

A NOVEL
BY J. R. MILWARD



Copyright notice

This story is a work of fiction. Lara Croft, her likeness, and the Tomb Raider games are all copyright of Core Design, Crystal Dynamics, EIDOS Interactive and SQUARE ENIX. There is no challenge to these copyrights intended by this story, as it is a non-sanctioned, unofficial, and entirely non-profit work of the author's own.

© J. R. Milward 2012

Acknowledgements

This book could not have come about without the inspiration of the game's original design team (especially Murti Schofield (story), Peter Connelly (music), and Richard Morton (game design)), and the efforts and resourcefulness of the TR fan community. In particular, thank you to my beta-readers, Elio Qoshi (Lara's Boyfr.), Brandy Staley (Rexxie13), plus Denise (mum), whose keen eye for typos I would not be without. Thank you also to Chris Jones (Rivendell) and Stefan Klim (GodOfLight) for their help a long time ago (in a galaxy far, far away) on helping me coax the concept of an AoD novel off the ground. Thanks also to SKing for creating the wonderful render artworks used for the covers.

Kudos also to the people who have not been mentioned by name, but whose suggestions, corrections and encouragement proved invaluable. Your passion for the game and generosity in sharing information, speculation and resources was an inspiration. Omitting your names is down to my absentmindedness, not intentional discourtesy. Huge thanks are also due to my family and boyfriend for their tireless support, and to my battalion of cats for not walking across the keyboard any more than was necessary.

Author's Note

The Angel of Darkness occupies an ambiguous position amongst fans.

The Tomb Raider fan community is one of the most loyal fan bases in the world, but the split between Core versus Crystal Dynamics followers is, at times, surprisingly bitter. Although Core Design was the company that started the Tomb Raider franchise, it must be noted that the team responsible for *The Angel of Darkness* was not the same group that began Lara's adventures back in 1996. Despite an ambitious plot, radically-improved graphics and passionate designers, the game was a commercial flop that eventually cost Core the franchise. It took the team at American-born company, Crystal Dynamics, to revitalise the Tomb Raider universe - and Lara Croft herself - in 2006. Fans of the new trilogy (*Legend*, *Anniversary* and *Underworld*) will state - perhaps rightly - that Crystal Dynamics was exactly the kind of fresh, exciting infusion that the franchise needed in order to survive. Now, on the eve of another reboot of our favourite heroine, we can only speculate what the future holds for Lara.

However, fans of the original Core games are not willing to concede that their beloved, genre-defining games are inferior for one pure and simple reason; Tomb Raiders I to VI are, to this day, terrific fun.

The Angel of Darkness has its flaws - more bugs than a formicarium, abandoned dialogue and animations, and plot holes the size of Tasmania - but a glance through the realms of concept art shows locations that were slated to be more dramatic than any yet seen in a Tomb Raider game. The London Symphony Orchestra provided the backdrop for deeper, darker emotions than anyone could have expected from a mere adventure game starring the buxom Lara Croft. For the first time, some of the glamour of earlier games gave way to places and situations that we could relate to, and others that were grittier and more majestic than we'd ever imagined. But the faults from too-little beta testing, and the rushed desperation to meet deadlines, gave the final game product an unfinished bittersweetness.

It was this that inspired me to write. There was too much material left unused, too many avenues left unexplored, for me to resist. I've

been playing Tomb Raider since 1999 (a late-comer, I hear the die-hards cry!), and the same desire to discover every last nook and cranny of Lara's tombs prompted me to research everything I could about this game. Between 2008 to 2009, I jotted down where plot holes needed filling, and where character development had been left unexplained. There was so much raw inspiration to be had that I had to turn to a couple of friends to help me make sense of it all. The resultant back stories (yes, even Eckhardt was once a spotty kid!) occupies a sizable folder in my desk drawer. One day, I may even get around to telling those stories. Core Design had planned *Angel* to be only the first part of a trilogy; to this day, fans across the world muse about the games-that-never-were, and many talented individuals have created their own. It is entirely possible that I will also succumb to the temptation, one day.

This novel follows on from the short novella I wrote in 2006. Lara's adventures immediately after her escape from the Great Pyramid have been the source of much speculation (and even an official novel, Mike Resnick's *The Amulet of Power*) but I wanted to put my own spin on those events. I'm consistently inspired by Lara's character; the idea that her daring-do exterior masks an all-too human interior provides much conflict and entertainment, aided by a very British sense of humour in the face of adversity.

An Angel in the Darkness provides an enlightening prologue to the events in *this* novel, which is by far my largest single piece of writing to date. To get the most out of the story, it is recommended that *An Angel in the Darkness* is read first (available to download from my website jrmilward.co.uk).

I hope you enjoy reading as much as I've enjoyed writing.

Jennifer R. Milward
November 2012

Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness

Prologue

A creature dreamed fitfully, tossing and mumbling in its sleep. Perhaps it had slept since the world began, and the dreams were all that remained of its memories. Perhaps it died long ago. If asked, it would not be able to say. It would blink and stare and wail, gnashing its rotting teeth, cursing and snarling. It was man-shaped beneath its bindings, but no one in their right mind would class the creature as human.

Not any more.

As it swung in the darkness, chains creaking, it dreamt of distant thunder. A storm was coming, somewhere in the Overworld. It remembered storms - the flash and roar and icy pelt of rain on its face. It remembered riding the energy, laughing for joy and destruction, power crackling along its body. But this storm brought no relief, no rain, no joy.

It was getting closer, making the creature sway in agitation, naked over the bottomless pit. Thunder rumbled, reverberating throughout the stone of the prison, louder and louder. Dust fell, setting the chains to jangling. The creature moaned, unsure at the latest turn of events. Its dreams had been the same for so long, but this, the newest, was disrupting the pattern, breaking the infinite cycle.

Lightning struck, burning the creature's eyes. It shrieked at the unfamiliarity, a memory inexplicably come alive. Something rushed in, caressing him intimately, biting every patch of skin with a thousand tiny teeth.

It took a moment for it to understand. The sensation was fresh air, blown in through the jagged hole where light was now pouring in, piercing the dark like the spears of dawn cavalry.

Feelings surfaced from the creature's reforming mind. Hunger, fear, need, hope.

Hope.

Weeping, the creature began to climb, pulling itself hand-over-hand, skeletal fingers growing torn and bloody as it dragged itself up the chains, towards the light. Even when the rays vanished, reappearing and twisting at random, it climbed on, until it could haul itself out of purgatory. It lay there, panting in a dusting of granular snow and soot, gazing up at the stars and quarter-moon, listening. Its pupils contracted slowly, painfully.

All around, the storm continued to vent its fury. The cries of dying men pierced the night, speaking unfamiliar words with unfamiliar accents. The tears froze on the creature's cheeks, running down into the filthy mane of grey hair. It tasted blood on its cracked lips. There was blood on the ground as well, and the creature followed it, shuffling and sniffing like a coursing hound until it found the mangled corpse. The flesh was still warm as the creature tore with its teeth, savouring the flow of life and the return of forgotten strength.

The storm gradually moved on, leaving only silence in the sheltered little hollow. The creature wiped its mouth and reverently lifted the shard of gleaming crystal from the dead man's grasp. Bloody fingerprints stained its beauty, but not enough to blot out the reflection of the creature's eyes. They flared now, like twins of leaping fire, redder than a slick of frozen gore.

At dawn, all the Allies found was a corpse, half-eaten by scavengers, within the ruins of an unusually-large crypt. Much later, officers would write in their reports about the uncanny precision with which the bombs had struck; the rest of the medieval fortress had escaped almost untouched.

Hardly a day after the clearance teams had done their grisly work, a cadre of men appeared at the ruins. The villagers whispered behind closed doors, for the strangers, dressed in the unremarkable garb of pilgrims, would neither look at nor speak with them. Indeed, in less

than an hour they were gone - their faces drawn with the weight of knowledge that they would have given anything to be untrue.

Their prisoner had escaped.

Part I

Paris

Chapter 1

There were a hundred reasons why I didn't want to come to Paris. For a start, it was raining. Not so long ago, in the open desert, I would have counted rain a welcome luxury, but not now. It pelted down, hammering against the ground like a two-year-old having a temper tantrum, drenching the trees' tossing branches and shining greasily on the paved streets. Thunder prowled the rooftops, stabbing aerials and isolated chimneys.

The Parisian night goers were conspicuous by their absence. I trudged alone through the darkness, feet squelching, fighting a growing sense of disquiet. I'm perfectly at ease in my own company, and indeed had been revelling in little else for the past two years. But as I walked down those streets, I felt an irrepressible chill that things were not as they should have been. Something was keeping people indoors, and it wasn't just the weather. There should have been newspaper vendors, tourists returning home to their hotels, and taxi drivers copping a quick smoke as their engines idled. There should have been *somebody* besides myself braving this stormy night.

But then again, I wasn't exactly here by choice.

I wiped rainwater out of my eyes as I scanned the building names on this street. It was a handsome-looking district, with poplar trees every few yards fenced in against dogs, and pools of chilly neon from wrought-iron streetlamps. The Chantell Building loomed more than most. As I stood there, I spotted a shadow moving behind some

curtains - the suggestion of a limp betraying its owner.

Werner Von Croy; the renowned archaeologist, academic, sometime-vessel of the ancient Egyptian god of chaos, and the second reason I did not want to be here.

I rubbed my hands to restore the circulation. I had come to Paris on the Eurostar, and arrived at Gare du Nord station less than an hour ago. I had neither raincoat nor umbrella. Although the rain was already overflowing the gutters, and there had been plenty of taxis waiting under the building's eaves, I had stubbornly (perhaps perversely) decided to go on foot. Seeing the warm glow behind those curtains was a reminder of how cold I was beneath my sodden clothes.

Nevertheless, I hung back before I rang the buzzer. Anyone who knows me would probably have been surprised by my hesitation. I have confronted things no other human has ever seen, defeated some of the most powerful and devious forces on Earth. Yet here I was, anxious about coming face-to-face with my elderly mentor. The irony almost made me smile.

"Werner? It's Lara." I snapped. The receiver fizzled something unintelligible, and the door lock clicked open. I had to stand for a moment, wringing out my ponytail in a spreading puddle, before I could gather my mask into place and mount the stairs.

In too short a time, I was standing outside his door. With difficulty, I bottled down my emotions. There was anxiety, wondering if there would be anything left of my friend and mentor I could recognise. Bitterness, like the sourness of death in my belly, remembering the last time I had seen him. And anger, most potent of all, knowing he had so easily persuaded me to visit him.

When the door swung open and his face met mine, I also knew I had missed him.

"Lara! Thank God... Come in, come in!" His eyes gleamed behind gold-rimmed spectacles, darting up and down the corridor as he ushered me inside. His hands shook as they slid a dead bolt into place.

"Expecting trouble?" I asked.

"Expecting...? Oh, no. It's just a precaution, with Paris as it is... You

understand.” He offered to take my jacket, but I kept my shoulders resolutely stiff until he retreated, shaking his head. “Can I offer you anything? Tea, coffee... or something stronger?”

I followed the sound of his voice through into the living area - a well-furnished space as far as I could tell with my attention focused so narrowly. There was something unnerving about listening to his Austrian accent, like a memory having a will of its own. His cane thumped with every other step. Its jackal-shaped head was inlaid with gold, lapis lazuli and had garnets for eyes - an uncomfortable, and perhaps disquieting, homage to Seth, the Egyptian god that had briefly shared Werner’s existence. I wondered why on Earth my friend would have kept such a thing, except out of morbid sentimentality. He hobbled to a coffee table and armchairs beside the window, giving me the chance to study him properly.

“Thank you, no.”

“Of course,” he nodded. “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

Robotically, I sank onto a chair, more troubled than I would have admitted. The skinny old man bore not a trace of the proud and vigorous gentleman I had once known and had expected. Where was his authority, his charisma? What had happened to the adventurer who had travelled across the wilds of Asia, deep into the Cambodian jungle, all those years ago? Where was the veteran who had chased me halfway across Egypt?

Surely he could not be the same person who sat in the chair opposite me now. His whole frame had shrunk like a piece of worm-ridden wood, bent almost double under some invisible strain. The hands that cupped the head of his cane were twisted like fleshless claws, and what little hair he had left had faded to the death-white of a shroud.

He cleared his throat. “I know this was rather an abrupt request, Lara, but I’m glad you’re here. Did... Did you walk here by yourself? No taxi?”

“Why do you look so surprised? Don’t tell me Paris is dangerous.” I tried to smile, but with my mood so troubled, it came out more as a grimace.

“Oh, no, it isn’t. Not usually. Not in normal times. But then, these

are hardly normal times. Have you heard...? No, you might not have. Archaeologists rarely take much interest in current affairs–“

“Is it the Monstrum?” I quipped. “The serial killer every paper is full of?” The old man blanched, not meeting my eye. There was fear in him I had never seen before.

“Killings... Yes, well. The whole city won’t stop talking about it. It’s not surprising people are afraid to walk the streets, even in broad daylight. But I digress... I have something for you.”

He fumbled his way to a bookcase, and returned with a package wrapped in brown paper.

“I had it restored exactly as it was.”

The paper tumbled from my fingers and I beheld my old backpack, the one I had thought lost beneath the Great Pyramid. The leather had been expertly buffed and every seam picked over to get the grime out. It was empty, but the smell took me forcibly back to more places than I could remember.

It was like greeting an old friend.

“Werner... I- How did you find it?”

“It took a while,” a trace of humour touched his eyes. In a hush he told me the whole tale right there and then, how he had toiled to reach me under the Pyramid for weeks after most people had advised him to give up, and how desperate he had been to atone for his mistakes.

The whole time I sat with my hands wrapped protectively round the backpack, not looking at him or anything except my memories. While he had been excavating my supposed final resting place, I had been living amongst the Tuareg, undergoing my own form of rebirth. What had emerged from under the Pyramid from battling Seth had looked like me and sounded like me, but it was only a shadow. Putai, the shaman who pulled me from death, had helped me regain a part of myself lost years before I set foot in Egypt, before my passion for archaeology had become the engine powering my life. My physical wounds upon defeating Seth were as nothing to the scars I hadn’t even realised I carried, but she – and others, I smiled suddenly – had helped set me on a path of healing.

That had been just over two years ago.

I noticed the silence, and looked up at my mentor. His tale had wound jerkily to its close, and nervous expectation betrayed itself in every line on his face.

I couldn't help it. The memory seared across my mind, as sharply and clearly as though I was back in Horus' temple and immersed in the visions he had granted me.

"Quickly girl! Before it collapses around you!"

The earth's trembling was so ferocious I could barely stand. A rock the size of my head smashed into me, breaking ribs, knocking me back. Ahead there was light.

Behind me... only darkness.

I looked up into Werner's desperate face, and my new-found peace evaporated.

"You! You could have saved me! You coward!"

Lara, his own heart is for him to understand.

"If I can master myself he should too! If not, he's weak and I hate him! I hate him!"

"I couldn't leave you!"

"You already have!"

My hand slipped. The darkness claimed me.

You have forgiven yourself. Now you must learn to forgive others as well.

"Not him! Never him!"

Peace, Lara. You will learn... in time.

The taste of blood welled from my bitten lip, and I felt the self-mastery I had begun to reclaim vibrating like a bow-string drawn beyond safe tension.

Once, unknowingly, I had lived using anger as my primary fuel - the fury borne from survivor's guilt that I had carried since my fiancé died in a plane crash in the Himalayas. That event had scarred me deeper than anyone realised at the time, despite the feelings of unprecedented freedom I had experienced in learning to fend for myself. However, the woman who had survived for two weeks in the mountains had not adapted to her former life in England quite so well.

