hub. On the walls were banks of ten-foot wide screens showing pictures from around the world." As you can see, we are keeping close watch on what goes on throughout the world. Physically our colony is isolated, but we have our fingers on the pulse of the planet, both our trading partners as well as those who would be our enemies if they thought they could conquer us without heavy losses."

Zündel took Nick through other sections of the building. Room after room revealed busy laboratory workers and scientists engaged in a variety of activities, often working with equipment that Nick could not even start to fathom.

"Did I understand you to say that you trade with the outside world?" Nick asked.

"That is correct."

"But I don't see what a colony this small could produce. Perhaps mining?"

Zündel smiled. "Information. We trade technical information, formulas, inventions for food and the materials we can't mine from the Moon."

"The Moon?"

"Our anti-gravity ships can travel almost anywhere. Wouldn't you take advantage of the mineral resources of the Moon if you had spaceships like the one you saw coming in while ago? Didn't you ever wonder why your nation lost its interest in traveling to the Moon? They discovered we were already there and had pretty much staked claim to everything of value. So your space program was pretty much mothballed, except for orbital missions and an occasional probe to a nearby planet."

"You say you trade information, but except for the anti-gravity technology, I've seen nothing that isn't produced by the US or our trading partners."

"The technology we've discovered, in part by studying the ancient Nephilim texts, but also through our own research, has led to a variety of things you probably use on a daily basis."

"Like what?"

"Television, integrated circuits, binary computers."

"But those were all invented by us," Nick protested.

"Really? Can you tell me the name of the inventor of the integrated circuit? Or the TV? Or the computer?"

"Well, no, but..."

"You can't name the inventors because the basic how-to came from our labs, using the technologies we recovered from Nephilimic devices or found on our own. We simply sell to the highest bidder. We make money, you make products, everyone's happy."

"I don't know what to think. To believe what you say, I would have to assume almost everything I've been taught in the past is basically — a lie."

"Believe as you will. But I don't think you can dismiss what we're doing. Surely, you can see the millions of dollars it would take to engage in the research you've seen in just this building. Here, come with me into this lab." She pushed through the doors. "The royalties we earn from products we've sold to your society have paid for much of the expansion of our colony. But the real money maker has been in

eugenics — like what's being done in this lab.”

Nick gazed around him. The expansive room was lined with huge ice coffins standing on end so their contents could be dimly seen through the coverings. As the two walked down an aisle of the containers, Nick saw that each held a monstrosity of some sort. Some contained giants that had been dissected; many containers held creatures of human proportions, but which appeared more beast than man.

“Eugenics?” Nick asked. “As in Aryan supermen?”

“Not in an elitist sense,” Zündel replied. “Genetic modifications can improve any individual. DNA components can be inserted into the genome via a virus. We can cure a variety of diseases and even some deformities. I'm a good example of the promise such research holds.”

Nick studied her a moment and was again aware of the sexual attraction the woman seemed to exude. “I'll grant that you're breathtakingly beautiful,” he said. “But I don't know that you're superwoman or anything like that.”

Zündel grinned. “What if I told you I was forty-three when I arrived here in 1937.”

“But that would make you... over a hundred years old!”

“Have you never wondered why so many of your rich businessmen and politicians never age? They pay a lot for the technology that keeps them looking young.”

Nick was unsure whether she was being truthful or simply pulling his leg. Before he could say more, Zündel took his hand. “Come with me. There's much more I want to show you.”

Washington, DC

The custodian trudged down the White House hallway just as he had five days a week, every week except for his seven days of paid vacation, for the last two years. Just as he had every workday before, he opened the broom closet to put away his service cart and cleaning tools.

Today there was one important difference: While the door blocked the Secret Service surveillance camera watching the hallway, the custodian removed a Portal of the Gods, that had been hidden inside a plastic trash bag, from his cart and placed the bag into the closet. He then closed the door, locked it, and went about the business of cleaning the carpet, his misdeed undetected by those guarding the President.

Chapter 20

Borean Colony, Neu-Schwabenland, Antarctica

Nick and Zündel entered a small apartment with brushed aluminum paneled walls with sweeping inserts of brass decorating them. The floors were tiled in chevron patterns using small wood and stainless steel squares. The modern furniture in the rooms was utilitarian in form, its surface lacquered black. Standing in the living room area, Nick could see a small kitchenette and a hallway beyond that he assumed must lead to the bedroom and bath.

“These will be your quarters for the time being,” Zündel said, pressing the red button that shut the door. “The refrigerator is fully stocked and there’s a library as well as a TV to help keep you entertained.”

“No locked cell for your prisoner?” Nick asked.

Zündel looked puzzled for a moment and then laughed. “You’re certainly not our prisoner. We’re giving you asylum — several groups are trying to take the amulet you have, and would kill you to get it. Besides that, you could escape any time you wanted with the device you’re wearing around your neck.” She stepped very close to the American. “So you’re anything but a prisoner. Especially to me.”

Nick looked into her blue eyes with uncertainty. All day he’d thought she’d been exhibiting more than just a causal interest in him. But he had assumed the small community she lived in probably was more intimate than what he’d grown up with in an urban setting. Did she have a smaller “comfort zone” than what he was used to in the US?

He forced himself not to step back, but remained uncomfortably aware of just how attractive a woman she was. *But is she making a move on me or am I just misreading things?*

As if reading his mind, Zündel moved a step closer so her breasts nearly pressed against him, looked him in the eye, and brushed an imaginary hair off the front of his shirt. She left her hand on his chest. “Tell me. How do you feel about cradle robbers?”

“Cradle robbers?”

“Older woman who stalk young men as lovers.”

Nick said nothing. He leaned toward her ever so slightly. She closed her eyes, and the two kissed.

Four hours later, Zündel lay in bed beside Nick, pretending to sleep. She listened to the rhythmic breathing of the young American. Certain he was asleep, Zündel opened her eyes and cautiously slid out of the bed, her bare feet padding across the cool floor to where Nick’s clothing was piled on a chair. She pawed through the pile, uncovering the amulet that she’d insisted he remove before making love to her. She snatched the amulet like an eagle plucking an unsuspecting trout from a stream.

The jewels in the device had a life of their own, glistening and sparking in the dim light. She pulled her eyes away from the almost hypnotic display and crossed toward the door without bothering to dress.

As Zündel raised her hand toward the door panel, she was startled by the strong fingers grasping her exposed shoulder.

Nick swung her around to face him. “You didn’t kiss me good-bye, grandma.”

Zündel frowned. She’d hoped to leave without a confrontation. “I’m sorry. But we need the amulet. You have nothing to fear. We have the same goal as you have: To stop the giants from gaining control of

mankind. We're on the same side."

"Since we're on the same side, you won't mind giving the amulet back then."

Zündel said nothing. She extended her hand, the amulet resting in her open palm.

Nick reached for it. But found his eyes wandering toward her exposed breast for just a moment.

In that instant, the German grabbed his hand, twisted, and threw him onto the floor. Before he could rise, she kicked toward his head, aiming to knock him unconscious. But the young man moved like a cat, rolling and twisting to rise on his feet.

"You're a talented young man," Zündel said. She lashed out with her fist.

Nick ducked and caught her arm, then twisted around and, using her forward momentum behind the punch, threw her halfway across the room before she could react.

Zündel rose, the amulet still in her hand. She threw her head to either side as if getting a cramp out of her neck, an angry blush rising up her face. The American had moved to block her exit of the bedroom, standing in front of the door as he wiped blood away from his cut lip. She took a step toward him and he took up a defensive position.

"I am impressed," Zündel said, lifting the amulet's chain over her head and dropping it around her neck so the disk hung between her two full breasts. "If I knew how to operate this device, I'd beat a hasty retreat right now rather than battle you."

"Or you could hand it over so I don't have to beat your pretty ass," Nick said, holding out a hand. "I really don't want to hurt you."

"We'll see who hurts who." With that, she launched herself at him with a flurry of punches and kicks.

At first, Nick failed to block all her strikes, and several staggering blows hit his chest and head. But then he started to anticipate her moves, and before the doctor could land a decisive blow, the American had danced away and then abruptly stepped forward to land a savage blow that floored her.

"Pretty impressive for an old bat," Nick said, panting to catch his breath.

She gracefully got back to her feet. "You're not bad either, junior."

They both jockeyed for position, then Zündel launched herself at him. However, this time Nick was ready, deflecting the initial blow she aimed at his throat as he pivoted on the ball of his foot, so that he suddenly slammed her against the wall with his forearm.

She tried to squirm out of his hold but failed.

He had her pinned.

He twisted her right arm behind her and applied pressure, sending a wave of pain through her body. She gasped, eyes closed, and felt him lift the amulet from her neck.

Then he made a mistake, letting up his guard ever so slightly as he tried to lower the chain around his head.

Zündel threw her head backward, hitting him in the nose and causing him to release her. The amulet skidded across the wood and metal tiles.

They both stood for a moment, then simultaneously snatched at the device. But Nick had the advantage of longer arms, grasping the treasure just before she could. But in doing so, he left himself open.

Zündel took advantage of her opportunity, kicking him in the solar plexus, doubling him over.

Nick huffed and tried to rise. The doctor grabbed his arm and threw him head-over-heels over her shoulder. He landed with a groan on a wooden and plastic chair that splintered under him, and the amulet flew from his fingers, skidding across the floor to land just inches from Zündel's toes.

The American lay motionless.

The doctor smirked, pushing her short blond hair out of her eyes as she knelt to retrieve the amulet. "I guess superior genetics wins today, my friend. Superior genetics always trumps the inferior breeds."

Zündel rose and turned toward the door and again reached for the control panel and then paused, turning toward the moment she saw from the corner of her eye.

The chair Nick swung slammed across the side of her head, knocking her unconscious.

Tossing the back of the chair aside, the American bent over slowly and picked up the amulet. “And the brute force of an inferior breed trumps superior genetics.”

He looked at her unconscious body for a moment, a look of regret on his face. Then he limped across the floor and pulled on his under shorts, collected his clothing, and then whirled to face the door that slid open to reveal armed guards, their guns leveled at him.

“Crap,” Nick said, tucking his flip-flops and clothing under an arm so he could hold the amulet in both hands.

“*Bewegen Sie sich nicht!*” the guard yelled. Then, in broken English, “Do not move. Drop the amulet and we won’t hurt you.”

“Right.” Nick said, touching one of the shining destination stones he’d never seen glow on the amulet before. He squeezed the activation levers on either side of the device.

“*Auf Wiedersehen,*” the guard yelled.

A hail of gunfire erupted as he faded away, the bullets whizzing harmlessly through the space the American had occupied only a moment before, drilling round holes in the aluminum wall beyond.

Disoriented by the darkness where he reappeared, Nick fell to his knees on a hard stone surface, scattering his clothing in every direction and dropping the amulet that rang metallically against the floor. He rose on shaky feet, searching for something that looked familiar, that would give a clue as to where he was.

The blackened room was like the inside of a castle, with Byzantine columns and murals lining the walls. The only illumination came from a crack under a massive wooden door on one wall.

At first, the American thought perhaps no one would notice his arrival. But then the door opened, spotlighting Nick in a beam of light from the hallway.

A guard in a red uniform materialized from the shadows to yell, “Intruso! Intruso!” Then the man drew a Beretta pistol and covered Nick who raised his hands. The guard pulled a whistle from a pocket with his free hand and started blowing on a shrill alarm.

Within seconds, more armed guards came to cover him with their guns. Nick debated trying to reach the amulet lying on the floor, but decided it would be suicide to even try.