I could still remember how I had fled my home-coming party, and

dashed barefoot through the grounds till the chatter of the simpering, shallow-minded guests was muffled by acres of manicured laurel bushes and climbing roses. I had found shelter behind a fragrant clematis, and looked on myself with freshly-opened perspective. My emerald silk dress - chosen to bring out the hazel of my eyes - was now nothing more than a bloody nuisance that hindered running and made climbing an impossibility. The high-heeled shoes I had discarded in a flowerpot might have been the height of elegance, but would have spelled frostbite and death compared to the protection of woollen socks and stout hiking boots.

Even the party itself was a travesty. Hardly anyone had acknowledged the black drapes - the tribute to my dead fiancé - but instead had pestered me with questions and comments about how dreadful the experience must have been for me, poor thing, hardly out of finishing school, surely there must be another handsome man to support her, poor thing, such a brave young lady, there, there, oh, have another glass, there's a place for you in our house if you ever want it, poor thing...

Poor thing. The epithet had rung in my ears until I was almost screaming. Even the well-meaning sentiments of my old friends had become a curse.

And, right there, I had made my decision. My mind strayed to the collection of medals in my bedroom drawer - the awards for record-breaking physical and mental achievement at Gordonstoun. While still only a teenager, I had ventured into and emerged safely from the heart of Cambodia. I had survived a fortnight alone in the Himalayas while my fiancé and everyone else aboard the plane had perished.

I was not a poor thing, nor ever would be.

The anger was still bubbling in my veins when I returned to the manor and politely but firmly told my guests to leave. My eye had fallen on a National Geographic magazine on the coffee table, exactly as it had done when I was sixteen years old, and I had felt my first genuine smile since returning.

Archaeology had always been a hobby of mine, but with my urgent desire to escape the trappings of aristocracy, it soon became my overriding passion. There weren't many days when I couldn't be

found in the British Library, or at my computer - losing myself in the depths of history and legend. Soon, I was attending archaeological seminars chaired by famous names every other month. Despite my father's disapproval, I took my family credit card and organised trips to Cairo, Shetland and the Congo in search of ancient sites. Those trips awakened my knowledge in a way that mere library books could not, and it wasn't long before *I* was one of the famous names at seminars, and publishing papers of my own.

However, the anger within me had not gone away. Every time I stepped up to the podium, or submitted my latest ground-breaking thesis, my mind would turn back to the abandoned sites I had visited, or the hardships I had endured in the wilderness. Lecture halls and conference centres became as suffocating as the tombs I excavated, but with none of the latter's excitement. Only when I was alone again - walking out into the fresh air, or facing danger and death with only my wits to protect me - did my anger metamorphose from discomfort to exhilaration.

Even when my father finally disowned me for 'bringing the family name into disrepute', I had treated the event as fresh fuel for my internal fire. My adventures became more demanding, as I demanded even more from myself. My emotional restraint had proved exceedingly useful in armouring me against the shadier aspects of treasure-hunting - the black-marketeers and thieves, the hired guns and the gangsters eager for the taste of glory and gold. The euphoria of the chase had become the engine that would propel me through the worst of dangers - always allowing me to emerge triumphant with the prize.

Only as the years passed did I come to understand the dark price of my emotional arrangement - the hunger that could never be fulfilled. No quest was too deadly, no artefact too difficult to obtain, until the day I confronted my own death.

I had hoped my time in the desert and subsequent reclusive lifestyle might have cured my addiction. It had been the sole thing keeping me sane in the time since my escape from Seth.

I looked up, and Werner visibly shrank from my gaze.

Evidently I was wrong.

"Enough talk. Why did you *really* ask me here?"

The pride that had sustained him thus far seemed to deflate, leaving him more wizened and vulnerable than ever. When he finally spoke, it was the voice of a defeated man. "To help me, Lara. I need you to get something for me."

"Go on."

"I'm tracking five Obscura Paintings for a client called Eckhardt... But he's a psychopath!"

Obscura Paintings? Clients? They had nothing to do with me, or us. It took all my willpower to stay in my chair, my mask firmly in place. "Why should I care?"

"Because I'm being stalked!" He rose from his chair in a fit of agitation, gesturing out of the window as a flash of lightning threw his shadow into bold relief. "People are dying out there!"

"You've dealt with worse. Handle it, Werner!" I nearly spat the words, rising to my feet. The way he cowered from me stoked my irritation even further, flushing my cheeks. He had never acted this way before.

"Lara... Please!" He pleaded, and pressed a square of card into my hand. "Look, go and see this woman, Carvier. She can help."

"What? Not doing your own research these days?"

"Lara, please don't think badly of me. I've been under too much strain recently and you're the only one who can help. If you would only--"

"Only *what*, old man?" I snarled. Despite my self-control there was heat in my veins, the rage that I wanted him to see. "I won't be used by anyone, least of all you. You should know that by now."

"Lara, *please*, you've got help me! For pity's sake--"

"I'm going," I had had enough. Disappointment overlaid my vision. I had come here expecting to find my old colleague hale and bombastic, not this snivelling creature begging me for favours. As he made to grab my wrist I turned on him, forcing him back into his chair, not caring that he cringed from my temper. "Egypt, Werner! You walked away and left me! There was no pity then!"

"Get *out*!" His voice rose, shocking me like a piston to the gut. I barely felt the gun jab into my stomach when head-splitting pain

crashed into my skull, knocking me cold.

*

It might have been the stillness that woke me.

I flexed my limbs, wondering how I had come to lie in such an awkward position. On the floor. In the dark. The noise of the storm rumbled overhead. A sickly, metallic stench was drilling into my brain like an alarm bell.

The reek of fresh blood.

Lots of it.

In a daze I staggered to my knees, pushing myself upright as the room and my head swung with conflicting shadows. It took a moment for the confusion to abate - phantom images coming and going with memories. Memories of what? A struggle? Had I fought someone? There were muzzy echoes in my eardrums, the sound of a gun shot, really close. I thought I remembered a scream. Had that been me, an intruder?

Or Werner...

I saw him, and immediately felt the ground rush back up as I fell by his side. I was shaking my head in furious denial, not sure if I was still dreaming.

He lay on his side, curled up like a child asleep on the Persian rug - a rug that was slowly turning oily black in the streetlamp's flickering light. Gently, I lifted him to my lap, turning his face towards mine.

All I cradled was an empty shell.

I was too shocked to weep, or to scream, or do anything other than take in the horrific death in my arms. Werner's eyes, no longer hidden behind glasses, were stretched wide in terror, mouth gaping. The crisp grey cotton of his shirt was unmarked, pristine, right down to where the cavity of his stomach drew the eye like some sickening magnet. There the blood pooled, drenching the floor, soaking his trousers and probably even now dripping through some unfortunate's ceiling. Something, or *someone*, had reached in and scooped out his organs with the ease of cupping a handful of water from a bucket. Silvery light twinkled across his body, until I realised that actual *silver* was splashed like droplets of mercury over his gaping wounds.

My heart thumped with extra insistence as I sat there, rocking him while my head grew clearer. It was then I saw the markings daubed above my head, up the walls, across the fireplace and paintings; there were symbols and arcane images, drawn in the only substance available in that quantity. None of them were recognisable, but at that point I was beyond caring about what they were saying.

That was my *friend's* blood on the wall.

Something new sloshed inside me, all but replacing my revulsion. Desire surged through my mind as I slowly rose to my feet, not taking my eyes from Werner's remains.

Desire for *revenge*.

My hands came up without my volition, smeared with hot gore. I suddenly longed to find whoever did this, and close those same hands around their throat, to squeeze the life from them just as Werner's life had been.

The feeling was so overwhelming it took me a few seconds to realise there were sirens approaching.

My mind was made up in a split second. I could not afford to waste one breath in a police cell awaiting questioning. Automatically, I strapped on the backpack, assessing my situation. The window beckoned, but as I moved towards it flashing police lights warned me back.

It was as though I had suddenly developed a split personality. Part of me forced my body through the door, down the corridor and stairs, barging through the emergency exit and down the nearest alleyway. The other observed with cold dispassion - noting every detail that might be needed later. I knew this side of me intimately, but never so keenly had I felt it take hold as it did now - like a dagger being whetted in my mind.

When I swerved back onto the street and saw the police van careen to a halt not fifty yards away, all I felt was contempt. *No one* was about to stop me hunting Werner's killer. I sneered, taking off in the opposite direction, shouldering my way through a service door.

Over the pelting rain, I heard another sound, rapidly gaining on me. Police dogs, Rottweilers by the size. *And me without anything to throw at them.* My feet pounded up the nearest stairs.

The building I'd entered was obviously derelict. The doors off the landing were all boarded up, offering no escape. I let my legs decide where to take me, but the dogs were eating up the distance between us. I cursed the entire Paris constabulary for breeding such efficient animals, and then cursed some more when I suddenly came up short against a window. There was no time to stand my ground, *especially* when I had to fling up my hands to save my face from being chewed off by a dog sailing through the air.

I felt its weight crash into me, all hot slobber and teeth, and heard the remains of the window splintering as I was forced backwards. In a fight between me and gravity, gravity won. There was only a bin to break my fall, and the pain made spots dance before my eyes as I rolled to the ground, dripping and heaving with my ribs on fire.

The dogs were barking overhead. Wincing, I climbed to my feet, wondering briefly why my balance seemed off, and then I saw. My poor, devoted backpack dangled from a Rottweiler's jaws; he was shaking it mockingly at me, like a prize kill.

Well, it certainly would be once the police got their hands on it. There was nothing I could do but run.

Chapter 2

I don't know how many alleys, apartments and industrial rooftops I negotiated in the dark and pouring rain. They all passed in a blur.

My only real compass was the noise of sirens; I retreated from wherever they grew louder. I only stopped running when the adrenaline wore off, and my body began cashing its oxygen debt. How I had allowed myself to get out of my usual shape - even considering my daily exercises - was inexcusable. My calves and sides were a tangle of lactic burns.

I realised I had stopped, and was leaning against a rooftop shed while tattered crows sulked on some telegraph cables. My nose and eyes were streaming, and I was as soaked as though I had gone swimming in Lake Windermere with all my clothes on. I dug my hands into my jacket pockets, finding a half-eaten chocolate bar purchased at the train station and a soggy scrap of white. I wolfed down the bar (hey, I needed the sugar), and scrutinised the address on the card Werner had given me.

Margot Carvier. Werner had said to go and see her. Would she help me now? It didn't take a genius to see I was a mess. At least the rain had washed the blood from my hands. Turning up on her doorstep in the middle of the night, drenched and fresh from the scene of a murder, would probably not endear me to her trust. But what other choice did I have?

Sighing, I scanned the buildings around me. I was somewhere in the industrial quarter, far from the snapshot romantic image of Paris.

However, Mlle Carvier's apartment wasn't about to come to me, so resolutely I set off again. It wasn't as though I could get any wetter.

No sooner had I stepped onto the nearest fire escape than the roar of a helicopter's engines appeared out of nowhere. I glanced up, and was instantly blinded by the searchlight sweeping the rooftops.

"Police! Ne bougez pas!"

Shit. The helicopter's loudspeaker was garbled by the rain, but the commanding tone was unmistakable. A siren wailed - only a few buildings away from my position.

Instantly, my instincts took over. I relaxed my grip, and slid down the four storeys' worth of slick, rain-soaked ladder in the time it took to count to six.

Two years ago, I would have managed such a stunt with ease, and probably pulled off a handstand at the bottom for good measure. But a lot had changed in that time; I wasn't the gung-ho crusader trying for Superwoman-of-the-Year anymore. Apart from some meditative maintenance work, I hadn't really pushed my body for a long time. A decent shock of adrenaline, however, will often achieve (at a pinch) the same results as months of hard training - if only for a short time.

As I fell from the rooftop, a 'short time' lasted just long enough.

"Ummph!" I stumbled, regaining my balance just as the searchlight zeroed in on my position. A cold wind from the down-draft blew a tornado of leaves and scraps of litter around my legs. Cursing, I realised I'd dropped into a courtyard ringed by houses and spiked iron railings too tall to vault over. There was no way out. The nearest block of flats had a boarded-up quality to them, but squatters had levered one of the doors off its hinges - presumably for easy access in an emergency.

Well, if this circumstance didn't qualify, nothing would.

Throwing the helicopter a defiant snarl, I ran at the door and managed to shoulder-barge it three-quarters open. My damp shoes squeaked on the tiled lobby floor as I felt around in the semi-darkness, and almost bumped into an old wardrobe partially blocking the stairwell. It took some manoeuvring, but I clambered past and pounded up the stairs. There was an old-fashioned cage lift, but with no power in the building it was as useless to me as a bunch of daisies.

While the helicopter was radioing in for ground support to occupy the building, I might be able to use the roof for another exit - assuming I could stay out of sight.

Then I found out why this apartment block had been boarded up.

One minute I was jogging along - the next, I was hanging onto the shreds of fraying sixties-style carpet as the stairs beneath me creaked and collapsed. Dust clouds burned my throat as I coughed and spluttered. The whole building seemed, for one heart-stopping instant, to be on the verge of crashing down around my ears.

Somehow, I had enough strength to haul myself over the lip of the hole, and realised with ironic satisfaction that the debris had knocked the wardrobe over. The battered old thing was pinned under piles of shattered bricks, joists and crumbling mortar - perfectly blocking the door. I could hear dogs barking on the other side, and rapid orders being yelled in French. One voice was demanding a ram to break down the door, while another was suggesting they try to find out who owned the building.

I didn't stay to find out.

The apartment block was almost totally dark, except for a few places where boards were missing from the higher-storey windows. Thunder rumbled and rain poured through the damaged structure in torrents slippery enough to make me lose my footing.

There were plenty of boarded-up doorways, but I kept moving until I ran out of stairs to climb. I could hear a steady *thud-thud!* from below; the gendarmes had brought their toys, at last. The sound mirrored the thumping beneath my ribcage as I squinted through the murk and found the door to the concierge's room. Damp and age had done most of the work for me, but it seemed to take forever to prise away the planks covering the door. Sweat stung my eyes, and I left the bottom two planks in place as a *crash* from the lobby suggested that my friends had broken through. Fortunately, the door wasn't locked, and yielded to a few stout kicks just as shouting echoed up the stairwell.

"Halt, police! Rendez vous!"

Hurriedly, I closed the door behind me and scanned the room; the shapes of ancient machinery lurked in the darkness like dinosaur

bones. The only light came from a ventilation grating, accompanied by a blast of freezing rain - but it was enough for me to recognise and stumble over to the fire escape. A rusty length of chain held it fast, and my heart did a double-somersault as the sound of the police drew noisier. But the former concierge of the building had been a considerate soul, and thoughtfully left a lump hammer in a corner by the machinery. Two desperate whacks, and the chain snapped in two.

Unfortunately, the sound attracted even more frantic shouts. I could hear the pounding of many heavily-booted feet approaching at frightening speed, even as I burst through the exit and back into the teeth of the Paris thunderstorm.

A flash of lightning struck the building next to mine, raising every hair on my body. But over the storm's violence, I could hear the determined rumble of the police helicopter circling nearby. Damn, that was some gutsy flying, I thought, and suddenly realised the truth; *the police weren't chasing me because I was just a random, running woman - they were chasing me because they thought I was the Monstrum.*

As if responding to my thoughts, the helicopter's searchlight snapped around and tracked across the roof. My shadow stretched and wove across the tar paper as I ran to the edge, desperately seeking a way down; and then I froze, caught in a full eclipse of the beam. For a terrifying moment, I saw the pilot and co-pilot looking directly at me through the rain-lashed windshield.

If that didn't give them a good photo fit, nothing would.

And that's when I also saw the opposite building, and the drainpipe within easy reach.

Well, I say 'easy'...

You can do it, girl! I gritted my teeth, squinted against the pouring rain, and took a running leap into the abyss.