An evil-looking man dressed in crimson robes entered the room, crossing to stand where the amulet lay on the floor. One of priest’s henchmen stooped down and picked the device up, handing it to the priest who hefted the amulet in his hand for a moment before turning toward Nick. “Welcome to the Matrani Headquarters. I am Usi, the high priest of our sect.”

“No doubt this is an honor,” Nick replied, still with his hands in the air and clothed only in his underpants. “Sorry I couldn’t dress for the occasion.”

The priest held up the amulet. “I’ll let you explain to our giants what happened to their brother who this belonged to.”

“I’ll be glad to — during the children’s story hour.”

“I’m sure they’ll be very interested in your tale. In the meantime, I’ll retain the amulet for safe keeping.” The priest placed the chain of the amulet over his head, stroking the jewels in it as he continued to speak. “Young man, I can tell you think we won’t be able to force you to tell us anything. But I promise you we’ll soon learn all you have to tell us, and then you’ll thank us for putting you out of your misery.”

The priest turned to two of the guards. “Bind him and take him to the cells.”

Chapter 21

Usi sat by himself in the ivory and gold *trono dei troni*, the throne of thrones created centuries before when his sect devised a plan to gain control of the world. The secret plan would transform the sect from acting as the servants of the giants and the demons they worshiped, into the masters of the dark forces.

Never before had Usi dared to sit in the high-backed chair from which it was hoped that one day the Matrani High Priest would rule the world. Until today, the dream had seemed impossible to even imagine. He ran his fingers over the intricately carved armrests that displayed mythological and heraldic scenes that told the history of the Matrani back to the time of Noah. He felt that history was truly in his grasp, his for the taking. All because of the accidental securing of the amulet he now wore.

With the possession of the amulet, he knew that he was in a position to realize the grand schemes of the previous generations of his sect. *Soon*, he thought. *Very soon*.

He could feel it within his bones.

And so could those around him. Raul who now walked toward Usi as he sat on the throne room was perhaps the best example. Today Raul prostrated himself before the high priest. Before, the most that those serving the Usi had offered was a bow or even just a nod. Now they could hardly bow low enough. They felt it, too.

“Rise and speak,” Usi told the prostrate form.

“My Lord,” Raul said, his voice echoing in the huge hall as he rose to his knees and then shakily got to his feet. “I have great news. Our workers believe they have located the Wandjina chamber in Australia.”

Usi rose from his throne. “Excellent!”

“Our team awaits your arrival before they enter the chamber. I’ve taken the liberty of ordering your jet fueled and ready. The pilot completes the flight plans as we speak.”

“Good work. Get my bags. I’ll wait for you in the plane.”

Usi had found it easy to sleep on the plane. He was uncertain whether the amulet had somehow focused his powers of concentration, or if the confidence it brought through its ownership had simply relaxed him, and made him more self-assured. But one thing was certain, he now felt more powerful. He now truly felt he was not only the high priest of a secret society, but the man destined to bring prosperity to the planet. The flight from Rome to Australia had gone by quickly, as did the journey across the desert.

Now he smiled to himself as he climbed from the Land Rover that brought him to the place his expedition had found the cavern on the hot Australian plain. The aboriginal legends of creation were so sketchy it had not been an easy task. Their notion that the Wandjina could take all forms including that of men and animals, had left his explorers with few clues.

Only now the Wandjina chamber turned out to be one of the first of the ancient chambers they had found. *Another stroke of luck*.

As he walked to the site, dust devils danced in the darkness, and far away, a didgeridoo droned sending a shiver down Usi’s spine. He studied the white humanoid figures depicted with large cliff face, now lit by the arc lights his team had deployed with nightfall. The creatures depicted in the drawings had no mouths and wore red halos and lines radiating outward from the heads. Some researchers had speculated they were ancient depictions of space men. Usi knew what they really were: Ancient demons

that the aboriginals had worshiped as the Wandjina.

Usi stopped at the rough-hewn monolith the team had uncovered at the base of the cliff. “This is a door?” he asked the team leader.

“Of sorts,” the leader replied. “It appears to block the entrance. It has to be removed to gain access to the chamber our sonar has detected beyond it.

“Let’s remove it then.”

The leader turned and signaled his men. The crane that seemed horribly out of place in the wasteland started its diesel engine, shattering the quiet of the night. The steel cable spooled across the boom pulley and tightened as the hydraulic cylinders whined, straining to lift the tons of rock it was attached to. Finally, the rock budged and rose ever so slightly. Then, free of the sand, it quickly rose upward. Once the stone was in the air, the truck rotated the crane’s platform so the monolith was clear of the hole, exposing the dark cavern beyond.

The team readied to shine their spotlights into Wandjina chamber. “No,” Usi said. “We can see with the light in the cavern.

The team leader said nothing, though Usi could read the doubt in his face. Usi felt doubt as well. *How did he know the chamber would light itself?* Somehow, he just felt it.

As they walked downward toward the entrance, the interior started to glow as hidden machinery that had laid dormant for eons sensed the presence of living things.

The entourage descended into the sparse pit. Fanciful creatures and men danced in pictographs, frozen forever on the face of the sandstone walls. At the center of the room stood a crude altar, transfixed by a beam of violet light coming down from above. Atop the alter an amulet glowed eerily. The priest strode forward boldly, climbing the crude steps. Pausing only a moment at the top of the altar, he lifted the amulet from its pedestal and placed its chain over his head.

The two amulets burned bright emerald, appendages from each amulet snaking toward each other like two dozen tiny serpents to intertwine and draw the devices into a single unit. Usi’s eyes took on a green radiance that might have been a reflection from the combined amulet.

The priest realized he sensed the thoughts of those around him, and then he noticed the faint, phosphorescent imagines of spirits dancing around the chamber, though he was unsure whether they were really there or the ghosts of the past reflected through time.

Then he became aware of pain. “My hand!” he cried. Looking down, he saw that the cut where he mixed his blood with that of the giant was ablaze with sickly green light. He turned and traced his path back down the steps toward Raul. “I must return to Florence. Alcyoneus tricked me. Damn his demon soul. Hold onto my arm to steady me.”

Raul did as commanded.

Usi lifted the combined amulets that hung around his neck, selected the destination stone he’d aligned with the portal hidden in this throne room, and activated the amulet, causing him and Raul to vanish from the Wandjina chamber, to the great astonishment of those followers he left behind.

Josh slept fitfully in the chilly alcove below Stonehenge. In his troubled nightmare, he removed the amulet and its chain from around his neck, opening himself to attack by a nebulous, demonic creature. The creature smoldered with hellfire, its clawed hands reaching up from Hades toward Josh and snatching the life that flowed outward from the young man’s heart, dragging it from him so he became transparent, invisible to Stephanie who, when he called to her for help, was unable to hear him. He then turned into

ice and was buried in snow, never to be found.

The snow melted away, and Josh found himself paralyzed, tied to a stone sacrificial alter still sticky with human blood, built upon the body of a dead Gaia. Draco flew down on leathery wings, the dragon's claws reached to tear Josh's exposed breast. Then his great-grandfather appeared and said, "Whatever you do, never remove the amulet and its chain from around your neck."

Josh jerked himself awake in the dark cavern, a puzzled look on his face. Most of the dream seemed an intertwining of ancient myth and what he'd seen and suffered the last few days. But his great grandfather really had warned him through the holograph not to remove the amulet.

Why the warning? Was there some sort of evil that might be after him? Had his subconscious assembled all the elements to present a warning of what might happen?

Or was it just a crazy dream?

Stephanie stirred in his arms, but remained peacefully asleep. He studied her face; she seemed so content in his arms. It felt so reassuring to have her there. Josh's gaze turned from her beautiful face that shimmered in the dim light to the amulet around his neck that hung just above her. Then he saw it: A new gemstone now twinkled on its surface. *Someone has found another amulet, he thought, and here we sit trapped underground, doing nothing but dreaming and daydreaming.*

Usi sat in a medical exam room in the small hospital within the Matrani compound. "Your wound doesn't really look infected," the doctor examining him said. "Healthy scar tissue — though that glow... that I can't explain."

"Are you sure the giant didn't trick me?" Usi asked. "That his blood hasn't poisoned me?"

The doctor lifted his magnification glasses. "Your body is definitely changing but if you won't remove the amulets, it's impossible for me to tell whether it's the giant's blood that entered the wound on your hand or if it's the artifact that's causing the changes. I suspect the artifact for the simple reason that other, older scars on your body are also glowing very faintly. It's as if your body is somehow replacing the scar tissue with new tissue, and doing so at a very rapid rate."

"That's pure speculation," Usi protested.

"But the other changes suggest—"

"What other changes?"

The Matrani doctor held up an X-ray. "The bones in your skull are no longer fused. They have growth plate edges like that of an infant. That should be impossible but... well, it's happening. And your heart is growing larger as well, along with your rib cage. Notice how tight your shirt is across your chest. When I listen to your heart, I can actually hear a creaking that I think must be bones altering shape, ever so subtly. You're changing."

"Changing into what?"

"I can't answer that. Perhaps more blood samples?"

"No!"

When Usi shouted, the doctor flew across the room as if knocked back by an invisible hand. The medic made no effort to get up, instead cowering with a terrified look on his face.

Usi's eyes glowed ominously. Then he forced himself to become calm. Ignoring the doctor, he got off the exam table. "I have too much to do. We'll know soon enough what's happening to me."

Kremlin, Moscow, Russia

The delivery van slowed to a stop outside the gray and brown Stalin-era building on Lubyankaya Square just off Red Square. Once the home of the KGB, the building now served the FSB (*Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnost*) — which was the old KBG in all but name.

A guard standing at a side door cautiously left his post after a furtive glance up and down the street. He briefly exchanged words with the driver. The proper code and response exchanged, the side door of the vehicle slid open, and a second man inside handed the soldier a package wrapped in brown paper and twine.

The van door slammed shut and the vehicle left with a bellow of blue smoke. The guard carried the bundle through the door, locking it behind him. Then he cautiously went down a long hall that had no security cameras, and opened a door leading into a dusty room that had remained unused for nearly three decades.

The soldier carefully laid the package on the bare floor, and then pulled out the back of the empty shelving on the far wall to reveal a large hole. Then the trooper quickly unwrapped the Portal of the Gods and hid it in the hole, repositioning the wooden section taken from the shelves to conceal the device.

Satisfied all was as it had been before, the guard straightened his hat, collected the wrapping paper and box, and left the room, locking the door behind him.

Half an hour later, he sat alone in his barracks room in a hypnotic trance. He cocked his Makarov, put the pistol into his mouth, and without a second thought, blew his brains out.

Chapter 22

Nick sat on a metal cot with a stained — bloodstained, from the look of it — sheet over a mattress so thin he suspected he could see through it if he held it to a light. A dim bulb glowed in the ceiling leaving the rough stone corners of the cell lost in shadows and cobwebs.

A least they gave me my clothes back, Nick thought. As easily as not, he might be in the prison wearing only his underpants.

The steel door to the room clanged open without warning. Nick turned to see Usi standing there. The American was shocked at how the priest had changed. He'd seemed sinister before, but now he looked like evil incarnate. His brow ridge had become more pronounced and his jaw larger. His arms were more muscular and his chest wider. He spoke with an inhumanly gravelly voice. "Well young man, the giants were demanding revenge for their brother's death, but now they realize you weren't the one who slew him. Otherwise, you'd be undergoing something very terrible indeed at the hands of what is left of Alcyoneus."

"Alcyoneus?" Nick asked.

"The giant that died when he tried to take the first amulet from your friend. Who has that amulet now, by the way? The Kincaid boy?"

Nick ignored his question. No need to give away the information the priest wanted. "How can you help these monsters?" he asked instead.

Usi smiled, and Nick was alarmed to see that the Usi seemed to be growing longer teeth as well. "They're barbarous," the priest said, "I'll grant you that. But we have a *quid pro quo*. Mankind needs their knowledge, and those secrets will allow us to live like gods. When the six amulets are mine, the giants will be forced to obey me. As for mankind, I'll bring human beings Heaven on Earth. It will be a time of peace and safety."

"Your giants eat human flesh. I've never known sheep to live in harmony with wolves."

Usi smiled. "Simplistic view — and all wrong. I've negotiated with them. They've agreed to eat only our dead or criminals guilty of capital offenses."

"Now *that* is a truly disgusting idea!"

"A small price for a return to Eden. You think people won't give up a dead relative or a child rapist for an extra 200 years of life? Or a cure for cancer? People will be lining up for the chance to live twice as long. They'll embrace the giants as our saviors. People will be happy to go along with the plan."

Nick cautiously rose from the cot he sat on, but turned to face the wall so Usi wouldn't become alarmed. *Keep him distracted*. "Just because people are happy doesn't mean much. I'm told cattle look contented — as they stroll into the slaughter house."

"Our relationship with the giants can be symbiotic, not predator and prey. The giants' knowledge will enable us to feed our populations, help us end drought and famine. With the new know-how, we'll colonize the stars."

"Our ancestors hated giants for a reason," Nick said, turning back to face the priest. "They're monsters. They'll enslave us." The young man cautiously took a step toward Usi.

"You are sadly mistaken," Usi said. "One day, mankind will thank me. I will become mankind's savior. I will lead our civilization to the greatest heights."

The moment the priest looked upward at the loftiness his words suggested, Nick lunged at him, trying to snatch the combined amulets hanging around his neck. His fingers grazed the devices, sending a feeling of fire down his fingertips.

At the same instant Usi stepped back, eyes glowing. Then beckoned with his hand and an invisible

force threw Nick backward so he smashed into the cell wall, knocking the wind from him.

“You are one stealthy fellow,” the priest said evenly. “Perhaps you see I already have some amazing powers. Godlike. All with just two amulets. One more and I may be unstoppable. And the power of all six... The legends say that the one uniting them becomes a god. I think now that this must be true. Who knows, I may not even need the giants to achieve what I have planned.”

“The man who would be a god,” Nick said, climbing to his feet.

Usi flashed an evil grin. “I like the sound of that.” He turned and left the room without another word. With alarm, Nick saw the steel door crash shut of its own volition behind him, the bolt slamming in place with an ominous echo.

The man who would be god, Nick thought grimly, *and that man appears to be insane, a megalomaniac*. Just what the world needed.

Josh and Stephanie huddled together, trying to fight off the chill of the darkness. “I studied this while you were sleeping,” Josh told her. “I think the back of the amulets isn’t just decorative. I think the embossing is a map that corresponds to the one we found in the photo from the cave.”

Stephanie studied her amulet a moment and nodded. “I think maybe you’re onto something there. Look. If that center section is Antarctica...”

“Exactly. Like on the map. Then the seventy-two smaller jewels in five rings around it—”

“Give us 360. So those would be the degrees marking longitude and latitude? Is that possible?”

“Assuming they had the same system we do,” Joshua said. “But that seems a little farfetched.”

“I don’t think so. All the ancient cultures seemed to have used that division — it must come from a common source, and perhaps this is it. The only oddity is that it is one of the few old measurements that we still use today.”

“Well, assuming that’s right, I figured the red jewel there in the upper left quadrant — see it’s the same on both our amulets — that must be our portal at my house.”

Stephanie thought it over a moment. “But how do you enter the coordinates?”

“That has me stumped. The rings seem to be calibrated in the right divisions. But I can’t see how that would make any difference.”

“Unless the rings rotate.”

“Can’t believe I never thought of that.” Joshua tested the rings. “They do! So, I could dial up coordinates using that central V at the top as the calibration mark.”

“And then you hit the control button on the front?”

“That’s right — only you have to pinch the two studs on either side — I think those are a sort of safety so you don’t launch yourself accidentally.”

“So we just align the rings, hit the button on the front, and we’re on our way?”

“If we’re right,” Josh said. “If we’re wrong...”

“We will be betting our lives on being right.”

“But I don’t suppose there’s any other choice. We can’t wait around and do nothing.”

Stephanie thought a moment. “I suppose someone could have put the portal into a box or something, too.”

“That’s a thought,” Joshua said. “And it’s probably only one of a hundred deadly possibilities... But if we stay here—”

“Sooner or later we die of thirst.”

Josh nodded. “So sooner or later we have to try.”

“I vote for sooner.”

Josh picked up a sheathed sword from one of the Celtic graves and strapped it around his waist.

“What’s that for?”

“I want to carry back a souvenir. Who knows when anyone will be back here. You got all the pictures you need?”

“Took some while you were asleep. Sadly the battery ran down — but I got at least a hundred good shots.”

“Hold still a minute,” Josh said, holding her shoulders.

Stephanie looked puzzled but stood still.

Josh retrieved something from a pocket, then reached around her head and hung a jeweled, golden necklace around her neck. “There,” he said, standing back to admire the necklace she wore. “No need for you to go back empty handed.”

She studied the jewels hanging from the woven chain, stroking it with a finger. “It’s beautiful.”

“It suits you,” Josh said. “But you may change your tune when it turns your neck green. Now take my arm. We’ll use my amulet so we end up in the same place. Ready?”

She held onto his arm tightly with both her hands, then leaned forward and pecked his cheek. “For good luck.”

Josh lifted his amulet, wondering if they were about to be free or about to die. If they died, he hoped it was suddenly and without warning, because he felt good with Stephanie standing close, holding his arm. If he had to die, that would be the way to go.

He squeezed the safety prongs, touched the stone, and the couple vanished.

Chapter 23

“We’re nearing Cairo,” the pilot of Usi’s private jet announced over the intercom. “Please fasten your seat belts.”

Usi complied, even though he suspected there was no need to. His body felt almost indestructible, and he had to wonder if perhaps it might soon be just that. The combined amulets were having an amazing effect on his body.

His luck was changing for the better as well. Just the day before, he had worried that all was lost and that the Matrani scheme to gain world dominance would fail under his watch. Now he was certain, if things continued as they had, to be the high priest who would see the fruition of their centuries’ of planning. Now his jet was racing toward another discovery one of his exploration parties had made.

Raul came limping down the aisle of the plane and plopped into the seat beside Usi. “I just got off the radio to our contact,” he announced, fastening his seat belt. “He’s secured the paperwork from the Egyptian government. A little expensive to grease their palms, but done. Oh, and one assassination to prove we meant business.”

“Looks like our years of bribing Egyptian officials to keep these tunnels secret are finally paying off,” Usi said. “If our luck continues, we’ll have an army unlike anything the world has seen for seven thousand years.”

“An army?” Raul asked.

“If there are as many giants as Alcyoneus claimed in the repository our people have uncovered. We’ll see soon enough. Perhaps we’ll even have another amulet. Now be quiet. I need to think.”

Fort Huachuca, Arizona

Rather than leave the device they’d found in the bottom of Josh’s pool where it was, General Grogan had decided to move it to the US Army Intelligence Center at Fort Huachuca that, among other things, conducted Military Intelligence training for the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines, with an old friend of the general’s in charge of the fort. The fort in southeast Arizona was about 15 miles north of the Mexican border, and Grogan hoped it was also close enough to Josh’s house that he and his friends would be able to home in on the portal should they attempt a jump to it.

On the flip side, having the portal at the fort enabled the general to keep a close eye on it should someone or something other than the three kids come through it. The bones at the bottom of Josh’s pool suggested such a possibility. So now, the portal sat in a little used hanger, surrounded by soldiers who were armed to the teeth.

The sergeant in charge of guarding the device had sounded an alarm and Grogan found himself racing from a nearby office he’d appropriated from the DEA that also operated out of the base.

He entered the hanger, stepping out of the sunlight and blinking, waiting for his eyes to adjust. The Special Forces troops guarding the portal wore gas masks and held their M16 rifles at the ready. One man carried a gas projection unit designed to bathe the area with a tranquilizing chemical that Grogan hoped would be as effective on a giant as it was on a human beings.

“General,” the sergeant in charge said, approaching Grogan. “The portal started oscillating a few seconds ago.”

“Meaning what?” Grogan asked.

The sergeant shrugged with an embarrassed look on his face.

“Don’t feel bad,” Grogan said. “I don’t know, either. None of our experts know, I bet.”

“Yes, sir.”

The general stepped toward the portal, then he studied the troops around it and decided they needed to be bucked up. “Steady, gentlemen. This is probably nothing. But if something comes through that gateway, we want to take it alive, if we can. Fire only on my command.” He stepped over to the man with the gas projector unit and said softly to him, “Be ready with the gas.”

“It’s armed and ready to fire, sir,” the soldier replied.

The portal flickered and started to glow.

Grogan took his gas mask out of the pouch hanging on his thigh, and held it ready to put on at a moment’s notice.

“Hold you fire until I give the order,” Grogan warned the soldiers again. “Any egg sucker who fires without my order will be eating lead from my .45. Through his butt.”

There was shimmering around the disk of the portal, and then Stephanie and Josh appeared.

“Hold your fire,” Grogan yelled. “Stand down.”

Josh looked around, spotted the general, and raised his eyebrows, obviously recognizing the soldier. He raised his hands back to the amulet he wore to make another jump. But before he could act, Grogan ordered, “Gas ‘em — now!”

The general lifted his gas mask as the thick cloud rolled over the two young people who crumpled like rag dolls, sprawling on the floor of the hanger.

Grogan started issuing orders, his voice hampered by the gas mask he held over his face. “You, open the hanger door so this place can get aired out. You three — keep your eyes on the portal in case someone or something tries to come through after them.”

The general turned around and searched for the sergeant. Spotting him, he issued another order.

“Contact the medics and then get these two kids moved to the infirmary. I want them strapped and secured before they wake up. And do not, I repeat, do not let anyone touch the medallions around their necks. I don’t want anyone launched halfway around the world by mistake.”

Usi stood for a moment in front of the stepped pyramid in Sakkara, twelve miles southwest of Cairo. The sun sank near the horizon and seemed to dance in the heat waves rising from the sand. The high priest made his way down the crude path leading into the dark pit, accompanied by Raul and the rest of his followers who, he noted, now gave him a wider birth, as if fearful of him.

The powerful flashlight Usi carried cut through the darkness like a knife as he descended the path that curved to stop at huge bronze doors which stood thirty feet high, surrounded by a lintel covered in gold leaf imprinted with Egyptian hieroglyphics. Usi eyed the gems on the two amulets he wore over his heart; the jewels flamed brightly in the dim light. *A good sign; there must be another amulet close by.*

The high priest placed his hands in front of the doors and concentrated on projecting the energy he now, somehow, could command. The ancient seals binding the doors groaned and peeled away. He gathered his thoughts, encouraged by his initial success and focused his concentration on the doors.

The heavy gates appeared immune to his power, but then the metal started to tremble. He closed his eyes and bowed his head. There was a hum, followed by the groaning of metal that had remained rooted in place for many millennium. Abruptly the hinges gave way and the doors flung themselves open.

Usi smiled and glanced at the surprised and, yes, even terrified faces of those around him. Without a

word he tossed his flashlight to the side and advanced. Once inside the entrance, lights blazed overhead, lighting the immensity of the cavern that was the size of several football fields — perhaps greater.