The helicopter roared as the pilot throttled up in an attempt to relocate me with the searchlight. I heard it sail overhead, missing where I hung by the skin of my cuticles by a hair's breadth. Then the cast iron drainpipe groaned in protest, and began leaning dangerously away from the wall. Rivets and fastenings sprang loose, one after the other, as I scrambled to slide down as fast as possible. I

wasn't fast enough. Brick dust and rainwater filled my mouth as I let out a scream, "Oh, shi-!"

I landed on something vaguely soft, and everything went black.

It was the smells that kept me from blacking out, I think. As I lay there in the dark, getting my breath back and immediately regretting it, I realised I'd fallen into an open dumpster bin parked beside the building. The jolt of my landing had knocked the lid closed, hiding me from view.

For a few minutes that seemed to take forever, I waited - not stirring a muscle. At any moment, I expected to hear the tramping of feet and for the lid to fly off as armed police surrounded me on all sides. At one point, a horde of heavy footsteps and angry yelling passed the bin. I recognised the voice of the gendarme who had led the assault on the apartment building, and who sounded like he was getting ready to serve his men their own par-boiled testicles for losing me so easily. The footsteps and bickering gradually faded into the distance, but I stayed where I was - hardly able to believe how narrow my escape had been.

Easy, girl. Rest a minute.

But I couldn't rest. After taking a quick peek to make sure I was alone, I rolled the lid back all the way so I could climb out. The breath I had been so carefully holding came out in a rush as I hugged the shadows - suddenly grateful for the rain that helped to wash the garbage-stink from my clothes.

If I was going to talk to Carvier, I'd best do it before she saw a news broadcast. With my luck, my picture would probably be all over the papers by the morning edition. Folding up my collar, and tucking my hands into my pockets, I set off - trying to ignore the nagging doubts that were starting to whisper their way into my mind.

Werner's final words - and the unsettling blank where my memory should have been - bothered me most of all. It was like trying to walk through a door that had been bricked up, or cheat Winston at cards. None of my attempts to reconstruct the events after I had lost my temper made the slightest difference, and a new fear began to surface.

What if I had killed him? I could still feel the place where a gun had

been pushed into my stomach. My eardrums were also aching - exactly as they had when I had first fired a gun at close range without wearing defenders. My sabbatical from target practise had obviously been long enough for my ears to adjust to a less punishing schedule.

I shivered. There was no way I could have simply killed him in cold blood... Was there?

I'd been prepared to shoot him while in Egypt, even before he'd opened himself to Seth. Had I been angry enough to do it now? The thought made me feel slightly queasy, because the simple answer was yes.

Ah, but it wasn't a gunshot that killed him was it? A voice in my head insinuated. It showed me the image of Werner's body. Even if I had been furious enough to shoot him, I would never – *could* never – have done that to him.

My subconscious and I don't always agree.

It took a moment to notice I was stroking the slight bulge of fabric above my breastbone. Salieah's gift of the Tuareg Cross had helped reassure my nerves several times in the last few months, especially when nightmares kept me awake.

I certainly felt in need of it now.

Chapter 3

Mademoiselle Carvier's apartment turned out to be in an even smarter neighbourhood than Von Croy's. I glanced at my watch. It was well after ten pm. I hoped I wouldn't be dragging her out of bed; my story and attire were hardly diplomatic enough for an afternoon tea at Wimbledon.

Much to my relief it only took a moment for her to answer her intercom. Her French was utterly impeccable, and reminded me of one of my old schoolmistresses.

"Who is it?"

"Mademoiselle Carvier... It's Lara Croft. I need your help."

Concise and precise, that's me.

I had a sense of déjà vu. The door lock clicking, the sodden footprints I left on the carpeted stairs. As I waited by Carvier's front door, I had to fight the urge to look behind me, to make sure a killer wasn't going to slip by without me noticing.

Had that happened for Werner?

There was a rattle and click, and a slice of face with haunted eyes peered through the crack in the door.

"Ah, Miss Croft. I recognise you from photos and Werner's description." Her voice wavered.

Feeling naked in the corridor, I coughed.

"Mademoiselle Carvier? I *really* have to talk to you. It's important."

The door opened a fraction more. Ye gods, she really was my old schoolteacher, right down to the half-moon spectacles she now

peered over, looking me up and down with faint disapproval. Her stout features could have been chipped from slate. "You may come in."

"*Merci*," I shut the door behind me, grateful for the warmth of the fire crackling in her living room's grate. She didn't bustle as I had expected, but moved with a cool grace that was almost predatory. Obviously not a woman to fool, or suffer them.

There was a radio on in the corner. I caught the words '*Monstrum*' and '*cherchant*' before she turned it off and fixed me with a frosty stare. My apprehension climbed a few more notches. Perhaps it was the way she wore her hair in a bun, or the tweed jacket and a blue turtleneck, over which she now crossed her arms - something about her touched me unexpectedly.

She was the first living soul I had spoken to since Werner's death.

"An evil night to be out alone, Miss Croft, our streets are not safe anymore," she remarked, testing me. Perhaps my current reputation as a recluse had travelled as far as her department. I got right to the point.

"Mademoiselle Carvier, I have just come from Werner's apartment--"

"And how is Werner?"

There was nothing for it. "I'm afraid Werner... is dead."

Her eyes went wide, and for a moment I thought she might collapse. "Dead?!"

"Yes, and I don't have time to waste. I'm being chased all over Paris!"

I bit my tongue. I really ought to have left that unmentioned. It was amazing how quickly her eyes went from shocked to accusing.

"Chased? I think you owe me an explanation, Miss Croft! I'm waiting!"

I tried to keep my voice level so she wouldn't jump to the window and scream for the police. "It's... It's all a bit vague. I arrived at his apartment today from London. He was babbling with fear--"

"He said he tried to contact you!"

"He did," I replied, shaking my head. "I never expected that. Not after... Egypt."

She took a deep breath, obviously floundering in unexpected

waters. The sight stirred me with unexpected compassion as she spoke. "Werner has been fearful for his life! He accepted a commission five weeks ago. Since then he's... been acting strangely, jumping at shadows. Do you know why?"

I tactfully ignored the question. "Who was the commission from?"

"The client's name... now, what was it... Eckhardt. He wanted Werner to research something called the Obscura Paintings. I happen to be an expert on medieval histories, so Werner approached me at my department at the Louvre."

Well, at least part of Werner's story was corroborated. "Were you able to help him?"

"A little, I think. Poor Werner was clearly terrified!" She shook her head sadly, a note of fondness creeping into her voice.

I ventured, "Werner didn't scare easily."

"That's true," she conceded. "But he felt he was being stalked. With Paris as it is, the strain was getting to him. He even left a package with me for safekeeping in case... anything happened to him."

Confusion struck me. It couldn't be my backpack, and he hadn't mentioned anything else. "Do you know what it is?"

She sniffed and turned back to face me, her eyes suspiciously wet. "His field notebook, addressed to you."

"If he left his notebook, he really was spooked." No archaeologist worth his research grant would ever leave his notes behind. Not ever. But then came the question I'd been dreading.

"You still haven't explained what happened...?"

It was hard not to meet Carvier's eye as impatience and guilt writhed like two serpents inside me. "There... There was gunfire. That's all I can recall."

"Gunfire?!" She exclaimed. "Werner was *shot*? Did you kill him?"

The way she just out and *asked* me threw me off guard. "I can't remember! It's... It's all a blur!"

"Miss Croft, I strongly suggest you talk to the police," she scolded, her manner grown suddenly wintry. Clearly she shared my old teacher's belief in a stiff upper lip.

"Mademoiselle, I was a good friend of Werner's. I didn't kill him, I didn't!"

"If you say so," she replied sullenly. I was struck suddenly by how long we had been talking, and how urgent was my need to leave.

"Do you have the notebook?"

"I do. It's safe for the moment."

My patience all but gave out there and then, but somehow I managed to silently count to ten without forfeiting my mask of tranquil resolve. In my best possible actress' voice I said, "I really, *really* am going to need Werner's notebook, Mademoiselle."

"Somebody killed Werner!" She snapped tartly, true anger – or her fear – showing itself for the first time. "You say you don't remember clearly what happened. Perhaps the police *are* right in suspecting you!"

"I didn't kill Werner!" I protested, but she was already marching into her kitchen.

"I think you'd better leave, Miss Croft!"

I wasn't leaving until I had what I needed. "The notebook?"

She stiffened. For a moment I thought she might grab a kitchen knife and commence some childish attempt to force me from her home. But then to my relief she shook her head and went to a drawer. "Fine. I'm not sure this is the right thing but... I must respect what Werner wanted."

She returned and thrust a tatty leather-bound volume into my hands. I barely had time to pocket it when she was off into another room. "And now you'd better go. The police will be here any minute."

"What... police?"

"I called them when you turned up on my doorstep. How could I be sure you were a friend? It was for insurance!" And she disappeared, slamming the door behind her.

"You're all heart," I muttered, scanning the room. Even as I did so the tell-tale flashing blue and red lights came dancing through the window. For a moment my subconscious tempted me to put my feet up on the couch, stretch out by the fire and wait for the police to come. Mlle Carvier kept a tidy home, with enough comfort to make my weary body long for a break.

But rest was not an option. Safety, shelter and secrecy were now my priorities if I wanted to track Werner's killer. I would not find any of

them here.

Regretfully, I tore myself away from the light and cosiness, and found a window in the hall I could easily vault from. The cold hit me afresh as I splashed into a puddle. There was a police car nearby, but there was nobody in it. Evidently the officers had gone upstairs to question Carvier.

I ghosted away, not really caring where I spent the night as long as I could be undisturbed. I wandered without much thought, keeping to those streets where the lighting was poor and the buildings unoccupied. Werner's notebook was a weight in my pocket, heavy with the hope it would hold some answers.

It must have been hours later that I stumbled, exhausted, onto a disused tram deep in a boarded-up subway section. After making sure I was alone, I struggled to get comfortable on the cheap plastic seating, eventually settling for the floor instead.

I might have wept, but there was no one around who could prove it.

Chapter4

It feels different when you wake up as a fugitive.

The sleep I had craved slipped from me too quickly for me to enjoy any refreshment. I woke fully, stumbling to my feet before I'd even registered the daylight, expecting to see gendarmes with their faces pressed against the windows. My body had not released its tension all night. I felt coiled like a spring, ready to run, ready to fight.

But I was alone. No faces, no gendarmes, no dogs. Only birdsong and the ever-present background hush of the city entered my impromptu hiding place. I curled my lip at the stench I'd been too tired to notice last night. The tram was littered with garbage and signs of rats. I couldn't help a shudder. Give me animated, rotting corpses any day. Rats are just *creepy*.

There were at least a dozen things I would rather have done. Brush my teeth, a hot shower, breakfast and hire an exterminator were just a few. But instead I pulled the notebook from my pocket and perched on the cleanest seat as I leafed through it, hunting for clues to my next move.

Page after page made me shake my head. Werner had been meticulous, I'd give him that. Eckhardt's commission had involved histories even *I* had never heard of.

"The Obscura Paintings," I mumbled, tracing through his immaculate handwriting. *Five fifteenth century works of black alchemic magic. All lost, hidden by the Lux Veritatis.*

Another page showed an arrow-like symbol, almost a brand. *Lux*

Veritatis – Light of Truth. A secret twelfth century Order of warrior monks who hid the Obscura Paintings in the fourteen-hundreds. Said to possess the three Periapt Shards, artefacts of power... Crystalline shards shaped like spearheads, weapons of light!!?? They were looted from underground cities in ancient Turkey.

Perhaps Werner began his search with this group, I mused. It certainly seemed a logical place to start. I felt my palms itch at the mention of an archaeological site I hadn't yet explored.

There was more, lots more. Intricate sketches and doodles plastered whole pages with Da Vincian elegance, though there was nothing elegant about some of the subject matter. Most appeared to cover Biblical references to 'Nephilim' (a name that seemed dimly familiar), and an entity known as the 'Black Alchemist'. The melodrama made me roll my eyes.

The sun was rising rapidly, although my hideaway remained deep in shadow. I was getting frustrated, but then the most recent entries caught my eye.

Terrified to go out... Monstrum terrorising the streets... Carvier says she has a security pass for the digs in her office... Louis Bouchard, useful contact. Purchased handgun. Discretion assured... Tried contacting Lara again in London, no response. Still not forgiven me for Egypt... (My heart clenched a little) Deciphered the encrypted map in Vasiley's Engravings. One of the Paintings is beneath the Louvre where the latest archaeological digs are...

I flicked back a page, intrigued.

Five Obscura Engravings – drawn copies of the Paintings. Contain encoded maps of each Painting's location...? A metallic symbol is hidden beneath surface of each Painting. Check with Carvier about X-ray facilities in Louvre...?

"Only after Carvier for her X-rays, Werner? You old romantic," I smiled, remembering fonder times as I came to the end of the book. "You were on to something though, weren't you?"

I scrutinised the entries again, nagged by the lure of a mystery. His handwriting had grown steadily worse - the newest entries penned in little more than a scrawl. But one item in all his notations stood out.

Louis Bouchard, useful contact. Purchased handgun. Discretion

assured.

If Werner could find him and get assistance in his work, why shouldn't I?

I made up my mind. If I was going to find this murderer, retracing Werner's last steps would be my first task. If I had to go after the Paintings myself to do it, then I would. Perhaps this Bouchard, whoever he was, would be a good place to begin.

My stomach growled, making me frown. I had a card, but what good would that do if the police had made me their number one suspect? One transaction and Interpol would descend on my head faster than Pierre DuPont milking an opportunity for sarcasm. There were a few Euros in my pocket - enough for a coffee, preferably somewhere discreet.

It took me less than five minutes to climb my way out of the hole where I'd spent the night. The chain link fencing was rusty, and I was thankful to be wearing denim. A lighting factory, its windows broken and brickwork graffitied rose above a skyline that had seen better days. The air was crisp after the night's rain. I skirted puddles and listened to the gutters dripping, keeping a watchful eye out as I moved onto the streets, not wanting to be surprised by anyone. But no one seemed to be out this early. I could hear the Seine lapping against the wharf as I paused beside a boarded-up club. The snarling dragon emblazoned above the doors would probably have looked more impressive at night, lit by garish red neon. But at this hour it felt more like a guard dog staring balefully from behind a gate, prepared to bite if I strayed too close.

I almost jumped.

A woman had tottered from a nearby doorway without noticing me. As I watched, she fumbled for a lighter in her little black handbag and, once found, took a deep pull of a cigarette, breathing out a plume of smoke with apparent relish. Her two-inch high heels, scarlet PVC jacket and obscenely low cleavage all conspired to make my eyebrow rise.

Oh well, nothing for it.

"Not a lot of passing trade at this hour?" I inquired meaningfully. Not one hair on her blond head moved out of place as she whipped

round. Maybe the sight of a lady and not a hulking drunk reassured her, or perhaps it was just my couth and charm that morning. She visibly relaxed.

"It's early yet. Move along, Ma Chere, you make the place look crowded."

I shared her smirk more willingly than I would have shared her cigarette. "Have you worked in this neighbourhood for long?"

"What can I do for you, Cherie?" she sounded like I felt, albeit with a more natural accent than the one I was taught at school.

"I'm looking for someone you might know. Name of Bouchard?"

Her hand tapped, flicking ash across the pavement. "You won't find him here, Ma Chere. He did run the club," she jerked her head disdainfully, "*Le Serpent Rouge*, but had to move premises. There was a lot of trouble, I heard. Staff problems. Things needed to lie quiet for a while."

"What sort of trouble?"

She regarded me carefully. "You're not from around here huh, Ma Chere? His staff has been dying on the job. No one knows why, or how. I did hear someone say it was the Monstrum, but who knows for sure. Bouchard's people... Very messy business."

I didn't miss the way she shuddered. It was small, and she tried to hide it, but it was there.

"And you've no idea where Bouchard is?"

Her eyes, overdone with too much eyeshadow, narrowed as she took me in, perhaps for the first time. "What do you want with a... dangerous individual like Bouchard?"

"I'm trying to track down a friend's movements."