And even Usi felt first astonishment and then something bordering on sheer terror, as if suddenly finding himself in the middle of a terrible dream. The ancient books had only somewhat prepared him. He had always believed the ancients had exaggerated, that there could never be such a thing that would remain undiscovered until this moment.

Yet here they were, waiting patiently. Waiting for a leader. Waiting for Usi. The giants stood, spread in front of him, row after row, rank upon rank, filling the whole cavern, each titan in stone-like suspended animation, glorious with massive shield and Gothic helmet.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting for three thousand years. Nephilim as far as Usi could see to his left and to his right, giants many ranks deep, stretching far back out of sight, into the darkness. Thousands of the monsters, all soon to be under the priest's command.

Chapter 24

Nick listened to the guards down the hallway, their voices barely discernible due to the reverberation of the stone corridor. He couldn't understand all that they said in Italian. But he could understand much of it. *All those years of listening to my Sicilian grandfather are finally paying off*, he thought.

A week earlier, he would never have believed what he was hearing. Now it made sense, at least to anyone who'd had Nephilim trying to kill him, learned that flying saucers really existed, and that it was possible to travel around the world in just seconds. *Yes, I can believe about anything any more.*

"Yes, Antonio," the first guard continued. "It's true. Thousands of giants have been found in Egypt. A whole army. They say our Usi will control them."

"And last year you told me that Atlantis had been found in Australia," Antonio groused. "Why should I believe your stories?"

"But this is different. You know Ercole down in communications?"

"I know him."

"He got the communiqué. Those who went to Egypt saw with their very eyes. This isn't something I read in a tabloid. This is first hand."

"Almost you make me believe."

"These giants — you have already seen the ones in our own building. Surely you won't dispute seeing them."

"Well, yes. But thousands of those creatures. Where could they have remained hidden?"

"Underground in Egypt," Antonio said. "There are tombs they haven't even discovered yet, there in Egypt."

"How, exactly, could anyone know that if they haven't been discovered?"

"The giants must be how his excellency plans to take over the governments in Russia and the US."

"Maybe. There are strange things spoken."

"What have you heard?" Antonio asked.

"It can't be true."

"Tell me anyway."

"I have heard — and don't tell anyone you heard this from me — that some sort of gateway has been hidden in palaces and maybe even the White House."

"Can you imagine the faces of the Americans if giants start to pour out of their congress?"

"Their congress isn't in the White House," Antonio countered. "Their president in the White House."

"If that is true, we Matrani may come into power the way our fathers dreamed. One day, my papa always said. One day we will rule."

Nick had heard enough. He carefully tore another very narrow strip from the bed sheet, continuing his work he hoped would enable him to free himself.

A technician turned toward Usi, awaiting his signal. Everything was in place.

Usi nodded.

The technician signaled his team and men raced along the front line of giants, yanking the copper chains from around their ankles, wrists, and necks, sending the metal bands clattering against the marble floor.

An audible crackling of energy pulsed down the line of giants who had been freed. Their skin rapidly transformed from stone-like, mummy flesh into living tissue.

Usi stepped toward the Nephilim whose armor proclaimed him as the leader of the army. The battle-worn giant stood at the center of their ranks. The titan's eyes fluttered open, and he spotted the high priest. The monster drew a massive sword as tall as Usi, glared at the man a moment, and then thundered, "Who dares awaken Ephialtes and his clan?"

"I gave the orders!" Usi said, taking another step toward the angry creature.

"Then prepare to die."

"Before you act too hastily," Usi said, holding up the massive gold ring Alcyoneus had given him after their blood oath, "know that Alcyoneus has given me this."

"Alcyoneus's ring! You stole it?"

"No." Usi opened the palm of his hand and exposed the scar toward the giant. "An oath. Alcyoneus blood and mine have mixed."

Ephialtes jaw dropped, and then the giant warrior fell to one knee, head bowed. "Forgive me, lord."

The hallway was silent. A stir traveled the ranks of the giants on either side of him, and then they all dropped to their knees with a noisy clanking of armor, their heads bowed in homage.

The giant leader raised his eyes but remained on one knee. "I beg your pardon, lord. I did not think Alcyoneus would ever create an alliance with... with..."

"A human being?"

"Yes, with men. Such things are — were unthinkable."

"In the thousands of years you've been asleep, things have changed. Now I have need of you and your army."

"My mighty warriors await your orders."

Usi looked unblinkingly into the giant's eyes. "Then give me your amulet. Put its chain around my neck."

Ephialtes stood, hesitating for only a moment before removing the amulet and chain from around his neck. Then he stepped forward, leaning over Usi to place the device around the priest's neck.

The additional amulet created a small electrical storm around Usi; arcs of blue energy snapped, transforming the priest so his skin took on a greenish tone and his features became even more pronounced than before. Then the new amulet sent out metallic, root-like appendages that intertwined and united the three devices, drawing them together into one unit.

The electric display subsided, but Usi's body continued to shimmer as if he no longer remained completely in the same dimension as the rest of the world.

"You are becoming a deity," Ephialtes said in awe. "Like one of our demon gods."

"And it feels heavenly."

Nick sat on the bed in his cell, pretending to ignore the guard opening the door to deliver the tray of food to his cell. The meals were served three times a day — for some reason his captors were keeping. Possibly they thought he had information they needed, or that he might serve as a bargaining chip. Whatever the reason, they were feeding him regularly.

The first time the food was delivered, an armed guard had come with the one delivering the food. Nick had feigned despondence, and was pleased to see the guard serving the food had come alone as he delivered the second meal. Now, the guard was again by himself, and even less cautious than before.

Nick again sat with his head in his hands, seemingly ignoring the guard as he laid the food on the floor. The guard turned to go — a mistake that the American took advantage of, leaping forward to punch the guard in the small of the back. Then Nick wrapped the garrote he'd fashioned from strips of the bed sheet around his captor's neck, pulling tightly so the man couldn't scream for help.

With his training, Nick could have turned and lifted the man trapped in the garrote, breaking the guard's neck. Instead, the American simply choked the guard, cutting off his air until the jailor passed out. But it was a tricky process, taking several minutes during which the Italian struggled to free himself. Finally, he went limp. Nick released him, dropping his body onto the cot and checking to be sure he still breathed. Satisfied the guard was still alive, Nick cautiously removed the guard's pistol from his belt, then covered the man with what was left of the sheet so a casual observer looking through the bars in the door might mistake the unconscious guard for the American prisoner.

Nick went to the doorway and peeked out between the bars. Seeing no one in the hall, Nick entered it and then turned and locked the cell door behind him, pocketing the keys that had been left in the door.

Retracing the route to the guard station, Nick stepped through the open door. The guards had gotten sloppy; the door should have been closed. The second guard sat at the desk, his attention centered on the girly magazine in front of him. As Nick approached, the guard said, "Antonio?"

Nick pistol-whipped the man across the temple, knocking him unconscious. He then dragged the guard's body into the hall leading to the cells and locked the door between the hall and the guard post. "So far, so good," Nick whispered to himself.

There was a cell phone lying on the desktop. *Could he use it to make a call out?* He picked up the phone, opened it, and entered a long number. Holding his breath, he hit the enter button and listened to the phone dial the number.

"Hello?" the voice on the other end said.

"This is agent Nick Erickson. I have an urgent message. Are you recording this?"

"Yes. Go ahead."

Chapter 25

Two guards stood at either side of the entrance into the hospital room, their HK UMB submachine guns at the ready. Inside the room, Josh and Stephanie lay unconscious, each strapped to a gurney. The jewel-encrusted sword Josh had brought with him lay on an exam table. Monitoring equipment attached to each of the unconscious college students beeped softly as medical personal hovered around the unconscious patients to be sure they were in no danger after the exposure to the sleeping gas.

General Grogan stood in the middle of the room, finishing his conversation on his cell phone. He hung up and dialed an aide. “Just got a heads up call from NSA — Captain Nick Erickson has information that the Matrani may have figured out a way to infiltrate the White House.”

The general paused and listened impatiently before speaking, “Yes, you heard me right! I’m hoping we can slip our own teams in their to head them off, but in the meantime the Secret Service has been appraised of the situation. In the meantime, go to the safe and get out the file marked ‘Barbecue One’ and contact the Air Force personnel listed in the file.”

Grogan paused and listened to his aide. “Yes, I know that involves nuclear weapons.” He waited and then replied, “No, I’m not freaking kidding. I *am* getting tired of having you second-guess me. You need to get your butt into gear if you don’t want to be cleaning latrines with your tongue.”

Grogan didn’t wait for a reply, snapping his cell phone shut and shaking his head as he pocketed the phone. Could he possibly have been as green as the soldiers around him. *Probably so*, he thought with a half grin. *Most certainly so*.

The general turned toward the medical team waiting alongside the two gurneys. “They still okay?”

“All vitals in normal range, sir.”

“We need to wake them up. Any problem doing that.”

“Uh, no sir. Smelling salts should—”

“Wake the gal up first. She should be easier to handle. The young man’s a malcontent.”

A medic opened a small vial and waved it under Stephanie’s nose. She made a face, coughed, and her eyes fluttered open. She started thrashing, straining to free herself from the straps holding her down.

Grogan leaned over her. “Everything is all right. You’re in a medical facility at Fort Huachuca, Arizona.”

Stephanie scowled. “You jerk! You gassed us for no good reason.”

The general straightened as if he’d been punched. “Perhaps. But I didn’t want you zinging off to God only knows where. We don’t have time for more cosmic tag.”

Stephanie glanced toward Josh. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. We’ll revive him in a minute. Now let me ask you: How easy’s this amulet doohickey to set off? I didn’t want to activate them by mistake.”

Stephanie said nothing and simply glared at him.

“Missy,” Grogan said, fighting to keep his anger in check, “we don’t have time for this. I just got word that an invasion of the White House by a hoard of giants may be in the offing. Someone may have hidden a portal in the White House and if the Secret Service doesn’t find it in time, there may be a whole army of your giants stomping through the Lincoln bedroom.”

“Is that possible?” Stephanie asked.

“You tell me.”

She nodded.

“So now we’re racing the clock. How easy is it to activate one of these amulets?”

Stephanie looked away and for a terrible moment, Grogan feared she wasn’t going to help him. But

then her face softened and she spoke. “The amulets are about impossible to set off by mistake. To activate one you have to touch the center gem and then squeeze the two levered sides of the amulet at the same time. Recently used portals caused various stones on the front to glow. But specific destinations can be keyed in with the rings on the back of the amulet.”

“Now I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to hand yours over.”

“I’m not sure...”

“It’s the only way to protect our nation. If the assault of the White House happens before the portal is found, I might still be able to get my teams there — we’ve been developing tactics for killing these giants for six months now. Your amulets could enable me to send my team there immediately. If we fail, Plan B is turning the White House and the area around it into radioactive slag. You don’t want that, right?”

“No, sir.”

Grogan motioned to the medical team. As they freed the girl, the general rested his hand on the .45 pistol in his belt. He’d never shot a civilian, let alone a young woman. But with the safety of his nation perhaps hanging in the balance, he knew he could wound or even kill her if necessary.

The medics released the straps holding Stephanie to the gurney. She sat up and spoke. “Josh told me his great grandfather Professor Kincaid claimed it might be dangerous to remove an amulet.”

“He might be right. But our nation’s safety depends on my men being able to use it. So, I’m going to ask you and your boyfriend to take that risk and hand over the amulets now. End of discussion.”