"Lost is he?"

I winced inwardly. "Dead. But he made contact with Bouchard before he... checked out."

She sighed, and finished her smoke, crushing the butt beneath her foot. "Tell you what, I know a guy who used to work at *Le Serpent Rouge*, before all this business closed the place down. Name's Pierre. He was a barman, now owns the café in Place d'Arcade, Café Metro. It's just round the corner," she shook her head, but was smiling, "He's a total loser, but you never know, might be worth a shot."

“Better than anything I’ve had so far,” I muttered, noting down ‘total loser’ for a later time. “I didn’t catch your name?”

“Janice,” she replied, already rummaging in her bag. “Everyone knows me around here. But you watch out, Cherie. Bouchard’s a mean operator, and these latest attacks have targeted him hard.”

“Does anyone know who’s causing Bouchard all this grief, or why?” I pressed, wrinkling my nose as she lit another cigarette.

“No, or they’re not saying. The Monstrum has got everyone too scared to talk.” She must have noticed my scepticism showing through, because her smile gained a Cheshire cat’s smugness. “Oh, Bouchard can handle it alright. No one better. But the way his people have been dying... Ugh, so ugly. And that poor woman...”

“What woman?” The words skipped out automatically, but premonition had already done its grisly work.

“Some woman called Carvier. She worked at the Louvre, it said on the radio. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Carvier!” I cursed, giving myself a mental kicking. I should have been more alert, even given her warning that Werner’s killer might have been following me. But why had he, or she, killed Carvier and not me? Why was I still alive? Were they shadowing me now, determined to kill everyone I spoke to?

I didn’t realise I’d spoken aloud until Janice shook her head in sympathy. “No, you be careful, Ma Chere. There are a lot of sickoes loose on the streets!”

I looked at her, noting all the details of her person, and concern gripped me. Was I putting her in danger just by talking to her?

“Yeah,” I replied vaguely, already turning and walking away, my head full.

“That’s okay,” I heard her call to my retreating back, “Some of us like it that way!”

Whatever raids your tomb, I shot back mentally, but my heart wasn’t really in it. I pulled my jacket a little closer as I followed the peeling road signs to Place d’Arcade, past shuttered windows and store fronts. Not for the first time I wished I had eyes in the back of my head. The streets were deserted but didn’t feel empty - possessed by the same thing I had seen haunting Janice’s eyes. Fear, suspicion,

rumour and intrigue (the most cunning Horseman of the serial killer) polluted the buildings. Wherever I looked, I saw signs of neglect and discontent - from the boarded-up shops and old blood splattered in the gutter, to slogans scrawled across crumbling brickwork. A chill wind shook new growth on the park trees as I walked past, smelling of spring and optimism, but the contrast with Paris' human population could not have been starker.

★

Café Metro was not hard to find, and even harder to miss once found. A twee striped awning kept the frontage in shadow; one look confirmed the metalwork had rusted solid. My stomach rumbled at the sight of a menu propped up outside, but a closer inspection revealed it to have faded beyond recognition. Net curtains hid a gloomy interior, but at least one customer seemed to have found it to their liking.

An honest-to-god chopper was propped on its stand by the door, shouldering a travelling rug and panniers with the kind of nonchalance normally associated with Western gun slingers relaxing at a bar. I couldn't see a model name, but I would have staked my life it was over a thousand ccs. *Sweet little machine*, I thought, pushing open the door.

A radio was warbling as I entered, and a quick scan revealed I was the only customer. If you have ever been to a Parisian café you probably need no description, for this was as uniformly French as anything calling itself Café Metro could possibly be, except for the smell. There was an excess of tobacco, unwashed bodies, burnt coffee and recycled lager that all the delicate floral air fresheners in the world could not have disguised.

Lovely.

"Are you Pierre?" I asked, as a man appeared from a backroom, backside first, carrying cardboard boxes and swearing. He started, almost dropping the boxes, and gave me a furtive once over. Sweat stained the armpits and front of his too-large football shirt, and old gravy marks infested his apron. His face was that of a weasel - pinched, suspicious and weak-chinned.

"Possibly. What can I get you?"

"Information." I stated, watching him ease down the load and mop his brow.

"Really?" he drawled. His eyes hovered for a moment several inches below my eye level, but I was too used to that reaction from men (and quite a few women) to give a damn about it. "Well, everyone wants something for nothing!"

"It needn't be for nothing, we could trade." I replied patiently.

His muddy little eyes went blank. "Trade?"

"You used to work at *Le Serpent Rouge*. I need to find your ex-boss, Bouchard."

"Hmm. You don't look like police." He started sliding boxes under the counter, but I caught the added note of apprehension in his movements and the way he watched me. Definitely a weasel, I thought.

"No... But I do deal with problems. Sort them out--"

"And run errands no doubt?" He chuckled.

"If need be. And they pay well enough." I added laconically.

"Hmm... what sort of problems?"

"What sort of problems do you have?" I broached, emphasising the *you*, wondering if he would ever catch on. "Any situations need clearing up? Difficulties removed?"

"In exchange for information on Louis Bouchard," he mused, shoving the last box out of sight and leaning thoughtfully on the bar.

"Hmm... That's dangerous information--"

"I'm a dangerous girl, and right now I'm losing patience!" I snapped, not bothering to hide my irritation. He scratched his unshaven cheek, not meeting my eye. I suddenly got the impression he had lost a lot of weight in a very short space of time; there was a sickly look to him that had nothing to do with following a healthy diet and getting plenty of exercise.

"Well... I do have a situation that needs tidying up," he hazarded. "A retrieval job. Something I ah, *forgot* to pick up from *Le Serpent Rouge* when I left in a hurry. It's mine, and I want it back."

"Why don't you just pick it up yourself?"

A smirk. "Two guesses."

“Bouchard? The Monstrum?”

“Don’t joke about the Monstrum!” He said, surprising me with his vehemence. “Bouchard ran a lot of operations there. The place will be staked out-“

“Just tell me where the item is at the club,” I interrupted. My stomach had given another twinge.

He glanced about, and beckoned me to come closer. Well done, Mr Grand Conspirator, for realising the obvious. “It’s small,” he whispered, “Small enough to fit inside one of the stage lights. The one that doesn’t work.”

“That’s *it*?” I exclaimed, disbelieving. I quickly forced myself to take a deep breath. “Okay, I can work with that... How do I get into the club?”

“With this,” he pulled a key from a chain around his neck, dropping it into my hand. “This’ll get you in behind the stage area at the back. Return what’s mine to me *here*, and I’ll put you in touch with Louis Bouchard.”

“I’m sure he’ll be glad to hear from you again,” I said, pocketing the key.

He grimaced, turning slightly green. “He isn’t going to. I’ll just tell you where to find him. Then it’s up to you.”

“Okay,” I met his eye, smiling sweetly. “And if this doesn’t work out, I know where to find you. Don’t I, Pierre?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed, and he might have tried a witty comeback had the phone not started ringing. He shot me a desperate look and turned away, intent on his call.

Huh. Weasels.

I took a quick visit to the ladies (much against my better judgement), and was just about to leave when my heart lurched to a halt. Over in the corner sat a man - a man who must have been sitting there the whole time. He wasn’t actually hidden, just... unassuming. I feigned checking my pockets as I noted details from the corner of my eye; dusty old fatigues, navy and white shirt covering a modest build. His dark hair fell unconcerned across his eyes, and two days’ worth of stubble fuzzed the edges of his goatee. His unsmiling gaze was absorbed on the paper spread in front of him.

A shoulder rig for a small side-arm hung at his side, glaringly empty. He was maybe in his late twenties - early thirties tops.

I caught a tapping sound from behind me, and spun to see Pierre gesturing to a cup of coffee-to-go steaming on the counter. Still deep in his call, he nonetheless mouthed '*on the house*'.

I picked it up without thinking, and was still preoccupied as I made my way to the door.

And caught the stranger looking at me.

For a moment our eyes locked. I was chilled to the marrow - so violently I felt my heart skip a beat. He *recognised* me. I had no idea who this man was, but he knew me the way a stalker would know its victim or a predator know its prey.

Then just as quickly he sighed, and turned the paper over, sipping his own coffee as though I was no more important than Pierre's phone call.

I left, slamming the door behind me.

Chapter 5

Careful, girl. This is called paranoia.

I kept my head down and eyes alert as I retraced my route back to the club, sidestepping a gaunt shopkeeper sweeping out the doorway of his pawnbrokers. He muttered something obscene, sneering at me, but I ignored him.

My heart was thumping in a way it never had before. The way the stranger had *known* me, and yet feigned disinterest, was frightening. It was like scanning a seemingly empty patch of forest only to realise too late that a tiger was staring back at you, preparing to strike. For a moment, I knew how Pierre must have felt.

Hey, didn't you hear me? I'm trying to keep us alive here!

Sometimes my subconscious really gets on my nerves.

What? You think I'm not being careful? I demanded in my head.

I think we're stressed, and worried, and in danger... and loving every minute of it.

Oh, come on, when did we turn into masochists?

Don't change the subject! We've got to be careful, but at this rate you'll find Werner's murderer only to beg them to kill us. Stop looking for trouble in strange men and focus on the task at hand!

Didn't I pick you up when I found that Dream-god idol in the British Museum? I jabbed.

Silence.

Dammit.

I shook my head, suddenly angry. I was no rabbit, or coward.

Whoever the man was, I was not going to let him or any other imagined enemies intimidate me. I was just jumpy - a perfectly understandable reaction given my circumstances over the last twenty-four hours. Anyone else would have felt the same way.

Breaking into *Le Serpent Rouge* appealed to my sudden need to do something. My head has always felt clearer after strenuous work, and the last thing I wanted was to talk to more absent-minded Parisians.

Or suffer a psychological breakdown.

The stage door was tucked away down an alley. Old posters were seemingly the only thing holding the bricks underneath together. Making sure I was alone (relatively speaking), I slipped in and stood listening for several minutes as my eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness. Not everyone bothers to *listen* properly when they enter somewhere new. It's an acquired skill. I gradually shut out the sound of my breathing and focused on the building talking to me. After Café Metro, I wasn't going to be surprised again.

The corridor, with its peeling paintwork and plasterboard, branched into tiny offices and cubbyholes - perfect places for ambushes. My shoes might have squeaked on the tiled floor, but a layer of grime muffled any tell-tale noise as I crept around the corner.

Little bursts of static made the hairs on my neck stand up.

I spotted the guard through an open doorway, pacing the office as his radio popped and fizzed. He was clad entirely in dark grey; his shirt was emblazoned with the red dragon logo, and the butt of an automatic protruded from an easily-reached holster.

I took no chances. The moment he turned away, I pounced like a tiger taking down a fawn, pressing his carotid artery hard enough for him to pass out in my arms. Even if I had missed hearing his radio, the odour of his cheap cologne would have corroded my sinuses from three rooms away. I shoved his bulk under the desk where it wouldn't be immediately obvious, and snatched his firearm in the process - an M-V9, or some other cheap semi-automatic. Puny compared to my usual tastes, but its weight felt good in my hand.

As an afterthought, I also pocketed a roll of notes from the stash piled on the desk. I was getting hungry (the coffee hadn't lasted long and wanted company), and for some reason the idea of rummaging in

bins once I got back outside just didn't appeal. If Bouchard helped me, I'd be sure to reimburse him in the future.

For the record, it had been a long time since I'd last been to a nightclub. I opened the door slowly as a glacier, scouting for trouble through the widening crack. The main dance hall looked as though Bouchard's relocation was in full swing. Packing cases for heavy-duty sound equipment stood like war memorials across a floor that could have accommodated a hundred sweaty partygoers. Second-hand daylight filtered through frosted windows, casting a chilly blue tint over the room. I sidled across to the bar. Bottles and glasses were stacked in careless piles, some of them victims of a barstool that had been toppled on its side in the haste to grab everything and leave. My shoes crackled on broken glass.

Squinting, I scanned the ceiling for any sign of the light Pierre had said held his treasure, and groaned. There must have been a hundred of them, from tiny strobe LEDs to dangling monsters like mutant flower heads. It would take forever to search them all, unless...

My gaze fell on the stage, and I smiled. Where there're buttons and levers, there's a solution. I mounted the stage (which was hardly worthy of the title), and perused the DJ's work station until I found a likely switch.

I can't help it. I'm a compulsive button-pusher.

Noise assaulted my eardrums, and I vaulted down and away from the speakers as fast as my legs would carry me, hands clamped to my ears. Beams of colour lanced across the floor, swaying like freaky lightsabers in time to the squealing electronic torture I had unleashed. Dear God, why couldn't these people have preferred Deep Purple? I glanced up, and saw with satisfaction that the lighting rigs were now fully operational, making my task of finding the defunct one a whole lot easier.

Well, in theory at least.

My instincts took over, and were the only thing that saved my life. I ducked sideways, behind the cover of a speaker case. Bullets pinged off the floor where I had been standing. The music was so loud I could barely hear the gunshots. But I did see the guards - two of them, hurrying over from a side door, no doubt alerted by my

contribution to Parisian subculture.

I cursed and readied my weapon, hoping I could avoid bloodshed. Persuading Bouchard to help me might be a little trickier if he learnt I had taken down some of his men. I sighted from behind my flimsy shelter, taking aim as I spotted a hunched shape peering around the bar.

Being shot in the foot hurts. The man let out a shriek but I was already rising, my fist swinging round to deck the other guard I had sensed sneaking up beside me as I sprinted to the bar. I tackled the still writhing man and found his glass jaw before he could fumble for his radio. He couldn't have been old enough to vote, let alone be put in charge of a gun. I pocketed the bullets before tossing the gun into the dumbwaiter, well out of his reach.

See? I can be a responsible adult when I want to be.

My composure hadn't altered a fraction. I brushed a stray lock of hair from my face as I looked above me, inspecting the lights. There, high on the highest rig (*well, it had to be didn't it?*), I spotted one that sputtered and sparked while its companions shone in a circle around it.

Fortunately for me, *Le Serpent Rouge* sported several levels, so my Spiderwoman routine could remain safely in the closet. I wondered if it had once been a warehouse, or a factory. There was something too industrial about the architecture for it to have been purpose built. I trod my way to the upper storeys to where the music was merely loud, not ear-splitting. Much to my frustration the stairs to the topmost level were blocked - the pile of immovable cases and sound equipment making me long for lemur chromosomes.

Huh, you never let that stop us before, the voice in my head sulked. Rather than snap a retort, I scouted round until I found a part of the balcony that was broken. It was the work of but a moment's deep breathing and focus to leap across the gap and hitch a ride on the main lighting rig. I clung on as it rode up and down like a slow-motion rodeo, not forgetting to keep my gaze fixed firmly on my hands and not the dance floor far below. Paint came away in my hands in specks of chafing grit, making my purchase uncomfortable, but eventually I managed to hoist myself from the rig to the highest

level.

A few pigeons warbled from their eyrie above a control booth. I tried the door. It was locked, but after a sigh I simply shouldered my way through. It was quicker and more humane than going through every guard in the place to find a key.

"Perhaps I just attract levers," I mused, testing the array of instrumentation spread out along one wall. After several false starts, the dud light slid along its rails to a service junction within easy reach.

It came as some surprise when my rummaging uncovered nothing more remarkable than a wooden trinket box - the cheap kind you find in flea markets the world over. I shook it gently, but the lid was glued shut. I would have to break it to find out what was rattling in there.

Somehow, I doubt Pierre would be impressed by our delivery of matchwood. Better leave it alone.

"Agreed," I muttered, and heard groans from down below. The guard I had shot was dragging himself across to a phone behind the bar, leaving a red trail as he crawled. I ducked back into the booth, sliding the box into the inner pocket of my jacket as I smashed the emergency lock on a second door. I could only pray they hadn't got a good look at me, and wouldn't report a brunette, denim-clad thief to Bouchard. With practised motions I hopped down the fire escape, glad to be back out in the fresh air, and dropped to the street - pressing myself against the alley wall as I got my breath back.