Stephanie swung her feet over the side of the gurney and stood. “He’s not my boyfriend,” she protested, lifting the amulet’s chain over her head and then handing the device to Grogan. A puzzled expression covered her face and she abruptly sat down on the gurney.

“You feel okay?” Grogan asked, motioning to an orderly.

“A little dizzy,” Stephanie said. “But I’m fine now.”

Grogan looked to the medic and raised his eyebrows.

“Probably just the after effects of the gas,” the medic said.

“Tell you what,” Grogan said to Stephanie. “I’ll turn a blind eye to you keeping that queen’s ransom in jewels you have around your neck and your boyfriend — uh — Josh keeping that sword he brought through the portal. I know some agency or another would try to take those away if I reported them. But I’ll have some selective amnesia. OK?”

Stephanie said nothing.

Didn’t think I’d have any luck buying her off, Grogan told himself. But it had been worth a try. Back to business. “Let’s get the other amulet,” Grogan said.

The medic moved to loosen the straps holding Josh to the other gurney, but Grogan shooed the orderly away. “Leave him be. I don’t trust this one.” Grogan reached down and grasped the amulet as if it were a grenade, and then gingerly pulled its chain over Josh’s head. “Now revive him,” the officer said, stepping away from the gurney.

The medic waved the smelling salts under Josh’s nose. Josh coughed and his eyes fluttered open. “Where am I?”

Before anyone could answer, the lights dimmed, each one humming in a rapidly rising pitch that continued until the glass tubes shattered with a loud bang. Each of the bulbs broke, throwing shards in all directions with each burst. Then an unearthly groan filled the room, and a shimmering spot appeared on the ceiling, as a passageway between dimensions opened, exposing a long, black tunnel. In the distance of that channel, a sapphire light danced and grew in size, as if approaching the opening. Then, a ghostly demon burst into the room through the opening, roaring as it bathed everyone in a faint blue light.

The soldiers guarding the door took aim at the demon and commenced firing at the form darting across the ceiling like a bat from Hell. The creature paused in its movement, its mouth erupting yellow flames that washed over the two guards, burning their skin so they dropped their weapons and fell, writhing in

pain on the floor.

The apparition turned away from its victims and hovered over Josh, its claws opening as if it were about to swoop down on the young man who fought to free himself from the straps that still bound him to the gurney.

Stephanie grabbed the copper sword lying on the exam table next to her, unsheathed the weapon, and threw herself between the creature and Josh.

The demon dropped downward the same moment Stephanie poked it with the point of the sword. The point ripped into the evil spirit. It screamed in rage, rising into the air as if repelled by the sword.

Stephanie swiped at the spirit with the sword, cutting off a claw. The demon backed away farther as she took another swing at it.

Then it vanished.

More soldiers appeared at the door, waving their weapons but not firing as they saw no clear target. Then they centered their aim on Stephanie since she still held the sword.

“Stand down!” Grogan yelled. “Hold your fire. She poses no danger. In fact, she probably saved our hides.”

The room was silent for three tense seconds, and then the soldiers at the door relaxed. “Back into the hallway,” Grogan ordered the men. “We have two injured soldiers to care for.”

The armed men at the door held their weapons warily, as if they were unsure whether or not the general knew what he was talking about, then backed out of the room.

The medics knelt by the two burned soldiers who lay moaning on the floor. Smoke drifted in the air from the discharge of the submachine guns and broken light bulbs.

Grogan stepped over to Josh and started unstrapping him so he would be free of the gurney. “What the devil was that?”

“That,” Josh said, sitting up and then getting to his feet, “was a real live demon.”

“The spirit of the giant he killed in the cavern yesterday,” Stephanie said, as if just realizing the fact herself.

“That’s why—”

“Your great grandfather said never to remove the amulet,” Stephanie finished.

“The amulet keeps these things away,” Josh said. “Once you removed it, I was no longer safe.”

“But why wasn’t I attacked when mine was removed,” Stephanie asked.

“Possibly because you haven’t killed any giants,” Josh said. “I don’t know why, but I felt that the spirit in this room belonged to the creature I killed yesterday when it attached Nick.” Josh turned to the general. “I need the amulet back.”

“If you promise to take orders from me until we get this mess straightened out.”

Josh looked toward Stephanie.

“We need to promise,” she told Josh. “Our nation’s in danger.”

“We received the information from your friend, Nick,” Grogan said.

“He’s alive?” Josh asked.

“Very much. He somehow ended up in the Matrani headquarters — they’re a screwball sect based in Italy and they’ve apparently sided with the giants.”

“He works for you?” Stephanie asked.

“A spy!” Josh said. “I can’t believe it.”

“More of a bodyguard,” Grogan said. “We got wind that you were on the Matrani hit list. So we maneuvered things around a bit, having Nick appear at your doorstep to answer your ad for someone to share the rent on your house. If it’s any consolation, he does think of you as a friend rather than just — ”

“A kid to baby sit,” Josh finished. He shook his head. “Every time I think it can’t get weirder.”

“Anyway,” Grogan said, “I need the capability to move troops to the portals if we’re to hunt these

monsters down.”

Josh glanced toward Stephanie who nodded. “OK,” Josh said. “Count us in.”

“All right then,” Grogan said. He reluctantly handed the amulet he was still holding back to Josh, and then fished Stephanie’s amulet from his pocket. “Don’t make me regret doing this,” Grogan growled, lowering the chain over her head.

Chapter 26

Sakkara, Egypt

Raul closed his cell phone and turned toward his master. “I am sorry, your excellency, but I just received word that our American prisoner escaped and may have alerted the authorities about our plans. Our guards believe he used a cell phone.”

“By the ten demons!” Usi swore. “I feel like I’m surrounded by incompetents. Give orders to have those guarding him executed. It’s time our people learned the price of gross incompetence.” The high priest pulled at his lower lip and then spoke. “We can’t afford to wait for our enemies to prepare for our assaults. If they know about the portals, they’ll eventually find them if we give them enough time. I’ll take the first contingent with me now.”

“Now?” Raul asked. “Are we ready?”

“There’s no reason we can’t attack now,” Usi said. “I was going to wait, but the giants are ready, our portals are in place. We must strike while we still have an element of surprise left.”

Raul said no more, simply bowing to his master, and then limped away.

Usi turned toward the giants that still stood in formation, impatiently fingering their weapons. Unlike the humans around him, Usi could tell they were itching for battle. “Ephialtes,” Usi said to their leader, “Ready your first assault team to come with me and have the second team await my return so I can take them to Moscow. I want you and the rest of your army to stay here. We’ll keep you in reserve to be deployed as needed.”

“I understand,” the giant said, bowing to the high priest.

Usi addressed all the giants with an inhumanly loud voice, “We will begin our attacks. It is time to bring the new age to our planet with the return of the Nephilim and the demon religions.”

A roar like rushing water washed up and down the ranks of titans. Weapons banging against shields added to the horrifying din.

“And now,” Usi continued and the ranks of giants became deathly still again. “And now it’s your time. Let the New Age begin!”

Again a monstrous cheer. Ephialtes directed two hundred giants to form a column alongside Usi. Each of the monsters touched the shoulder of the Nephilim next to him, readying themselves for the jump. Then the giant nearest Usi cautiously raised his hand and wrapped his fingers around the arm of the high priest who had once been human, but now looked as if he had more in common with the monsters around him than with his own kind.

Usi lifted the amulet high.

The giants in the cavern roared louder and banged on their shields, knowing that bloodshed was about to begin.

Usi pressed the jewel that would take them to America, and the whole group vanished in a peal of thunder.

Grogan strode toward the staging area at Fort Huachuca, an aide, Josh, and Stephanie flanking him. “The question I need to have answered,” the general said, “is what’s the best way to kill these giants. And

those demon thingies.”

“Guns don’t work very well,” Josh said. “Nick dumped seven .357 Magnums into the first one we fought and the bullets didn’t even phase the thing.”

“We’ve found that with the giants we discovered in Afghanistan as well,” Grogan said.

“In Afghanistan?” Josh asked.

“Long story, don’t have time. Do you know what does kill them?”

“Josh has a theory,” Stephanie said.

“I think copper. The ancient weapons are copper and they are lethal all out of proportion to the wounds they inflict.”

“But then what killed the one in your pool?” Grogan asked.

“We put a ton of copper sulfate in the pool to kill the algae.”

“So copper is the key,” Grogan said. “But our rifles use copper-jacketed bullets. Why don’t those seem to have an effect?”

“Rifle bullets gain their energy through momentum while the bullet itself is small,” Josh said. “And only the jacket is copper.”

The aide walking alongside the general spoke. “If the general will excuse my interruption. Our new training ammunition has frangible bullets that are almost one hundred percent copper.”

“Good point, soldier,” Grogan said. He turned toward Josh and then Stephanie. “The projectiles are designed for short range use and are lead free to prevent poisoning on indoor rifle ranges. The inner core is copper powder rather than the steel and tungsten of the standard round. At close range, they leave a massive but shallow wound channel lined with copper fragments and powder.”

“Might be just the ticket,” Josh said. “But there’s no way of really knowing for sure.”

“We’ll just have to hope it works,” Grogan said. “We don’t have any way to test the theory without engaging a giant, and none are presently available.” Grogan turned to his aide. “Contact the NSA and the Secret Service and let them know about copper killing the giants. Tell them our frangible training ammunition looks like the best way to nail these suckers. Stress that this is an untested theory, but we know for sure that conventional ammunition has little effect.”

The messenger departed as Grogan and the college students he had in tow entered the staging area where several platoons of US Army Rangers awaited them. “Attention!” a sergeant called as the general entered, and the soldiers snapped to attention.

Special Agent Bill Heller shouted orders. It was hard for him to believe he wasn’t overseeing a wild goose chase, but figured it was nevertheless good training for the Secret Service agents in his command. “Check that hallway,” he ordered his men, waving them down the corridor. “Be sure to check the broom closet.”

He watched the agents going down the hall and started to turn away when there was a splintering of wood. He turned back to see what had happened, and witnessed the wall around the broom closet explode, a giant form bursting into the corridor. The creature seemed like a bad dream, standing nearly twelve feet high so that it had to stoop to avoid scraping its helmeted head on the ceiling.

Heller unholstered the Sig Sauer P226 from under his jacket. “Halt!” he ordered, covering the thing and knowing it would never obey his command. He fired twice and then paused for a moment, distracted by another figure that stepped from the closet area. This one was dressed like a red-robed priest, and looked somewhat human. Yet he moved too fast to be a man, seeming almost to be other dimensional. Then

he vanished into the dust and more giants entered the hallway.

Heller felt like he was in a nightmare. He continued to fire as more and more of the giants erupted from the opening where the broom closet had been. The Secret Service agent lost count — there were at least twenty of the creatures, crashing through walls like sheets of wet cardboard.

One of the creatures stepped toward Heller, brandishing its ax menacingly. The agent fired at it until his weapon was empty, then retreated to reload. The monster didn't follow him, instead seeming to lose interest and crashing through a wall to attack an office of workers whose screams filled the air before ending abruptly in gurgling cries.

Automatic weapons and shotguns thundered down the hallway as the US Marines guarding the White House entered the fray.

Heller shoved another magazine into his Sig Sauer just as the human-like being dressed in red robes appeared again. The being's eyes glowed green as he stared at Heller. The Secret Service agent raised his pistol and fired pointblank at the intruder.

The being held up a hand and seemed to catch the bullet. Then it laughed and raised a jeweled amulet from around its neck, held it in both hands, and dematerialized.

For a moment, Heller simply stood in place, wondering if he was hallucinating. Then a giant turned its head and spotted him, and the agent's sense of survival took over, propelling him down the hallway in a hasty retreat, the monster's heavy footfalls behind him.