All of a sudden I felt it - a low, rhythmic growl that thrilled and terrified me in equal measure. I peered around the corner, winning my own bet. There really is no more satisfying a sound than a thousand ccs purring into life.

He saw me too. The stranger from the Café, astride the machine not ten paces away, holding the handlebars like the reins of a stallion as he met my eye. For an instant he smiled - a smile on loan from the Devil himself - then he kicked that beast into life and revved past me in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

My fists were clenching as I strode from the alley - the rapidly fading rumble of his engine the only sound echoing down the street. My watch said I'd only been inside a matter of minutes, though it felt

a lot longer.

He had been *waiting* for me. But why? I'd seen the way he carried himself, the way an ex-soldier or even Marine would do, dangerous and subtle. I hadn't realised he was there until he *wanted* me to see him. Perhaps he had followed me all morning, or even last night. Had he been witness to Werner's death and Carvier's murder?

I shuddered.

Had I just stood by and watched a murderer escape?

★

Pierre almost shot out of his skin when I returned, a stiffness in my gait importing my anger.

"Did you...? Everything go okay...?" he yelled as I slammed the box down on the counter.

"Now, a little matter of Bouchard's whereabouts?" I raised one eyebrow significantly as his hands twitched towards the box, seemingly entranced by the sight of it. My tone obviously broke the spell. He coughed, a tick scuttling across his cheek.

"Bouchard... Well, yes..."

"You aren't going to disappoint me are you?" I leaned in, doubt making my hackles rise. "You remember what I said about 'dangerous'?"

"No, it's just that someone else was asking for him, just after you left. The... the customer who w- was sat in the corner, reading his paper," he stammered, "I couldn't tell him anything, naturally... But he m-may have overheard us."

My heart did a little dance, but I quashed it with fury.

"You know, you talk real loud, Pierre. It's hard not to notice it."

He flinched, holding up his hands. "Okay, okay! Easy! Can we still make a deal?"

"Only if you behave," I snapped. "And keep things to yourself from now on."

"Alright. B-Bouchard is lying low. I... I know someone who can show you where."

"You can trust them?" I retorted, not the least impressed.

"Just about. Name of Francine. She's my ex. This is her address, and

the key code for the gate.”

How reassuring, my inner voice scoffed, making it tricky to keep my mask steady. “And she can point me to Bouchard? You *sure*?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Pierre licked his lips. “She knows a discreet route to the back of the premises-“

“Discreet?” I interrupted, “Translation, dangerous!”

“Nothing in Paris is safe!” he hissed, but his tone became wheedling. “This route will get you where you need to go. Please? It’s arranged. She’s expecting you”

I snatched the scrap of paper he held out with Francine’s number on it. My imagination boiled with all manner of threats, but it was hardly worth the bother. I settled instead for a contemptuous sneer as I turned on my heel and left, making the window panes rattle as I slammed the door.

Janice was right. The guy was a total loser, but at least now I had a lead - a name, a number. Rue Dominique, a place overlooking the old St. Aicard’s Church just down the street. I took a deep, steadying breath and once more touched the amulet under my shirt as I summoned my reserves.

I only hoped Bouchard laid on breakfast.

Chapter 6

A number of people have remarked over the years that I possess abnormally sharp senses. For the most part I scorn such presumptions, though I will acknowledge that my training and daily routines keep me well-honed and alert. I'm sure most people would find their vision, hearing, smell, taste and all the rest increasing if only they concentrated more on the here and now and ignored the twittering of their minds for five minutes.

Yes, they would, wouldn't they?

I sighed. Someday, I would remember to register for a self-exorcism class.

As I left Café Metro and hunted for Francine's apartment, I found myself wishing for extra senses to reassure me.

My footsteps echoed like bronze hammers on anvils. Every breath of wind felt like the rushing of an oncoming train in my ears. The fear that had Paris in its grip was starting to affect me, and I had only been here a matter of hours. I could not imagine living with this feeling, day in, day out.

No wonder the streets were empty.

Fortunately, Francine's residence was only a five minute walk away, opposite a boarded-up indoor market. Querying the scrap of paper Pierre had given me, I tapped in a five-digit keycode and the yard gate swung open. I trotted up some stairs, overlooking a bright red Ford truck with mud-splattered fenders, and rapped on her door.

Before I'd even finished knocking a dark-haired woman had

appeared from behind the blinds and ushered me inside without a backwards glance. She leaned on the door, taking me in with quick, tense eyes. She wore black, smart and secretarial. What little I could take in of her apartment seemed as far from Café Metro's tastes as possible. I couldn't help but compare her with my mental picture of Pierre, but the two were like oil and water.

"You're early." Her voice was unusually deep. She was at a level with my height but rail-thin, contrasting oddly with her rounded cheeks - hinting at some underlying health issue.

"Is that a problem?" I asked.

She raised an eyebrow, displaying a flash of plum-coloured eyeshadow. "Not for me, but for you, Cherie. Bouchard's in the old church. There's a mausoleum in the churchyard that leads down to the church basement. It's just... He's not used to casual callers. Be careful."

"Is this the best way?" I asked, walking to the window and peering through the blinds. Sure enough, the apartment overlooked a mouldy stone wall bristling with iron spikes, and a host of gravestones and tombs rising from withered grass.

Her shrug was half-hearted. "It's the only way past the doorman. Just... watch out for the ledges. They're dangerous."

I didn't need her to remind me, but it cost nothing to nod politely as I stepped out onto the balcony and closed the door. From the way she kept rubbing her fingers together, she was obviously as eager to see me leave as for me not to fall and end up as a corpse outside her window.

The drainpipe creaked under my weight as I slid to the ground and dusted off my hands. The graveyard bore similar signs of neglect as the streets. Ancient crisp packets and rusted drinks' cans lurked in crevices where the wind had blown them. Last year's leaves carpeted the track and between the headstones. I was aware of how easily someone could be hiding behind them, or the mausoleums.

Yep. Mausoleums *plural*.

My subconscious and I sighed in unison. Any one of them could be the entrance to Bouchard's lair. The *thwak-thwak* of a police helicopter nearby reminded me of how time was slipping away. I

began hunting in earnest, going over every inch of the yard for clues. When I reached the end of the track, my spidey-senses started tingling.

An angel, carved from white stone too tacky to be actual marble, towered above me and the surrounding graves. She stood in her own little plot, surrounded by a low fence I easily vaulted on the first attempt. At her feet lay a sarcophagus with its lid almost, but not quite, in its proper position.

I crouched, listening till I started to feel pins-and-needles in my legs. From deep below me, muffled voices bounced off stone and standing water to drift almost unnoticed from the crack in the lid. I slid my fingers under the edge, but it wouldn't budge no matter how hard I tugged.

It was inevitable that my thoughts turned to the winged shape casting its shadow over me.

As it turned out, the angel wasn't quite as tacky as I'd first thought. I jumped back as, with a last heave, I toppled her over, shattering the solid sarcophagus lid like peanut brittle. Blocks of masonry clattered into the pit, tumbling down steps leading to the catacombs.

Hey, don't look at me like that. I *raid* tombs, not redecorate them.

Aware that I was technically in a bad position for anyone to come and investigate the noise, I hastened into the clammy darkness. I could hear water, and the occasional fluorescent light bulb threw twisting shadows onto damp walls of mortared stone and Gothic vaulted ceilings. The pitter-patter scurry of vermin made me shudder. Several times I turned a corner only to pull myself back from an icy dip in a stagnant pool. The Seine obviously viewed Christianity's invasion of its floodplain with some contempt, and countermeasures were making slow, watery decay of everything man had created.

I was creeping along the cold walls, peering through a door half-hidden behind leaking pipes, when a horrific moan whispered down my spine.

The last thing I'd heard make a sound like that had been mummified three thousand years ago.

The sibilant noise lapsed into silence, only to erupt again more painfully - as though some demonic animal was being garrotted

behind the green army-issue screen shielding half the room from view.

I curse the curiosity that made me go and peer around it.

A powerfully-built young man lay on a gurney, and was turned on his side to face the opposite wall. A stainless-steel trolley laden with bandages and pill bottles was parked close by, glaring under the rays of actinic medical lamps. He wore jeans and was naked from the waist up, displaying shoulders a rugby player would be proud of.

He was no longer wholly human.

I caught my breath. The entire left side of his body had simply melted. I mean, *melted* - as though a wax mannequin had been placed too near an open gas flame and allowed to twist and deform, dribbling into a bubbling, unrecognisable cascade of silvery, glistening pseudo-flesh. My stomach heaved, driven by a fresh wave of sounds from the creature - whimpers of unimaginable anguish. Its spine flopped uselessly, bucking the torso so his face fell into lamplight.

The face of what was unmistakably an ordinary guy bored straight into mine, paralysing me with empathy. A lump formed in my throat but I couldn't swallow. His cornflower-blue eyes pleaded, worse than any wounded animal. My breath turned shallow, fingers clenching around the gun-shaped lump in my pocket. His gaze flickered from it and back again - a burbling cough hacked from his chest a petition that anything living and wishing to end the hurt would understand.

"You can't 'elp 'im," a gruff voice said, startling me. I had my gun out and trained on the shadow in the doorway in the time it took to blink - conscious thought having nothing to do with reflexes. The figure raised one massive paw, and a battery of 'clicks' told me that me firing first would be very, very terminal.

"Ou are you?" it continued, not moving an inch. His accent was thicker than quicksand.

My eyes cast about professionally, counting at least five firearms trained on me from various points around the sickroom. No two of their owners were alike in age, size or clothing, but all stared at me with one part shock, one part total indifference at the prospect of gunning me down where I stood. The melted man had not ceased his

pitiable cries, but had at least sunk back down on the stretcher, squeezing his eyes shut in a gesture that was somehow more ghastly than when he was actively seeking my help.

“Lara Croft,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “I need to speak with Louis Bouchard.”

“An’ what would an ‘ansome lady such as yourself want with Bouchard?” the voice drawled.

“Business, not pleasure,” I said, earning one or two sniggers. Despite any rumoured masochistic tendencies I may or may not have harboured, I added, “I didn’t come here for a fight. Truce?”

The shadow jerked its head, a head that seemed to have hardly any neck, and a man came forward to take my gun. I offered it without any resistance, and played statues while he patted down my body for concealed weapons. Heck, if they thought I could tote a bazooka in under tight jeans then more fool them. But such was the climate, so I let it slide.

The man, a stocky thug with a gleaming bald head and beer belly struggling to escape his waistband, grumbled, “Clear.”

He passed the gun to the shadowy figure, who stepped into the light to scrutinise me with narrow, beetle-black eyes. He topped my five foot nine inches with more to spare, and had me outweighed by more than fifty kilos - hulking in the manner of men unused to being told what to do. His cheeks were pale and rather bloated, offset with smartly bristled hair. He wore a crisp, mustard-coloured shirt over black slacks and Italian shoes, and rested his hand on the lapels of a tan leather coat that probably cost the same as my motor insurance. His knuckles were the size of walnuts, covered with little white scars, and his eyes were bloodshot.

I’ve seen Kodiak bears that looked less dangerous.

“Gentlemen,” it wasn’t a request; the men instantly clicked the safeties back onto their guns and withdrew a step. He slid my own confiscated weapon into an inner pocket, gesturing through an open door. “The lady an’ I are goin’ to talk. See that we’re not disturbed.”

When you’re in the water with sharks, the worst thing you can do is act like prey, which is why I forced back my shoulders, lifted my chin and strode through the door with Cleopatran authority.

My nose wrinkled. The room beyond was cramped, filled with boxes and bundles that could have only have come from military surplus. Old pizza boxes and beer bottles littered an odorous corner, and papers were stacked across a mug-ring stained coffee table as though a meeting had only just broken up. A dilapidated sofa, its cushions bowed from overuse, occupied a little island amid the impressive inventory, but the man did not sit down. Instead, he turned the door lock and planted his feet firmly, watching me take in his treasure trove.

A dragon doesn't show you his hoard if he thinks you can get out alive afterwards.

Gulp.

"What happened to your man in the sickroom out there, Bouchard?" I whispered.

A frown darkened his features. "You got somethin' to say about Arnaud?"

"Maybe," I said. My memory was of an old man, his blood mingling with silvery splashes. "It might be linked to what happened to a friend of mine."

"I doubt it. Is this why you came down 'ere, uh? To waste my time?"

"To buy it, actually," I replied. "You helped a friend of mine a while back, Werner von Croy?"

"Names don't mean a lot 'ere... Even real ones," he growled, "What did 'e want?"

"Maps and information, on the Louvre."

A brief nod. "I remember. Mmm, four weeks ago. Wanted to take a coach load of Japanese tourists to see the Mona Lisa."

Obviously he didn't believe it any more than I did. Werner had welcomed tourists with as much enthusiasm as a wasps' nest at a garden party.

Note the past tense, my subconscious reminded me. Had.

"Easy, Bouchard. I lost that friend yesterday," I said. "Now I'm wanted for his murder."

Again the words slipped out before I could grab them, as they had in Carvier's apartment. I winced. The fewer things he knew about my involvement, the better. But if Bouchard was surprised he didn't show

it, instead eyeing me as if I was a prize racehorse he was thinking of buying.

"Hmm... There was a newscast about a Monstrum killing earlier... What would you know about that?"

"Nothing that would interest you," I said quickly.

"You'd be surprised 'ow much the Monstrum interests me," he smiled, or at least, showed all his teeth.

I reminded myself that I was painfully short on resources, but had to negotiate with whatever I could take. "My friend...? The Louvre...?"

Some of the tension seemed to leave the crime-lord's shoulders. Shaking his head, he lumbered over and eased himself onto the creaking sofa, "Yes... The academic. Wanted access to recent archaeological diggings inside the Louvre. I gave 'im a contact... You want the same?"

I resisted the urge to mirror his relaxation, but nodded to his stockpile. He still had his hand within easy reach of the gun. "And more. I need nine millimetre protection, backpack, plastic explosives, stun packs... Paris just isn't safe these days."

"Who for? You obviously can take care of yourself!"

"Do you have what I need?" I pressed, giving my voice the added weight of command.

He shrugged - a fat, contented bear whose full stomach permitted me to remain unmolested for now. I was just a side-issue to him, the least of his problems, but one who appealed to his love of bargaining. I'd gotten lucky. If I'd arrived before the pizza delivery, I'd probably have been shot on sight.

"I know who does. Daniel Rennes... Works out of the pawnbrokers on the corner of Rue St Mark, and Cours de la Seine."

My memory jogged back to the man I had passed in the street. "Thin guy? About my height?"

Bouchard nodded. "That's 'im. I 'ave to get certain things into 'is 'ands. Passports," he raised an eyebrow. "You could deliver them for me."

"Passports?!" I said, incredulous. Running more errands would cost me time I didn't have.

He must have misinterpreted my expression, because his gesture

was placating. "Czech passports....Nothing to dirty your hands with! It's purely a business arrangement."

"For which Rennes would give me what I need...?" I said, half to myself.

"For the *right* price," Bouchard countered, wagging a finger. "The passports will prove you come through *me*. Rennes is choosy about 'is customers. It 'as saved 'is life several times!"

How comforting, my subconscious remarked, and before I could act it had hijacked my vocal chords. "Was the man in the sickroom delivering packages for you, too?"

Bouchard looked up sharply, but something like real hurt clouded his eyes. "Poor Arnaud. One of my toughest. 'E's the only survivor of four attacks so far."

"Attacks? By whom?"

"An interesting question. We don't know for sure... yet." Again he flashed his teeth in what could only loosely be called a smile.

"The Paris Monstrum, perhaps?" I suggested.

"We're looking into that," his voice, already hoarse, dipped several octaves. "*You* should take care."