Chapter 27

An army messenger raced toward Grogan and then stood at attention.

“We’re not on the parade ground,” Grogan said. “If it’s important, spit it out.”

“Sir,” the messenger said, “the White House is under attack. Giants. Huge numbers of them.”

“And by huge numbers you mean how many?”

“It’s unclear. But a hundred, maybe more.”

Grogan turned toward Josh. “Can there be that many?”

“It’s possible. There were quite a number in both caverns we discovered.”

Grogan turned back to the messenger. “Keep me updated.”

The general took off his hat and ran his hand over his head, then spoke. “Nick’s info that they had smuggled a portal into the White House must have been correct. Josh, can you get my men through that same portal? Do you know how to home in on a specific target?”

“I think so. But we need the longitude and latitude of the White House.”

Grogan turned to an aide. “Get the coordinates for the White House.”

Usi and a contingent of giants erupted into the Kremlin storage room. The priest stood for a moment and watched as the giants tore through walls on all sides of the room so they could attack the human occupants from several directions at once.

Beyond the room, Russian guards started firing, emptying automatic weapons in blind panic at the sight of the creatures.

Usi smiled, touched his amulet, and vanished.

After studying the coordinates to the White House, Josh and Stephanie were confident they could jump to that position with the settings on Josh’s amulet.

“Are you ready then?” General Grogan asked.

“As ready as I’m going to get,” Josh said.

“Time to boogie,” Grogan told the Lieutenant standing on his left.

The Lieutenant swallowed hard, then turned toward the platoon lined up in the staging area. “Lock and load.”

“You heard him,” the squad sergeant yelled. “Lock and load.”

The troops placed the selectors on the rifles to safe position and the rifles were cycled, creating a loud clattering as cartridges chambered into the M4 Carbines and the two M-249 machine guns the men carried.

Grogan stepped forward and spoke in a loud voice. “Ladies and gentlemen, our capital is under attack. We have a quick way to get you there. You’ll be the first line of our nation’s defense in protecting the White House until reinforcements arrive. We’ve spent the last six months devising tactics and training to

deal with giants. Now you're going to get a chance to put your training to use. Your weapons have been loaded with ammunition having frangible copper we believe will be deadly to the giants.

"Now I'm told," the general continued, "that it's essential that everyone be touching their fellow soldiers in order to travel in a unit to the battle site. So none of you will hold onto his fellow soldier with a mambie pambie pansy hold. I want honest-to-God, grip 'em like your girlfriend's boobs holds. Form up around Kincaid here."

The soldiers bunched around Josh, each grabbing the shoulder of a fellow soldier while holding his rifle at the ready in the other hand.

Grogan whispered to Josh. "You double-checked the coordinates for the White House, son?"

Josh nodded as the soldiers lined up around him. "Yes, sir. The coordinates are locked in place.

Grogan stepped back and spoke to the squad. "Gentlemen, I can't come along. I'm taking another contingent to Egypt to fight another bunch of these suckers. But I know you'll kick some giant butt for me. Joshua?"

"Yes, sir."

"The show's all yours. Good luck."

"Thanks." Josh readied his amulet, nodding toward Stephanie who the general had insisted should stay behind. But just before Josh activated the amulet, Stephanie snatched a rifle from a surprised guard, and then she jumped toward the departing platoon, grabbing the arm of a soldier.

She vanished with the platoon.

"What should we do, sir?" an aide asked, an amazed look on his face.

"There's nothing to do," Grogan said. "I'm sure she'll take care of herself. It's the giants that need to worry."

Josh, Stephanie, and the US soldiers emerged from the portal into the chaos that was the White House. Dust and smoke hung in the air, with walls knocked down and the bodies of giants and secret service personnel lying on the floor. Josh turned to spy a giant charging with a screaming White House staffer in its fist.

"Don't hit the civilian," one of the soldiers warned. The troops tried to hit only the giant, but their shots went wide and the monster slammed into them, the ax in its hand instantly cutting one of the troopers in half.

Josh dodged out of the way, slashing with the copper sword that seemed woefully inadequate compared to the weapons of those around him. However, he was rewarded with a yelp of pain when his blade struck home in the monster's back.

The creature dropped the now-unconscious woman it had been carrying, trying to reach the wound in its back. Josh took the opportunity to step forward and jab upward toward the monster's heart. With bellowing rage, the Nephilim dropped to its knees and then started disintegrating.

The soldiers seemed bolstered by Josh's success, and started firing more confidently as more of the giants appeared. With a proper aim, the ammunition had a deadly effect on the creatures, causing them to burst into flame where the bullets struck, the blaze quickly engulfed the monsters and they disintegrated into piles of smoking flesh and armor.

But the sheer numbers of the titans threatened to overwhelm Josh and the soldiers. Time and again, the creatures charged, each time getting a little closer. Five, then six came, each climbing over the fallen, burning bodies of their comrades, the last dropping with its arms outstretched so it reached just inches

from the closest American soldier.

“That was close,” Josh said, his ears ringing from the gunshots.

The soldiers around him used the lull in attack to reload their rifles.

“Conserve your ammunition,” the sergeant warned the soldiers standing around Josh. “It only takes a few shots to bring them down. Set your rifles to semiauto fire.”

With the next charge, the giants changed their tactics, raising massive shields to make their way slowly down the hall, impervious to the fragmenting bullets that failed to penetrate the shields.

“Aim for their feet,” Stephanie yelled over Josh’s shoulder. She ignored his surprised look and pushed past him, taking careful aim at one of the monsters and nailing it on the foot. The creature staggered and fell.

The soldiers standing on either side of her followed suit and soon they had downed all but one of the creatures who turned and ran, at which point it was also cut down with a well-placed shot to the back of the head.

Josh saw movement out of the corner of his eye; he turned to spot a lone Nephilim slashing at him with a long sword. Barely jumping aside in time, Josh lashed out with his own sword and was satisfied to see it draw blood. The giant growled, its arm disintegrating as it pulled back.

Not waiting for it to die, Josh lunged forward with the point, jabbing at the opening between its breastplate and neck armor. The blade wedged in the armor and was ripped out of his hand when the giant tumbled backward.

Though the creature’s arm had now disintegrated up to its shoulder, it was still capable of mayhem and raised its remaining arm, forming a fist to crush its tormentor.

Josh held up his hands to protect himself. But the giant could land its blow, a bullet smashed into its temple, exploding its head which burst into flames.

Josh turned to see Stephanie lowering her weapon. “Nice shooting,” he yelled. “Owe you one.”

“More than one,” Stephanie yelled back with a tired grin. Then she turned away to concentrate on the next group of giants charging toward the rank of soldiers blocking the hallway.

Doubting he could ever pull his sword from the armor it was wedged in, Josh snatched a rifle from the bloody floor, trying to ignore the decapitated soldier who had held the gun. Checking to be sure the selector was in the “fire” position, Josh advanced to stand alongside Stephanie, firing to help down the last of the five beasts that had been advancing toward them. “What the hell are you doing here, anyway?” he asked her.

“Figured you’d need someone to watch your back,” she replied.

There was a crash and the wall just ahead of them tumbled down. A Nephilim shoved its way through the wall, blinking in the plaster dust that filled the air.

Josh and Stephanie both fired at the same instant, even as the creature hurled a huge javelin that flew by and buried itself in the wall behind them. Their bullets connected and the monster burst into flame and fell backward into the room it had come from.

There was another lull. The couple turned to see the soldiers behind them mow down three giants.

All was quiet except for the cries of the wounded and dying human beings in the ruins that had once been the White House.

“Hold your fire,” a voice called from the smoke obscuring the hallway. Secret Service agent Bill Heller appeared, stepping through the haze, blood running down his face from a scalp wound. “Hold your fire. I think that’s the last of them.”

Chapter 28

Ephialtes and the giants awaited Usi's orders. The high priest ignored them, instead conferring with his technicians who studied the combined amulet as he held them out for them to examine.

"It looks," Usi said, pointing toward the glowing gemstones, "like that Kincaid brat is traveling again." He paused, noting that more than one gem smoldered with dim fire. "Someone else has been traveling as well — they must have picked up the amulet from under Stonehenge since the jewel for the portal there is glowing. That gives them two amulets. But there's still one amulet left and I believe I can get it first. Then I think I'll have enough power to take the others from him. We know where that last amulet is. The giant showed us on the map."

Raul spoke up, "But, master, our Yucatan expedition hasn't located the entrance to Izamal, yet. If the cavern is full of rock... Without you, we are lost."

Usi felt moved by the handicapped man's concern. But this was not a time to be timid. Only a bold move could save the situation.

"He's right," one of the technicians said. "You shouldn't risk jumping into a chamber that might very well be filled with debris."

"That's no longer a consideration," Usi said. "The combined amulets have changed me. I'm not totally physical any more." Then he noticed how they glanced at each other, as if they were unsure whether he was sane. It was time for a demonstration so they could believe.

"Raul, come here," Usi said.

His aide stepped forward, limping to stand alongside the priest. "Raul," Usi said, "you have been my good and faithful servant. You never complain, even though I know your handicap makes walking and sitting a tortuous pain. I know that many say the position I hold should rightfully have been yours."

"I serve you happily," Raul said, bowing his head. "You have been a great leader and I feel no resentment."

Usi placed his hand on his aide's head, and then the priest closed his eyes. At first, nothing happened, but then power surged down Usi's hand and into the head of his aide. He continued to let the energy flow out of him for a few minutes, ignoring the surprised gasps of those standing around him. Finally he stopped, removing his hand and opening his eyes.

Raul stood upright before him, tears running down his face, his legs even and his spine unbent.

"Is that better?" Usi asked softly.

Raul fell on his knees before the high priest. "My lord and my God!" he cried, kissing Usi's hand.

The high priest was pleased at the amazement painted on the faces of those around him. One by one, each dropped onto his knees. They no longer saw him as a man. He had become their god. "Now do not worry about me," Usi said, setting the rings on his amulet to the coordinates of the Izamal temple. He readied for the jump. But before he could leave, a voice grumbled from behind him.

"What would you have us do?" Ephialtes asked.

The giants. He had forgotten about them in his haste to go after the last amulet. Yes, there was something they could do. An evil smirk covered Usi's face for only an instant, then he suppressed it and he turned to face the giant. "You must deploy your army outside the stepped pyramid. Prepare every one in your command to repel any attack the humans may mount. We're going to establish a beachhead here. You'll defend it from all invaders. You may kill every human you see, save these here with me. Do you understand?"

A broad grin crossed the giant's face. Ephialtes bowed, and then he signaled his forces to leave the cavern. Thousands of sandaled feet started up the ramp, the earth shaking under their weight, dust falling from the roof high overhead.

Usi turned away from the savage horde, barely able to conceal his utter disdain for the giants. Then he nodded to his people standing around him. "I'll be back soon. Don't get involved in the fighting."

Usi pressed the amulet and vanished with a small thunderclap.

Izamal, Yucatan, Mexico

Three minutes later, Usi smiled exposing the double row of pointed teeth he had grown. He stood inside the underground Mayan temple but his growing powers enabled him to sense what lay above him, and therein lied the humor. Above sat the great Monastery of Izamal, housing one of the most venerated Marian statues in all of Mexico, hallowed Christian ground — built right above one of the most evil of places on the planet.

Such delicious irony, Usi thought. The ancient Mayans temple was the abode of the twin demons, Kinichkakmo, a manifestation of their sun god, and of Itzam Na, a deity of healing and resurrection. The Spanish conquistadors believed the Indians' religion evil; in 1553 they tore down the largest pyramid erected to the gods, building a monastery on its site. But the Spaniards had never realized that the greatest part of the ancient religion remained hidden, underground, waiting to yield the amulet that eventually would destroy the religion the Spaniards had brought.

Usi turned his attention to the cavern. Its ceiling angled upward, like the inside of a stepped pyramid. Ornate Mayan hieroglyphics covered the walls and a sacrificial altar stained with blood lay in the center of the room. The entire area was bathed by yellow light from above, activated by Uzi's arrival. *Now to locate the amulet.*

The White House lay in shambles, and Josh wondered if it could ever be restored. Bodies and debris littered the scene and the surviving human soldiers looking dazed and shell-shocked. Both he and Stephanie were covered with blood, including some of their own blood from small nicks caused by flying debris.

"We did it," Josh said, dropping his weapon on the floor and taking Stephanie in his arms. At first, she embraced him tightly, then he felt her stiffen. He let go and the two stepped back from each other.

"That was an experience to tell our grandchildren about," Joshua said. "I mean... you know." He felt a blush creeping up his neck.

"I know what you mean."

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Looks like you picked up quite a few cuts."

"I don't think any are too serious. Mostly I feel super tired."

Joshua looked at the destruction around him. "The White House is going to need some serious renovations, that's for sure."

"Josh, Stephanie said. "Look at your amulet."

Josh glanced down, wiped the blood from the surface of the medallion, and lifted it for inspection. A jewel that had previously remained dark now glowed brightly. "Someone must have entered another of the seven main portals. That must be in—"

"The Yucatan," Stephanie finished. "Someone after the last amulet?"

“I’d bet on it. I’m going to jump there. Maybe there’s still time to beat them to it.”

“But you said that wasn’t safe to jump without knowing—”

“Someone must have thought it was safe to jump.”

“Or maybe they’re just desperate,” Stephanie protested. “Like you.”

“It’s worth taking a chance,” Joshua said. “To keep another amulet from falling into—”

“The wrong hands,” Stephanie finished. “But do you really think it’s worth taking the risk?”

“Yes!”

Stephanie reached up to dab at a cut on Josh’s face and then said softly, “Did I ever tell you I hate it when you finish—”

“My sentences?”

“I’m going, too.”

“No,” Josh said, pulling away from her. “I’m going to make the jump alone. You stay here.”

“If you think I’m staying behind, you’ve got another think coming.”

“I don’t want you to risk your life.”

“Josh — I’m not sure it would be worth living if I lost you. I wouldn’t have anyone to argue with.”

Joshua looked her in the eye. “Wouldn’t do any good to argue, would it?”

Stephanie shook her head, her face very serious.

“Remember our jump to the Celtic site. We just about—”

“Just do it and quit talking. I don’t want to think about it any more.”

“Grab on, then,” Josh said, setting the coordinates on the amulet.

The two were gone in the wink of an eye.

Sakkara, Egypt

The sun was close to the horizon, bathing the sand around Zoer’s stepped pyramid in shades of orange and red. General Grogan lifted his binoculars to study the thousands of giants lined in formation, preparing for battle.

“The Egyptian troops are in place,” an aide told the general.

Grogan lowered his binoculars and turned to survey his troops and the Egyptian soldiers. It was a tiny collection of only three or four hundred soldiers. Even with their side arms, a battle with the thousands of monsters arrayed against them would be anything but a close contest. The titans could overwhelm them through sheer numbers. *There are a lot more giants than I ever expected to see*, Grogan thought.

The Americans and Egyptians stood in fixed ranks, unlike what was normally seen in modern warfare, like something out of a World War I formation. *Or even like those of the Romans*, Grogan reflected. But that was just how he wanted it if his plan was to work. For a moment he wondered if an army had ever battled giants like this in the past, and, if so, what the outcome must have been. *Longwalkers one, humans zero*, he suspected.

Grogan studied the Nephilim once more, panning his optics down the front line. The self-confident creatures wore smiles. They were certain of victory. The general turned back to the troops alongside him. They didn’t look so self-assured. They did look resolute.

Grogan turned to his officers. “Order your men to let ‘em come to us through the valley. We will take no action. Don’t even let your men load their rifles unless I give the order. I simply want everyone to stay in formation.” The general waited for the translator to convey his orders to the Egyptian officers, then continued. “Remember, no shooting unless I give the order.” The translator spoke. “OK,” Grogan finished, “Get to your men.”

From across the valley, blood-curdling war whoops rose into the darkening sky. Weapons pounded against shields. Then the giants started forward, at first at a slow walk and then ever faster, until they were crossing the valley faster than a horse could gallop.

Chapter 29

Usi climbed the steep stairs leading to the altar where he was almost certain the amulet must be hidden. The ancient stones were dyed black from the blood that had been spilled on them centuries ago. Before the priest reached the summit, he heard a soft plop behind him, the noise echoing through the darkness. He whirled about to spy Josh and Stephanie materializing from the portal he'd recently come through, residual energy from their appearance still swirling around them.

"Come after the last amulet, have you?" Usi asked, his voice supernaturally loud. He waved his hand toward them and the couple flew backward a few yards, tumbling onto the floor.

Usi descended the stairs toward the intruders. "I see you've never united your amulets but wear them separately. That's a big mistake. Together the power of these devices is much greater than the sum of their parts. You'll never be able to overcome the combined power of the three I wear."

"That's a mistake easily rectified," Stephanie said, removing her amulet. She turned and dropped its chain over Josh's head.

Usi continued down the steps, watching with amused curiosity as the two amulets united, and the young man fell to his knees, bolts of power crackling around his head as the power of the device overcame him. Usi moved at superhuman speed, grabbing the girl before the Kincaid brat could recover.

When Josh finally looked up, his eyes went wide.

Usi smiled, holding Stephanie tightly in one arm, his razor-sharp dagger at her throat. "I was hoping you two would make the mistake of uniting your amulets. The process takes a little time, and it was time you didn't have. Now, I'm going to give you a choice, Kincaid. You can leave now and I will spare this young lady's life. Or you can stay and watch her die before I kill you, just as my predecessor murdered your great grandfather."

Grogan waited another moment, calculating how long it would take the giants to reach the center of the desert valley. Then he motioned to his radioman. "It's time to rain on their parade."

His radioman handed him the handset.

Grogan lifted the handset to his ear and pressed the talk button, "Lucky strike, you got your targets?"

"That's a big roger," the voice on the other end said. "Couldn't miss a target that big."

"Time to rain fire."

"Roger that."

The giants continued their charge, and were halfway to the human lines. The soldiers around Grogan fingered their rifles and machine guns nervously.

A low roar in the distance caused Grogan to look toward the west where eight American jets were barely discernible. They swooped earthward, sun at their backs, racing past the stepped pyramid silhouetted against the horizon. As the fighter planes neared the Nephilim flank, the lead aircraft released its canisters. The containers tumbled through the air, then burst into flame fifty feet in the air, creating a shower of burning napalm that engulfed the giants in a growing infernal.

Grogan watched the growing conflagration that grew as one after another all eight jets dropped their loads onto the ranks of monsters. "Never bring two thousand BC tactics to a twenty-first century fight," Grogan said, spitting into the sand.

The jets headed out, leaving the valley in flames. Within the inferno, a few of the giants struggled forward a few steps, their bodies burning away until they no longer could stand. They fell in black burning piles of flesh and bones that danced in the heat waves. As the Nephilim died, blue demons leaped upward in the flames, streaking into the darkening sky to vanish into space.

The general glanced at his troops who were painted orange by the dying flames. The soldiers watched emotionlessly, hardly moving a muscle, as if in a dream.

The general lifted his binoculars to inspect the burning corpses. None of the monsters had survived the fiery attack. As he surveyed the carnage, the Chaplin beside him recited from memory a bit of scripture that seemed eerily appropriate: "As straw in the fire so shall they burn before the face of the holy; as lead in the water shall they sink before the face of the righteous, and no trace of them shall any more be found. And on the day of their affliction there shall be rest on the earth, and before them they shall fall and not rise again. And there shall be no one to take them with his hands and raise them, for they have denied the Lord of Spirits and His Anointed. The name of the Lord of Spirits be blessed."

"Amen to that, Padre," Grogan said, lowering his binoculars, satisfied all the Nephilim were dead. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigar. He bit off the end, spit it out, and then plopped the cigar into his mouth.

"I almost feel sorry for them," an officer standing next to the general said.

"Just remember," Grogan said from around his cigar as he struck a match. "Those things would have gladly eaten your great maiden aunt for lunch." He lit his cigar and puffed. "And then they'd have your privates for dessert."

The soldier said nothing, but didn't look nearly as sad as he had before.

Joshua eyed the high priest and remained motionless, fearful the madman would carry out his threat to harm Stephanie. "By now your giants have been slaughtered," Josh said. "The American general in charge of the operation told me his plan. It was very simple and deadly. He is going to — probably already has — lure your forces into the open and destroy them with an air attack. The parties you took into the White House have failed as well. We came from there."

Usi threw back his head and the monstrous cackling from his throat sent shivers down Josh's spine. As the priest laughed, his blade moved ever so slightly and Josh saw a thin trickle of blood run down Stephanie's throat. Her eyes were wide with fear.

"You fools," Usi finally said. "You've done what I wanted. The destruction of the giants was exactly as I planned. I no longer need them, so I deployed them in ways the human forces could take advantage of, slaughtering the monsters for me. I never really wanted the giants to rule mankind, but it seemed the only way to gain control of our world. But I only wanted the power they offered. When I take this last amulet and then the two you wear, I'll become the god of this world. I won't need help from anyone, ever again."

Josh crouched to attack, glaring at the priest.

"I see you aren't planning to leave," Usi said.

"You'll kill her either way," Josh answered evenly.

"That's correct." The priest waved his hand and Josh flew across the room to smash against the wall, his head hitting against the stone to leave him dazed. He rose to hands and knees and glanced up. Usi slashed Stephanie's throat.

"No!" Josh yelled, racing toward her.

With a surprised look on her face, Stephanie fell, grasping at her throat with one hand. But as she dropped to her knees, she reached up, seizing Usi's amulet so the chain broke with her weight as she fell.

"You little fool!" Usi screamed, falling to his knees to attempt to pull the amulet from her grasp.

Josh reached Stephanie's side, wondering if it might still be possible to save her. But she shuddered, her limp hand releasing the amulet. The priest snatched the amulet before Josh had a chance to reach it.

As Usi rose to his feet, Josh grasped the dagger lying on the floor.

The priest lifted the amulet, laughing in triumph as the broken chain magically united itself. He lifted it over his head in outstretched arms. But before the priest could lower the chain around his neck, his eyes glazed over, his look of glee transformed to one of pain and horror.

His eyes dropped in time to see Josh release the hilt of the dagger. Its blade was completely buried in the priest's chin, its point extending up into his brain. The amulet tumbled from Usi's hands, falling at Josh's feet.

The priest staggered back, then turned and attempted to climb the stairs, hoping reach the last amulet, perhaps hoping it would somehow allow him to regain some of his powers. As he climbed, he clutched at the dagger in his chin, pulling the blade from the wound. Rather than blood, light gushed from the wound, flowing like a liquid, spilling life energy down the priest's chest and onto the floor where the energy dissipated.

The priest yelled in animal rage as he continued to climb. Then one foot seemed to crumble and disintegrate, causing him to drop to a knee. He continued the ascent, crawling until his hands vanished into piles of dust. On he struggled, climbing another step on the stumps he had left. Then he toppled over and withered into a pile of smoking clothing.