"An automatic would help," I eyed the stash piled around us in a subtle request. "You sold my friend Von Croy some hardware. I need the same."

"That was then," he said expansively. "We need all the firepower we can get. Rennes is your man for that."

Before I could blink he got up, fishing a bunch of keys from his pocket and fiddled with one of the lockers ranged along a side wall. I pretended not to see the combination he also entered on the locker's old-fashioned dial. It's considered impolite in criminal circles to show you know more than your opponent.

Don't ask me how I know. It would take too long to explain.

"There," he brandished a brown envelope, its sides distended by the contents. "Make sure Rennes gets this package. An' make sure it *is* Rennes!"

I took the proffered goods, slipping it awkwardly under my jacket. "Why? Who else could it be?"

He gave me a dark look, one hand on the door. "I'd like to ask poor

Arnaud that. But 'e can' talk anymore. Just make sure Rennes gets that package!"

Chapter 7

An unfriendly wind struck my face as I exited the church. The escape tunnel Bouchard had pointed me down had emerged right in the middle of the nave. The pews had been cleared aside and an amateur boxing ring installed in their place. Obviously there was little call for a House of God in a ghetto ruled by men like Bouchard. A portly trainer surveyed me from the opposite side of the ring, scratching his sagging backside and glaring like an overweight school bully, but the fact I had just come from Bouchard's lair with all my limbs intact was probably all the instruction he needed to leave me in peace.

Rennes' pawnshop was not hard to find again. A modest sign hung over the door, but the usual shelves of gold watches, jewellery and gaming consoles I would have expected a pawnbroker to display were noticeably absent.

The moment I stepped through the door, my subconscious started screaming.

Something isn't right.

I paused in the beer-brown hallway, listening. It had offset doors - reminding me of the way medieval castle designers had built stairs at an angle to the main keep, preventing attackers from having a clear run-up with a battering ram. A pattern of pale repairs to the wall plaster suggested Rennes' paranoia wasn't entirely unjustified.

A man was walking towards me. I had time to notice his suit - an eccentric grey number tailored to perfection - and his face, pulled

back almost painfully by a short ponytail, with squared-off glasses. The glasses had an odd tint that made his eyes seem to smolder like dampened coals. His business was clearly finished for he bumped my shoulder on his way out, slamming the door behind him.

Huh. Nobody bothers with manners anymore these days.

I was suddenly aware of a smell.

It came on so strongly that I had to cover my face, my eyes watering. I entered the shop properly - a bomb site of rusty bicycles, old washing machines and collapsing bookcases - and the stink grew to something resembling a sledgehammer.

Imagine roadkill, and then imagine crouching next to it a week later when the storm drains have clogged with ten times that amount of death and detritus, breathing in corruption and foulness with every breath. I wondered if an old sewer pipe had ruptured nearby.

There was something else there too. Something terribly familiar.

I dropped the package and sprinted through the twisted, mangled security grill and torn wood that had been the shop's counter top. The back door had literally been wrenched off its hinges, but before I had even passed through I knew what I would see.

Rennes lay sprawled on his back, having been thrown against the wall. A tumble dryer propped up his broken neck at a comical angle to make him look right at me, as though he was about to climb to his feet, dust himself off and demand to know why I was intruding.

His belly had been torn open and bloody sigils had been daubed across the wooden floor.

I felt my legs shaking and forced them to keep me upright. My stomach mounted a rebellion, but I resisted the urge to heave, forcing myself to pick out details methodically and dispassionately.

It wasn't easy.

The pawnbroker had not been a young man. His rust-coloured shirt, string vest and braces only partly obscured his wound. It was grimly fascinating that so much blood could have come from so skinny a body. His arms and legs lay anyhow, like a stilt-legged puppet forgotten and discarded at the bottom of a cupboard. His expression preserved an aura of bafflement and sudden, delirious terror.

The rest of the backroom was a textbook lesson in how to survive World War Three.

Military-grade matériel was piled everywhere, boxed and labelled with scrupulous precision. A couple of naked light bulbs provided enough illumination to discern a state-of-the-art computer setup, several bookcases arranged into an informal study, and even a steel-reinforced blast door set into the far wall. I spied crates brimming with cans and long-life food rations, alongside kegs plastered with international hazard warnings. A soft beeping emanated from a trapdoor not ten feet away from me. An escape tunnel?

Steady, Lara. You can handle this. Think!

My options had just shrunk from few to almost none. My best chance would be to grab whatever supplies I could and get the hell out of there before someone summoned the police. The sight of my second murdered corpse in twelve hours made me clench my fists to control the urge to break something. There was no doubt now; intentionally or not, I was leaving a trail of bodies across the city. I could rule out my involvement in this killing, but...

Focus! You're running out of time!

Wary of leaving prints, I tore a scrap of cloth from my jacket lining and used it to scoop up Rennes' wallet and tease it open, picking out some folded-up memo notes. My intuition turned up gold. I cautiously tapped in the keycode scrawled on one of the notes into the pad beside the armoured doorway, and smiled in triumph as it clicked, releasing some sort of hydraulic locking mechanism.

Inside was a room no bigger than a broom cupboard, and treasure. *SS tranquiliser, C4 explosive, high-voltage stun gun, map of the Louvre and its storm drains*, my subconscious muttered, examining each item as I grabbed a backpack hanging from a peg. There were even a couple of shrink-wrapped packages of camouflage wear, army boots and a whole array of webbing to hold the gear in place. Werner obviously hadn't had time to collect it all.

It felt like Christmas.

I stuffed the bag full to bursting, wrestling with the zip until it could take no more. A quiet sort of thrill was building inside me, one I recognised and had loved for years. I was taking action, preparing,

doing. My idea of hell is to be strapped to a chair and forced to sit still for the rest of my life. All I had to do now was find a place where I could hole up undisturbed and prepare myself before dark. I clipped my feet into the boots and hung my shoes round my neck by their laces, finally feeling like I was making a difference to my hunt.

It just goes to prove that you should never take good moments for granted.

As I turned to leave, I suddenly registered the cessation of a noise I'd unconsciously been hearing since I entered the shop - an innocuous buzz easily mistaken for a fly or wasp. My eye was drawn to the computer station, and a large bundle sitting placidly on the chair.

A home-made bomb.

Oh, crap.

Trapdoor! The voice in my head yelped, but I was already unlatching the handle. Nothing went boom as I dropped down into the dusty sub-basement, stumbling round boxes till I found a grill I could prize from the wall. A rank breeze would serve as my guide through the darkness.

As it turned out, I needn't have worried about needing such assistance, or leaving behind prints - not when Rennes' paranoia was enough to outfit every drug cartel, terrorist group and apocalypse-crazy wacko for a thousand miles.

The explosion tore through the spillage pipe as I ran - the air growing superheated in the time it takes to *say* superheated. I pounded towards the circle of light ahead, but then the bow wave caught up and shoved me onwards like an invisible, out-of-control truck careening down the motorway at eighty miles an hour.

I could have been screaming the whole way, but it didn't register. I hardly even noticed the explosion's noise - not when the *pressure* was enough to rupture eardrums and throw me clear across the river onto a barge moored mid-stream.

Then light, heat and sound caught up and had their merry way while I hunkered down and prayed.

It felt like hours later when I dared open my eyes, and patted out the small fires smoldering in my clothes. The knees of my jeans were

skinned bare, and I could feel a line of dripping wetness where a nail or other sharp object had swiped my thigh through the denim. The palms of my hands prickled from the impact of landing on solid wooden boards, but I'd gotten off lightly if the smoking column reaching high above the skyline was anything to go by. The appalling stench had disappeared - replaced by the smell of charred wood, ceramic and steel mingling oddly with the iodine-reek of the river.

The wailing of sirens rose above the ringing in my ears, but they were still a long way off. I had plenty of time to hop across to shore and get my bearings, find some shelter and plot my heist. If I was right, the map and journal I carried would lead me deep under one of Paris' most famous landmarks - the Louvre Galleries, home to some of Europe's greatest cultural treasures. If anything was hidden there that could possibly help me locate Werner's killer, it wouldn't stay hidden for long.

Despite my bruises, a satisfied smile lifted the corner of my mouth. I climbed to my feet, unsteadily at first, and stood swaying, listening to the wharf and the gulls. The pawnshop groaned as burning timbers gave way - air whooshing as it rushed to feed the fire. I was feeling fairly confident, until I glanced across the river and spotted a lone figure watching me.

I must have imagined the smug expression on his face as he turned and got back on his bike, roaring away as though he had never been there.

Confidence?

Huh, my subconscious swallowed. Who are we kidding?

Chapter 8

The woman hurried, ten minutes late for her meeting. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, and she prayed that no one would notice. Inexpertly, she dabbed her eyes and stuffed the handkerchief into her pocket. There were red specks on the cloth that had nothing to do with tears.

The meeting room was darkened, one hundred and thirteen steps below the constant, ever-shifting background buzz of the city. Down there, deep below the humdrum normality of Parisian life, there was only silence, and shadows, and secrets.

Pale faces turned to look at her as she entered - faces she despised, feared, respected, and often all three at once. She took the empty chair, trying to ignore the nervous sweat trickling down her back. The man to her left, Grant Muller, licked his lips. His smile was like a camera flash - there one moment, gone the next. The scientist's hands twitched across the flab of his belly.

To her right, Karel sneered like a cat watching a mongrel dog scratching itself. She had worked with both men for several years, but still did not know what to make of the cool, dispassionate lawyer. Karel was dressed in his usual sober black, contrasting with his shock of white hair. A silk scarf the colour of old, old blood was draped across his shoulders, and she envied its warmth. She wore only the surgical smock, gloves and boots of her trade. It was cold down there, deep below others' knowledge.

The grey-clad gentleman across the table rose. There was a

projection directly behind him, showing street maps and complex strategies in red and green OHP ink. Its soft glow threw his features into shadow. All she could see were his eyes, smoldering like raked-over coals.

"You're late." He croaked. The threat behind those two little words was more ominous than the creak of thin ice over a bottomless lake.

★

After the meeting had broken up, she waited in the atrium for her confidant - avoiding the gazes of the others as they filed past. Their plane to Prague was already fuelled and ready, but like her it was forced to sit, shrugging off impatience as best it could.

"You okay?"

She felt sausage-fat fingers grip her shoulder, and a mug of something hot was pushed into her hand. She glanced up, into Dr. Muller's genial smile.

"Of course, I'm fine."

"You don't look it. Drink - it'll help. The Master needs you strong for the work ahead."

She managed a haughty scoff, but sipped anyway. It tasted bitterly herbal - probably one of his potent concoctions brewed in the Strahov labs in the floors above her workplace.

Together, they watched as their master stalked from the meeting room and departed without giving them a second glance.

"Do you really think it will work this time?" She whispered. "You saw the way they were glaring at me. He stills blames me for the failure last time, *me!* As if *I* was the one who gathered his wretched samples! I can only work with *pure* specimens, as I'm sure I made perfectly clear!"

"Hush," Muller chided, as the gigantic figure of Gunderson, the master's bodyguard and military adviser, loomed in the doorway - curling his lip at the sight of the two scientists huddling in the corner. Only when he had left the room did she release the breath she had been holding; and the tears threatened once more.

"We're not ready to attempt the Awakening yet! I need *fresh* Nephilim DNA if I'm going to test the procedure properly! The

original samples have already degraded, which explains the hybrid's side-effects. If only-

"Boaz, you need to calm yourself," Muller looked worried. "These ideas are blasphemous and you know it! Eckhardt knows what he's doing, and we have to trust him. The New Order depends on you fulfilling his commands, even when you don't understand them, yes? Now I know it's been hard on you-" he patted her hand "- stuck down there with your inmates, no sunlight, all cramped-up, yes? But we need you and your knowledge of gene splicing to continue the Great Work! You have a gift, my dear, a rare gift that will help the Nephilim rise once more! How glorious will it be when that happens, to know that you helped bring about Eden on Earth!"

She wiped her eyes, smiling faintly. Muller could be pompous at times, but she trusted his professionalism and conviction in the Great Work. When her belief weakened, she did not turn to Karel, or Gunderson, or even Eckhardt, the master of them all, but to Muller's gardens and the glimpse of future Paradise - a place where she could think and have her faith reaffirmed.

"And just think," he continued, "Once we have the last two Obscura Paintings, we won't need to worry about hybrids at all! A race of pure Nephilim will walk the Earth! We won't need more sampling, or subjects, and no more abominations! No offence to your genius, my dear, but I sleep better at night knowing you destroyed the Proto in the end. It was the right thing to do... oh, my dear, are you sure you're alright? You're weeping!"

It was only with heroic effort that she stemmed the flow of her tears, brushing her severely-cut hair from her eyes. The gesture showed her physical scars, like a line of puckered slashes encircling her face. The accident had happened years ago, before she even knew about Eckhardt and his plans, before she came to work at the Strahov.

Before she knew the price of failure.

"Nothing... just... I hate to think of my p-poor little ones all alone. I hope we get the Painting soon... s-so we can go back and tend them. They m-must be terribly lonely."

Muller chuckled, and helped her to her feet. She was trembling, so

he took her to the luncheon room. Something to eat would help, he assured her.

She could only smile, and nod, and pray her secret remained hidden.

Chapter 9

The *Musée du Louvre* is one of the biggest and most illustrious cultural centres in the world. Every period of human history is represented in some way within its galleries (mysterious civilisations betrayed by immortal super-bitches notwithstanding). Its foundations as a twelfth century fortress are still intact, amid rambling additions and annexes constructed and occupied by more kings, generals and political figures than any revolution could comfortably accommodate. Within the Louvre are some thirty-five thousand artefacts, paintings, sculptures, drawings, tapestries, prints, carvings and assorted cultural items, and those are just the ones on general display. It's been called the *Palais du Louvre*, the Grand Louvre and simply the Louvre.

To me, it will forever be filed under 'Raging Temptation'.

I woke after my allotted five hours' sleep, having spent the better part of the afternoon plotting my escapade from an abandoned squatters' apartment in the seedier part of town. My weapons were all cleaned and oiled. The muddied, ruined remains of my denim suit lay sealed in a waterproof bag, and shoved well out of sight under half-rotted floorboards. My last act whilst still wearing it was to purchase some cereal bars, drinks and a few other essentials from a rundown little corner shop. I'd found my hidey-hole, secured myself with a few crude but well-placed booby traps and - after double- and triple-checking my gear and routines - ate a frugal meal of cold soup, bread and cured ham, fell into a pile in the corner and slept.

My dreams were disturbing, but faded beyond recall moments after my internal clock sounded its alarm. I roused myself in the gloaming hours as the city lights began sparkling. In the dark and the silence I dressed for action - breathing in focus and expelling tension as I worked. It's a little ritual I like to go through just before I do something crazy, but rituals of all sizes have power.

On went camouflage trousers, buckled and belted with black-webbing holsters, then a dark stretch top, over which I threw a sleeveless army-issue jacket with dozens of handy zip pockets. My boots were up to the knee and surprisingly light for their toughness. I re-braided my hair and tightened on a pair of fingerless gloves to improve my grip. Finally, I slung the backpack across my shoulders, adjusting it for comfort until I barely knew it was there.

If you ever have the chance, I'd recommend you visit the Louvre. Try taking the number 27 bus, or use the Métro. You can enter via the great glass pyramid, play in the fountains and take cute photographs of your friends gesturing behind each others' heads.

Do not, under any circumstances, follow the route I used that night.

Why *are we doing this again exactly?* My annoying little voice sighed as I sloshed through knee-deep water under the Pont du Carrousel bridge. I hugged the walls and tried to think inconspicuous thoughts as I hunted, and found, the outlet marked on Rennes' map.

"If you don't like the scenery, you can always shut up," I pointed out, "I mean, what's not to like?" I wished I'd brought flares as I went down on hands and knees in the pipe, feeling algae and god-knows-what cling to me as I squeezed past. "Picturesque views, charming locals..."