Josh ignored what was left of the priest, instead cradling Stephanie's body in his arms as he wept.

Chapter 30

Josh was unsure how long he had been sitting with Stephanie's head pillowed on his lap. He felt dazed and couldn't really think. The two amulets he wore had changed him, and his emotions and mind seemed to race unchecked.

Then his grandfather's words come back to him, in what seemed almost total recall: "The greatest danger for mankind will occur if one individual obtains all six amulets. He can combine the six to form a powerful seventh amulet that gives him godlike abilities, even the power over life and death itself."

The power over life and death itself.

What might the power over death mean?

Josh gently laid Stephanie down on the cold stone. Then he collected Usi's amulets and held them against the united two he wore. A glowing wind encompassed, with energy like glowing fireflies swirling around him, demon voices singing in his ears. He felt his mind and body being transformed into something that even he barely recognized as himself. The muscles in his legs and arms grew, straining at his clothing. He could even feel the bones in his head expanding to accommodate his new-found mental powers.

For a moment he stood, collecting his thoughts. Then he slowly mounted the stone steps to the top of the alter. There golden light spotlighted a stone casket embellished with the demon face of Itzam Na, the Mayan god of creation and resurrection. *Fitting*, Josh thought, and even though he had not voiced the words, they echoed through the cavern like thunder.

He lifted the cover of the casket, untroubled by the booby trap that injected poison into his fingertips — he now was impervious to such threats. Inside the casket sat the last amulet, glowing brightly due to its closeness to the combined jewels he wore around his neck.

Josh grasped the sixth amulet and lifted it toward his chest. Power streamed between the medallions as he brought the last into place, and then they intertwined in a complex pattern of light and electricity, the stones singing with the power coursing through them.

Bursts of brilliant light surrounded Josh like a cosmic cloud, and his body, no longer physical, was comprised of light that extended forward and backward in time. For a moment he could see the whole compass of mankind's rise to its current glory, and looking ahead could see its gradual crumbling and fall. After that time, there was a brightness his eyes could not bear to behold for more than a moment.

With an effort, he narrowed his view to the present, turning to float down the steps. He hovered where Stephanie's body lay on the floor. He realized it was no longer necessary to bring her back, yet it had been his original goal, and so he decided to honor his past.

The being that once had been Josh reached down with his mind and lifted her body so it floated in front of him. Then his hand of light touched the wound on her neck; the skin healed itself instantly.

He studied the energy of her soul floating above her body, and saw that she had not yet disconnected to leave for the beyond.

He placed a finger over her chest. Her heart restarted.

Then he waved upward over her face, and her mouth opened and she gasped for breath.

He watched her spirit re-enter her body, and then she coughed once and began breathing regularly.

Josh lowered her to the floor. In a few minutes, her eyes fluttered open and she groggily sat, shielding her eyes from the bright light.

"Josh?" Stephanie asked, squinting at the light he had become. "Is that you?"

His voice was disembodied, seeming to come from everywhere yet nowhere. "It's what I've become."

Stephanie studied him a moment, and then her face showed she understood what he had done. "Josh, remove the amulets."

“I am the new god of this planet.”

“Josh, you must remove the amulets. They have changed you in a bad way.”

Joshua smiled at her ignorance. “I will rebuild Earth. I can do anything I want, I can have anything I desire.”

“Josh, there’s one thing you won’t have if you remain like this. You can never have my heart.”

The being that once was Josh said nothing, but the mask of light that had been him dimmed, and silver tears ran down his cheeks.

“Josh, I loved you... the way you were. Please... please take off the amulets. Please. If there’s anything still human in you, if you ever loved me, please remove them.”

The being of light stood motionless for a long minute, its face showing great sorrow. Then its hands rose and slowly removed the combined amulets. Holding them away from himself, Josh touched the center of the assembly, and the amulets tumbled in the air and then slowly drifted to the floor as six separate units.

A whirlwind of light formed around Josh, and he vanished upward in a cloud of firefly sparks that swirled toward the apex of the chamber and vanished.

“Oh, no!” Stephanie cried. “Josh! Come back.”

There was a long pause. Stephanie called again. “Josh, please come back!”

But he never returned.

The Oval Office had come through the attack with moderate damage. It was usable, unlike much of the rest of the White House. The President had insisted on conducting the private ceremony in that room.

With General Grogan looking on, the President presented three Medals of Freedom, the highest honor that could be bestowed on an American citizen. One medal went to Nick, another to Stephanie, and a third, posthumously, to Josh.

“You three,” the President said, “were instrumental in saving our nation, in saving the whole world. I’m only sorry that your heroic efforts must remain secret, and that one of you had to forfeit his life.” He placed a medal on a ribbon around Stephanie’s neck, and then shook her hand.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, wiping away the tears that were flowing freely down her cheeks.

The President put the ribbon holding the second medal around Nick’s neck.

“Thank you,” Nick said, shaking the leader’s hand.

The President cleared his throat and spoke. “I also want to thank you for turning over the amulets. I’ve ordered all six, along with every portal, destroyed. Mankind’s not ready to handle such technology. We need a destiny of our own choosing, one reached with mankind’s own baby steps, not with the giant strides of monsters.”

“So now,” the President continued. “I’m swearing you to secrecy. You must never mention of the attempted takeover of our capital. The public believes the damage resulted from a terrorist attack. It must continue to think that. Likewise, you should never say or write anything about the portals and amulets. I don’t want to panic the public with needless fears. We’ve wiped the monsters from the planet, once and for all. There are plenty of other things for our world to worry about.”

Stephanie looked down at Josh’s medal, and broke into tears.

Epilogue

San Francisco, California

Raul entered the Satanist Grotto, standing tall, still a bit amazed at how powerful and self-assured he felt after being healed by Usi. He wished the Thelema Grotto Master had not elected to meet in the poorly lit room within the Ordo Templi Orientis building. But the Satanists had always been a bit melodramatic, and this seemed in keeping with such theater. Raul was willing to make a few concessions if it meant his scheme could be realized.

So, the new high priest of the exiled Matrani order adjusted his robes and sat in his designated chair. A hexagram on the floor separated him from the Satanist chairing the Council of Nine, the rest of whom sat around the wall of the circular room, half hidden in shadows.

Raul had come alone. Following the destruction of the Matrani headquarters in Florence after the Italian government had declared them an illegal terrorist organization, few of his people remained free. Many had killed themselves. A few were locked in prison cells. Only a very few remained free.

“Thank you for meeting me,” Raul said.

The High Priest nodded and then spoke. “You have a proposal that would be mutually beneficial. Would you please explain it again to me and mine.”

“Most certainly,” Raul said. He licked his lips and reviewed his short speech so he could present the idea very precisely. There must be no misunderstanding. “Our leader has vanished,” Raul finally said. “While he remained among us, he became as a god. He could heal — he healed me — and he could move objects by sheer thought. His skin exuded light. These are not exaggerations, nor were these parlor tricks. They were real phenomena that I observed with my own eyes.”

“Interesting,” the Satanist sitting across from him said. “But what does this have to do with us?”

“I believe you can conduct a ritual, the Abra-Melin that the Mage employed to call spirits and bring back the dead.”

“You have mistaken us with the devil worshipers,” the High Priest said, irritation in his voice.

“No, with all respect, I think not,” Raul replied. “I know more about your organization than you think. I know of your most secret rituals as some of our members were also among your highest order.”

“Spies?”

“Let us say ‘fellow believers.’ Our order goes back thousands of years. We have knowledge of many ancient rites and groups. We also sought to harness these powers of magic and of demon gods. My leader succeeded in this.”

“But now he is gone.”

“Yes.”

“Dead?”

“We do not believe he is truly dead. Trapped between dimensions is a better concept, I think, though even that is not quite correct. But my technicians as well as my religious advisers believe your ritual might free him from the trap he fell into.”

“What would be in this for us?” the black robed priest asked.

“We will freely share secrets which you will find of interest in exchange for your attempt to do this thing. If you succeed in bringing his return, he will show his gratitude in ways you can not even dream of.”

“But to reveal our secrets...”

“They are not secrets if we already know they exist.”

The high priest rubbed his chin, and the members along the wall squirmed in their chairs. Some of

Usi's power had transferred to Raul, and he simply knew he had hooked the Satanists, and that they would soon conduct the ritual.

And the irony is, Raul thought as he sat there studying the Satanists, they will be resurrecting the one they claim to worship, yet do not. The one who will become the world leader, the Antichrist of the hated Christian Bible, the one indwelt by the fallen angel Satan.

"I am interested in this proposal. But I need to discuss it privately with my Council of Nine. If you can wait outside?"

"Most gladly," Raul said, rising to his feet. *Soon, my master, Usi, you'll be back among the living, your mortal head wound healed.*

Khartoum, Sudan

Old newspapers and trash swirled in the breeze, brushing against the mud brick wall of a decrepit shop before dancing down the alleyway. A man dressed as a beggar furtively looked in either direction. Seeing he was alone, he pulled a portal from the gunny sack he had carried over his back, placing the device alongside the building before turning and scurrying away.

Seconds later an elite team of armed Boreans materialized from the portal, its leader, Heinz Heisenberg, holding the amulet that had transported them in his hand. One of his team wore a heavy backpack that he removed as other soldiers took up defensive positions at either end of the alley.

The soldier with the backpack kicked aside some trash and set his burden on the dusty street, opening the top flap the backpack to reveal the arming mechanism of a nuclear weapon. He turned toward Heisenberg who simply nodded. Then the soldier set the timer for 30 seconds. "Der Timer wird eingestellt."

"Aktivieren Sie den Timer," Heisenberg leader said softly, giving the order to arm the nuclear device. Then he shouted to his men, "Gekommen. Es ist Zeit zu gehen."

One member of the team grabbed the portal, and all the soldiers regrouped with practiced precision. Heisenberg activated the amulet and the entire team vanished.

Twenty seconds later, an artificial star vaporized Khartoum, its nuclear mushroom cloud rising into the air.

The newscaster looked solemn as "News Alert" flashed across the TV screen. "We are interrupting your show with this breaking story and will return you to your regularly scheduled programming in a moment. Reports are just coming in from the World Center for Seismology. A major earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale, centered in Sudan, has been detected. US Officials believe the quake was centered in Sudan's capital Khartoum.

"The White House issued an official statement saying that the hearts and prayers of the American people go out to those who have died or lost loved ones in this natural disaster. The US President has pledged that America will do everything possible to help survivors. No mention was made of the growing tensions that have been mounting between the US and Sudan over the last few months because of charges that African nation has been harboring terrorists."

Stephanie awoke from the nightmare and sat up in bed. She'd dreamed that she was with Josh. He'd been swept down a whirlpool.

She tried to help him, but his hand remained just out of reach no matter how far she stretched to touch him.

"Help me!" Josh cried.

Stephanie looked for a branch or something to reach with, but there was nothing but sand on the bank she stood on. She turned back to see the torrent drag Josh slowly downward into the water. Only his face barely remained above water.

Then he had slowly vanished, his last pleading words echoing in her mind: "Please never give up your hope of seeing me again."

Now Stephanie pondered the meaning of the recurring dream, wondering if there really could be any way that Josh might still be alive.

But as with every other time she'd been plagued by this vision over the last few years, she knew the answer had to be "no."

It was crazy to think otherwise.

It had only been a dream, after all.

Stephanie checked to be sure she hadn't awakened her husband. Nick snored softly, blissfully unaware.

She lay back down beside him, putting her arm around his waist, trying to relax. Then she did her best to push the nightmare from her thoughts so she could fall asleep.