Like we need a tour-guide to show us around, it said smugly, but with a strange note to its voice I didn't recognise. *You know, I'm getting pretty tired of being merely a sub-part of your inner monologue. It would be a lot easier if you started crediting me with some autonomy.*

"Such as?" I muttered, letting my hearing, touch and internal map guide me in the slimy blackness. "What the hell do you mean? You're my subconscious. You don't have autonomy!"

Exactly my point! It replied, excitedly. *You can think of loads of times when I've saved our collective ass, or noticed something you've*

been too preoccupied to see until much later on. I pull my weight, don't I?

"So, let me get this straight," I took a left, following a rushing, roaring sound of water. "I'm trying to give myself permission to have multiple-personality disorder, because it's good for survival's sake? Gosh, and I was so *worried* about going insane without noticing."

My hands found the base of a rusty ladder, and I started climbing. *Just give it some thought. I just want you to realise all the potential assets you're toting round, that's all. There's a lot in here besides wobbly grey matter. Remember what Horus said?*

I certainly did. As I pulled myself out and looked about me, correlating my position, I had to admit that my inner voice had a point. Despite all my experience, I might still have resources within me that remained untapped.

If I was going to avenge Werner's death, perhaps I should start using them.

"Fine," I muttered out loud. "I'll call you Margaret."

Pardon?

"Mar-gar-ret. It's easier to think of you... me... damn, *you*, if I give you a separate name. Got a problem with that?"

It's not very... tough, is it?

I rolled my eyes. "After great-aunt Margaret. Remember? The only person in our family who actually gives a damn about our welfare, who loaned us the manor, who recommended Winston, who-"

Okay, okay. Whatever you wish, O Mistress. Sheesh... At least make it Maggie so we don't get confused about who we mean.

"Heaven forbid. I'd hate to think I was confused."

I'd entered a low hallway - claustrophobic and dim but most definitely made for humans to navigate. I ran my hands over the crumbling brickwork, streaked with mould and mildew. The air was chilly but quite fresh, with none of the rank overtones of sewage to contend with. That said, there was plenty of rubbish floating in the scummy water, and the squeaking of rats was uncomfortably loud. It was cool enough for me to start shivering in my damp clothes.

I got out the map and wandered down the passage, crunching on gravel until I came to the source of the noise. I entered a tall

chamber, with water descending in a never-ending haze from pipes vomiting forth from the walls. A relatively dry patch on the rim gleamed in neon tide-lights around a control panel. Warning signs plastered the valves like overgrown wasps - their yellow and black stripes faded under blotches of powdery fungus. The indicators humming in front of me all shone hazardously scarlet. With a little jiggery-pokery, I wrenched the valves closed - the rusting metal sounding like a manicure-addict at a mathematician's convention - turning the indicator lights to green. The water immediately shut off, and I heard the boiler room lock click open above me.

What? If you build a storm drain, the first rule is always put the doors above the flood line. It's perfectly logical.

It took some climbing, and the ladder rungs set into the wall were mostly broken or rusted to brown crumbs, but eventually I hauled up and unlatched the boiler room door.

Faugh... It's the right place alright! Maggie grumbled, much more clearly than I could have spoken - with my hand clamped tight to my mouth to keep from inhaling the fumes of diesel and spent gas. My brimming eyes scanned the room until they located a great, chimney-like pipe on the far wall, beyond an open overflow tank the size of a public swimming pool that rippled sluggishly under a sheen of combustible fuel. The pipe was thick enough for me to have swum down, although that would have meant I was swimming in pressurised, superheated gas.

"This is it," I gasped, cross-referencing the pipe against the map. The chamber I had chosen as my entry point was directly behind the wall. I cast about me, weighing my options. High explosives would do the job, but they would also blow me to kingdom-come if I was in the same room.

My eye fell on the tank, and an idea formed.

"Better let me concentrate, Maggie. If I get this wrong, you won't be around to bug me about it," I muttered, setting the timer for five seconds. Before I could talk myself out of it, I plugged a fist-sized lump of C4 and its trailing detonation wire behind the pipe, and leapt over the low guardrail into the tank. My eyes and mouth were clamped tightly shut as I swam down for all my life was worth.

The resulting boom vaporised half the chamber, taking the wall with it.

Oil stung my eyes as I looked up, seeing flames brawling on the surface. I kicked myself over to the pipe openings in front of me, and breathed a lungful of grateful air when I emerged less than a minute later in a side room - its waters protected from the incendiary blast. Slightly light-headed and dripping, I stomped back to view my handiwork.

The air had gone from cold and clammy to oven-roast, take-your-eyebrows-off hot. It must have taken mere seconds for my clothes to dry out, as I hopped, skipped and jumped over the patches of flame till I fell through the gap in the wall, basking in the cool grey beyond. I had emerged exactly where I'd planned, in the sub-basement next to the original foundations.

Huge wedges of mortared limestone, faintly purple in the half-light, rose on my right, roped off from the general public. There was a hush on the room, such you find in libraries and strict churches. There were footlights at the base of the walls, glowing more softly than fireflies on a summer evening.

I checked myself over, rubbing a gentle salve on my tenderised skin and popping the tube back into its pocket. With great care, I also loaded the tranquiliser dart gun and bug-zapper. There would be plenty of guards between me and my destination, and the fewer casualties I inflicted, the better.

A panelled mahogany door beckoned me on.

Here goes nothing, we whispered together.

Chapter 10

Museums, like schools, airports, stations and shopping centres, feel utterly *wrong* when they're empty. There's something about the vitality of a crowd that gives those places life, movement and energy. Take that away and even the most impressive location will feel like a mortuary. Even if you have permission to be there, you feel a strange sense of disquiet, of trespassing beyond the bounds of normality.

That was how I felt as I entered the Louvre Galleries.

The tourists had long since gone home. Cleaning staff had emptied the rubbish bins, polished the floors and closed up for the night. The lights in the corridors were extinguished save for tiny spot-lamps, and I knew from prior knowledge that the main galleries would be limited to only a handful of red uplighters to help preserve the paintings from photonic damage.

It was a whole other world to the one most people get to see.

Zapper drawn, I ghosted up a flight of broad steps, listening intently. The steep corridor was divided by several minor exhibits - one a rather nice piece of Egyptian Bas relief, with a handy 'you are here' map below. I heard a noise other than my own footsteps, paused, pressing my back to the wall, and concentrated.

The man that came around the corner jerked once as the dart struck him in the neck. He fell without even seeing me, flopping at my feet as the electric shock sent his limbs into spasm. I swept him against the wall, propping him up and checking his airway was clear. His glasses had fallen off but not broken, and his laminated name tag

read 'Philippe Roux', matching his faded red hair. His eye beneath its lid dilated reassuringly, but he wasn't going anywhere for a long time.

My eyebrow rose appreciatively. Rennes knew his weaponry.

At the top of the stairs was a door. It opened onto a gallery a whole battalion of art enthusiasts could have gotten lost in. Ye gods, it made my *gym* look small - and I didn't decorate my sports' hall with Da Vincis and Van Goghs. A comforting red glow rippled across the parquet floor, shining off glass cabinets. There were even cushioned stools for people to sit and admire the artworks. The place smelt of liberal amounts of pine polish. A reproduction of Leonardo's *The Last Supper* graced the far wall, taking up the whole expanse from floor to ceiling.

It took me a second to realise that one of the figures at the base of the painting wore a guard's uniform.

His face was frozen in surprise, but his hand was already going for his gun.

I had crossed the distance between us before the weapon was out of its holster. In one swift gesture I broke his forearm, twisting him round with my momentum and neatly depositing him on the floor. The breath gushed from his chest in a hollow *whumph*. Before he could cry out, I had tapped him smartly, punching his ticket to the Land of Happy Knock-Outs.

Hey, I've had a broken arm, and they hurt like hell. It was the kindest thing to do.

Nice work, Maggie said approvingly. Now if we can just find Carvier's office, we might be able to get to the dig site and avoid a career in boxing.

"Thanks, you were a great help," A fine sweat beaded my forehead, running in an irritating line down my neck. The galleries were warmer than I'd expected.

Oh, well, if it's help you want, you might try searching his pockets. You might find his-

"-Security pass." I finished, plucking a swipe card from the guard's breast pocket. "Good thinking."

You're welcome. Say, haven't you noticed something?

I was walking along, scanning the corridor ahead with my zapper

drawn, its tip constantly moving, not focusing in any particular direction.

You've completely forgotten about that man we saw leaving Rennes' place. Don't look at me like that - I only just remembered it myself. Strange, isn't it?

"You think he had something to do with the murder?" I murmured, peering through a door. It opened onto a new hallway - this one almost an artwork in itself. Thin columns of pearly marble supported the vaulted roof, and Grecian statues of Goddess-like proportions stood facing each other down the hall's length. Windows along the far wall cast squares of wraith-pale moonlight across the floor, but could not distract from the dots of red light hovering at intervals along the walls and columns.

Damn security and their damn laser trap fixations.

I don't know, but I'd bet a new quad bike he wasn't just a customer. The circumstances are suspicious enough but apart from that... I felt my subconscious shudder, a curious sensation that sent goosebumps racing across my skin. He felt... wrong. Evil.

"Just keep me posted when you figure something out. I'm kind of busy here," I kept low, sucking in my chest to slide past the invisible beams on the far wall. Not for the first time, I wished I had smaller assets, if only to make my job easier. They *do* get in the way sometimes. And much as I was interested in what my intuition had to say, this was not the time for me to get distracted.

Sighing, I felt Maggie's assent and my head fell relatively quiet.

At the far end of the hall, my way became clearer. Someone had taken the trouble to erect a notice board (this being the Louvre, it was a very *posh* notice board), detailing the recent archaeological work being undertaken beneath the museum's foundations. However, the actual entrance, set nearby in its own little alcove, was very clearly *not* for public use.

The basic card in my pocket wouldn't open it. The remaining wad of C4 in my backpack itched, but would attract far too much attention. I needed Carvier's security pass.

Her office wasn't as difficult to find as I might have thought, and I didn't run into more than a couple of guards the whole way. The

Department of Medieval and Renaissance Research turned out to be in a much more contemporary complex than most of the Palais - adjoining the historic building in the manner of up-market universities trying 'to preserve the past whilst working to the future'. Personally, I quite liked the mix of old and new-age industrial styles flashing past as I stalked down richly-carpeted corridors. Ordinary office doors with their own little plates displayed titles like 'Oils Restoration' and 'X-Ray and Spectral Imaging'. I pulled up outside the one marked 'Private: Security Personnel Only'.

There was a single guard inside, lounging in a chair facing banks of CCTV monitors - a half-eaten pastry and cooling cup of coffee cluttering the desk. He never even heard me coming, but jolted and then sighed dreamily as I applied the same neck-grip technique as I had on the goon in *Le Serpent Rouge*.

Hey, if it's good enough for Spock, it's good enough for me.

Swiftly and silently, I deactivated the cameras to Carvier's office. I used the generic pass on the door, and sighed in relief when the locking mechanism flashed green to admit me.

Well, Madame keeps a tidy office, Maggie muttered admiringly as I scanned the room, impressed.

"You mean *kept*," I corrected, a faint flutter of guilt as I noticed the photographs, obviously of family and friends, ranged on her desk. "Let's see what we can find."

Carvier had carried over her scrupulous domestic habits to her working life. The office was immaculate and beautifully equipped with both antique and super-modern furnishings. Mahogany, rosewood and darkly-stained oak predominated, and the rug in front of the modest fireplace was a genuine Persian. I moved closer, drawn to the paintings over the mantelpiece. The largest and most prominently displayed canvas was of a man - naked and bound in a manner reminiscent of a crucifixion, except that his arms were restrained by his sides and a leather hood concealed his features. A Germanic-style castle lurked in the background. The whole ensemble disturbed me greatly.

I picked up a book that had a notepad for a bookmark. The clipped, precise handwriting could only have been Carvier's.

"The Obscura Paintings'," I breathed, committing the details to memory. "Five images painted on thick wooden bases"... similar to Russian icons then, I guess. "They were created by the Black Alchemist, Pieter Van Eckhardt, in the thirteen or fourteen hundreds. The Paintings were seized by the Lux Veritatis, and painted over with religious imagery. Each Painting has a metallic symbol of power built into it. Together the five Paintings hide something called the Sanglyph, or the 'Blood Sign'."

"I wonder what that does?" I mused, but my instincts were tingling that I was on the right track.

Eckhardt... The same name as Werner's client. Bit of a coincidence, wouldn't you agree?

The notes ended. Eager for more, I searched the rest of the office. My eye was pulled, magnet-like, to a large work desk, on which several pieces of yellowing parchment lay crumbling.

"The five Obscura Engravings," I skimmed the text, "The Lux Veritatis monk, Brother Obscura, is alleged to have painted over the Black Alchemist's original Paintings with innocuous religious imagery, before the Paintings were hidden. However, he made undisclosed, sketched copies of the Paintings that contained encrypted maps to each Painting's secret location. These sketches became known as the Obscura Engravings."

"This is what Werner was talking about," I leafed back through the pages of Werner's notebook. "He mentions all of this in his journal. 'Mathias Vasiley in Prague has sent me four Obscura Engravings. He kept the fifth Engraving back...Deciphered the encrypted map in Vasiley's Engravings. One of the Paintings is beneath the Louvre where the latest archaeological digs are...' He must have been led here by one of the original Obscura Engravings... which means..."

Exactly, Maggie interrupted. If Vasiley and Werner were right, then one of the Obscura Paintings really is here, now, right beneath our feet. We have to get to those diggings, before anyone else does.

My heart pounded, and it was an effort to swallow. After a brief search of her desk, I unearthed Carvier's security pass lurking in the back of a drawer. It was odd - for the first time since Werner's death I felt like a thief, despite having stolen odd bits and pieces throughout

the day. Perhaps it was because I had already *met* Carvier, had been in her home and understood something of her style. My lifelong archaeological 'recoveries' had never elicited this reaction, even when their centuries-dead owners protested my acquisitions.

Warily, I crept from the office, descending the stairwell at the hall's far end. My shadow wove across the walls from the lights shining up through the grilled steps, and the *clank-clank-clank* of my footsteps struck me with notes of definite anxiety. I met no one as I returned to *Galerie 3*, and the locked door leading to the digs.

Carvier's pass, her photograph unsmiling, felt heavy as I swiped it and nudged the door open.

Above the ever-present floor polish, I could just about make out the odour of freshly-dug earth - faint, but too emotive for me to ignore.

I tightened my gloves, cracking my knuckles one by one.

Time to raid.

Chapter 11

Let me make it perfectly clear to anyone who has never actually studied the practical side of archaeology. Most of the time it's dirty, frustrating, and duller than ditch water. In Britain, field work is traditionally carried out on a soggy Thursday afternoon, with rain dripping down the back of your mackintosh and cows in the next field eating your sandwiches when you're not looking - and all you have to show for nine hours' work are some rusty lumps that may (or may not) be Iron Age arrow heads. If this idea does not appeal to you, I suggest sticking to watching *Time Team* from the comfort of your sofa.

On the other hand, the Louvre digs might just have convinced you that archaeology is worth the fuss.

The passageway had led me down into the basements. A series of arc lights and whirring computers guarded armoured doors that had yielded to Carvier's swipe card with a juddering rumble, throwing up a gritty cloud of dust. In the shallow gloom beyond, my eyes had widened to behold a vast pit behind chain-link fence - a pit deep enough for four or five African elephants to stand on each other's backs and not reach the surface. Overhead, an assemblage of steel girders held up the roof and air conditioning units. The only illumination came from sodium work lamps dotted every few metres or so, and the impartial, fuzzy glow from frosted portacabin windows. As I stalked along the perimeter, the door to the nearest cabin opened and a guard hopped out, his shoes scuffing the gravel, not

seeing me as he turned to lock it.

I was on him in moments, adding one more to the Louvre pyjama party.

Then stopped.

Looked up.

His buddy was watching me from an open-sided tent not five paces away - too shocked at his colleague's swift dispatch to even draw his weapon.

I looked from him to the body and back again.

"*Excusez moi*," I grinned sheepishly, then dashed across and caught him under the chin with a flying kick before he could stutter into his radio. He moaned several times, not entirely out, so I propped him against a plastic chair and held him firm until my pincer-fingers sent him off playing with the fairies. His baseball cap had fallen off in the struggle, and he would have a handsome set of bruises to show his boss when he eventually revived.

I planned on being long gone by then.

Unmolested, I strode to the edge of the pit and swept my professional eye over their work. A stone tower taking up one entire side had been painstakingly cleared of silt and rubble, and scaffolds had grown up the pit like crazy man-made creepers. About mid-way down, a curious round panel seemed to spin in the tower's flank like the interlocking cogs of a giant pocket watch. The panel was of age-darkened wood, as wide as I was tall, and symbols like living gold were etched into each ring - flashing and catching the light in disturbing shapes as the rings revolved.

Well, well, well. What *had* they found?

Satisfied that I was alone, I searched the cabins - munching on one of my energy bars and supping from my water bottle as I went. The first cabin was only the generator housing and maintenance shed, but the second held far more interesting prizes. An on-site office - complete with scanner and notice boards - had been shoe-horned into the cramped space, and I pulled up a swivel chair while I perused the charts and doodles scattered across the desks.

I recognised Carvier's handwriting.

"Maggie, there's information here on the Nephilim... *'the supposed*

hybrid descendants of angels and human women, who flourished in Turkey in early Biblical times’,” my lips pursed, “Yes! I knew I’d heard the name before! Father Patrick mentioned them once, when I was bugging him about my theology exam. Genesis, ‘the Mighty Ones of Eternity, the People of the Shem’.”

And in Numbers, thirteen thirty-three, Maggie prompted. He said many scholars thought that Nephilim might have been the basis for later myths about giants or demi-gods. ‘And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, which come of the Nephilim: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight’.

“But what has an ancient Biblical myth got to do with fourteenth century paintings?”

If Maggie had shoulders, she would have shrugged them.

Maybe Father Patrick knows. Is there anything else here that might help us?

Sighing, I returned to the papers, ignoring my sudden urge for coffee. The craving always gets me at inconvenient times, like when I need to study.

Hold it! These look like the symbols on the cogwheels, said Maggie as I thumbed through the notes. Sure enough, someone had made detailed examinations of the markings, together with scribbled notes querying their translation.

I flipped open Werner’s journal and compared them, suddenly seeing a pattern.

Four markings, in this order... crescent moon... male symbol... dot within a circle and... hey, that one looks like a carrot! This is easy! Maggie exclaimed. I mentally elbowed her in the side.

“Concentrate! Let’s see if it’s right before we jump to conclusions,” I pushed my chair back, slipping the journal back into its pocket.

I vaulted the chain-link fence and stood, judging distance against muscle power, before I launched off and rolled to an awkward landing on the platform immediately in front of the great cog wheel.

My balance shifted, making Maggie yelp in alarm as I rocked on the edge, arms pin-wheeling until I steadied myself. Only then did I look down. The bottom of the pit yawned, like a lion deprived of a juicy morsel. A miniature JCB was parked up among a crowd of buckets

and mud-caked wheelbarrows, with nothing but poles and corrugated iron sheeting keeping the walls from caving in. The floor was bare flagstones, perhaps part of an old road.

Hell of a way to break a fall.

The boards creaked as I stepped up to the wheel, and something strange happened.

It's slowing down, Maggie remarked, bemused, as one by one the revolving rings came to a stop. I heard a hollow rattle, like a snake's warning hiss, and a wooden frame attached to a spring-release handle seemed to melt *right out* of the wheel. The frame aligned itself with a row of four symbols, and it was instantly clear that moving the handle would shift the rings around to display a new combination of markings.

The whole edifice seemed to wait, expectant.

Only then did I exhale.

I hate feeling like I'm being watched.

"Knock, knock," I muttered, and gave the handle a gingerly tug. It took all my strength to heave it down - hanging my weight from the bar until each revolution was complete, until the four markings in the frame matched the combination Werner and Carvier had deciphered. The noise of each turn made me think I was winding God's own grandfather clock - the clanking and grinding almost too loud to bear.

Finally, with a snap and a hiss, the frame withdrew - dissolving back into the wood but leaving the chosen symbols burning like dragon eyes, charring the wood black. The ground trembled uneasily, but I straightened my back, showing no fear as the wheel turned in on itself like the petals of a lotus flower. The edges pointed at me, displaying deadly sharpness, and finally slid right *into* the stone tower.

The hole it revealed, blacker than a sadist's heart, sighed as air rushed past me - smelling of neglect, age and about six hundred years' worth of bat droppings.

"Guess those were the right ones," I murmured, ducking my head inside and feeling the air for helpful currents. "Uh, thanks."

The hairs on my neck prickled. My head snapped round, glancing

behind me.

I didn't need to explain it to Maggie. She knew who I half expected to see, outlined against the chain-link fence - the stalker, following me like a shadow. I waited, poised and listening for one breath, one footfall out of place, but there was nothing. For some reason the very *absence* worried me more than actually seeing someone.

"Stay up here if you want to, Maggie," swallowing my fear, I stepped right into the opening, feeling the floor slope away from me into utter darkness. "But I could really do with your expertise wherever this leads."

Like I have a choice? She drawled. *Come on, girl, where's your spirit of adventure? Stiff upper lip and all that jazz, as Mr Zip would say.*

I managed to smile. "Well, after all we've been through, what's the worst that could be down there?"

The stone abruptly gave way, dropping in a slope I could not possibly gain any purchase on.

I was falling before she could answer, and laughing like a demon the whole way.

Chapter 12

I landed on something wooden and obstinately solid. My body twisted as I hung on, gasping to refill my bruised lungs. My feet dangled over blackness, until my grip on the rotten timbers gave out and I tumbled off with a scream.

I fell about four feet, onto cushion-soft sand.

Well, that wasn't so bad, Maggie stammered. The faintest of phosphorescence lit up my boots, hands, and the roughened limestone walls of the passage. For several minutes, adrenaline backwash sluiced through me, untangling my senses and soothing me with endorphins. One fact stood out: I was alive. It's amazing how much we take that statement for granted.

Once my breathing had settled down to a less panicked rate, I felt my way along the passage - the glow becoming ever brighter. A few strands of my hair had pulled loose, and a whistling of wind blew them into my face as I trudged on, totally unprepared for what lay ahead.

Abruptly the walls, floor and ceiling dropped away. I got down on my stomach to peer over the edge and sucked in my breath at the enormity of my discovery.

You've seen photos of tunnel excavations? Of the sinkholes needed to lower each piece of massive tunnel boring machines into place tens of metres below the surface? Granted, those holes are big, but they were amateur compared to the chamber now in front of me.

Bats hung in sleepy clutches from the stalactite-festooned ceiling. A

few of the creatures fluttered about, as tiny as gnats in an oil drum. Far below - a dizzying depth that sucked at my eyeballs - majestic lamps like those of a pirate galleon proudly ornamented a bridge that had once spanned the chasm's diameter. But the beautiful carvings and masonry had fallen to some ancient calamity and the span had been messily cloven down the centre, leaving two ends that would never again meet.

I slid forward as far as I dared. Below the lamps, shadows encroached - tainted with an eerie bluish glow like St. Elmo's fire. By its light I spotted the cavern floor, which was littered with dark, irregular forms of broken stone. Menacing shapes of gargoyles were festooned all around - leering, snarling and curling their animalistic mouths in challenge, as though keeping whatever was at the bottom of the cavern at bay.

Very carefully, I held a pebble over the edge, and counted as it fell. I heard the faint 'plink' six hippopotamuses later. A breeze, the kind you get at the top of very high buildings, rushed past.

"Piece of cake," I said. My voice shook.

Oh, come on, Maggie whispered, if it wasn't a challenge, how could you possibly enjoy it?

With her words, I felt the old-me surfacing - rivulets of self-belief and audacity that cared nothing for doubt. It sloshed into me like water from a hot spring, bubbling through my fear and washing it clean away. I'd quite forgotten how it felt to be this daring. It had been twenty-six months since I'd last risked death, or explored beyond the confines of my manor. In the time since my return from Egypt, I'd wandered past my trophy room with a strange sense of detachment - as though I could not connect myself to the artefacts within. The Scion and Xi'an Dagger, the Khmer Iris and anachronistic taxidermy all seemed to belong to someone else - not the meditative, reclusive woman I had become since Horus' visions.

In its wake I breathed out, suddenly seeing the chamber through renewed eyes.

"Thanks, Maggie. I needed that."

Approval touched my perception lightly as a snowflake. *Don't mention it.*

Infinitely conscious of my surroundings, and more composed than I'd been in a very long time, I began making my descent.

Climbing has always been one of my passions. There's something about being intimately connected to the living rock of the Earth that stirs the adventurous side of my soul. I remembered practising on the climbing wall at Gordonstoun's gym - how I had easily scaled it and perched, smugly, at the top, waiting for the other girls who were puffing and blowing to catch up. Even slipping had been fun, because of the way the harness would arrest my fall, leaving me spinning in mid-air in total comfort. However, I had quickly tired of that game and it wasn't long before I was climbing without a safety harness, and then without ropes altogether. My teachers hadn't known whether to congratulate me or file a complaint for setting a bad example.

I took my time, following every rib and ridge of stone with my boots' flexible tread. At times I was barely touching the wall at all - placing my whole weight on a few perilous centimetres as I leaned across to gain new purchase. There was a rhythm in my step - a steady little one-two-three beat that I counted, dancing from one point to another. My earlier stretching exercises had paid off; I didn't feel a single twinge as my whole body bent and flexed. It was quite cold in the chamber, but my working muscles kept me comfortably warm. By the time I dropped to the ground, stumbling a little to get my balance, I was sweaty, tingling and smiling in triumph.

I looked back up, and had to resist the sudden urge to shout *Helloooooo!* just to hear the echoes. Sheer joy filled me for a few precious moments, uniting me with strength I thought I'd buried beyond recovery.

Horus would probably have said I'd just forgotten how to use it.

*

The gravel underfoot collapsed inwards as I tried to walk on it, like being in the top half of an hourglass bulb. In a flurry of sand, I dropped through the grating at its centre - leaving it open in case a quick getaway would be needed. I really hate it when doors close behind me for no reason.

The passage wound steadily downwards, growing noticeably

warmer with each step. The spectral luminescence twinkled on the walls like frost, although the air carried no hint of moisture. All I could hear were my footsteps' crunching, and the claustrophobic sound of my breathing.

I almost tripped over the shrivelled corpse.

My heart was in my throat as I prodded the husk experimentally with my toe. It didn't seem to be in imminent danger of rising to chew out my guts - a reality I've had to deal with far too often. The corpse's limbs were stretched out, as though trying to claw the way back to daylight and safety - away from an ominously bolted oak doorway further down the tunnel. The tattered remains of medieval-style clothing clung to its bones. After wrenching off the body's head, arms and legs (just to be on the safe side), I rolled it over and disconnected a crossbow from the remains of its strap.

Fourteenth century hand-arbalest, lever-type trigger, ash stock... Not bad, I mused, blowing off the dust and sighting along the lathe, checking for warping. To my surprise the whole assemblage was in absolutely perfect condition - from the iron stirrup to the hempen string. Nothing had degraded in the tomb-dry atmosphere. There was even a handful of wicked little bolts hidden in a bag, safe in their waxen casings.

I wonder who he was? Maggie pondered. *Probably a tactless grave-robb*er.

"So what are we?" I questioned, squatting by the body. My questing hands rummaged through his pack, and came away brushing sand off a leather-bound book.

The pages were as fragile as tissue, but I was used to handling ancient documents. It had been written in Latin, the scholarly language of the day.

"October 17th 1465" I read. *"There being many years between my master, Pieter, his incarceration, and my present explorations to secure his release. Such knowledge I have gathered that has led me here, to this place under the city... knowledge the Black Alchemist wished expressly to use for himself in completion of the Great Work! Alas that I have to finish it and bear the results alone! The Lux Veritatis yet do not know of my presence, as I slipped through their vigil in the fastness*

of the moon

October 18th. Curses lie upon this place. My investigations and translations of Pieter's last orders guided me here, after many months of searching. Yet I wish now that I had never set eyes upon this tomb. Such evil lies here... thick as the bilious humour. It is necessary for me to commit this to my diary, lest I forget how to instruct others when they come to lay waste to the Lux Veritatis vault!

October 19th. Alas, I am weakened and can write only with effort. Today has been a most terrible day. Guardians within the great hall caught me unawares. I fear the Lux Veritatis hath cursed them to walk in shadow, in mockery of the Black Alchemist's great power! Oh, how clumsy and decrepit they seem, yet so soon removed from life! Master, should you ever read this, how glorified you must feel knowing your enemies' skills fall as those of ants beside yours! Alas though, my arrogance cost me dear, for they hunted and trapped me within the vault for many hours. I hear them now, waiting behind the stone. It becomes necessary for me to force my way through. Master, grant me strength!"

A shudder ran down the length of my body. The last entry was penned in a hasty, trembling script, as though the writer had been in mortal pain as he wrote it.

"October 22nd. My end approaches. I have failed, but perhaps others loyal to the Great Work may come and relieve me of my burden! I cut down my assailants, though each took many arrows and did not cease their hunt of me. It became necessary to leave them crawling below while I climbed to the high chamber. Oh, my master, forgive me! In my terror I fled that place, and its guardian. Brother Obscura, sharing that fate of the others yet worse and stronger for it, descended and forced me from the Painting's resting place. My strength could not match his, even in death. It be days since I entered this accursed tomb, and I feel death now. The sword wound inflicted by one of those thrice-damned Lux Veritatis warriors festers and pains me... cannot climb out... beware, my master, as you enter, for they watch and strike without mercy..."

I closed the book, looking down on the corpse. A servant, or an ally, of the Black Alchemist, Pieter van Eckhardt, trying to get the Painting

while their master remained a captive? I knew almost nothing about the man or his master, but a sudden revulsion seized me and I got to my feet.

He was a fanatic, Maggie said, simply. He came here and died because he believed it was what his master wanted. He was after the Painting on Eckhardt's behalf. But he failed. Something in there didn't want him to succeed.

My heart sank. It's been my experience that when ancient tomb builders employ curses and guardians, they don't skimp on quality. I was well aware that whatever had killed him could still be there - as eager to defend the Painting now as it had been centuries ago.

"Well, we aren't going to get anywhere by standing around," I said, slinging the crossbow across my shoulders. It would give me something to hit things with, if nothing else. The nagging fears were pushed firmly to the back of my mind as I shoved the corpse out of the way with my foot. "It's not as though we don't know what we're doing."

Of course not. We're avenging a friend, and getting to the bottom of a murder, Maggie replied, a little haughtily. It's not like we're planning to keep the Painting.

I needn't have worried about getting past the door; its bolts offered no resistance as I slid them open, and the lack of damp had left the frame un-warped.

I had barely gone five paces when my eyes widened. The passageway's rough-hewn walls transformed into finely-wrought stone in shades of honey, burnt sugar and vintage brandy, polished to a mirror-shine. Willowy pillars and buttresses stood like an honour guard down a hall the length of a cricket pitch. Lamps of copper and crystal hung from chains, gleaming with a fey radiance that made my reflection in the walls seem pale and fearful. Despite the hallway's elegance, I couldn't help but sense a quiet malevolence watching my every move - a presence that was affronted by my intrusion, and would not hesitate to inflict suitable punishment given the chance.

Was that what the man had fled from?

Don't let that imagination run away with you, Maggie cautioned. Trust me. I'm your instincts. I'll keep you safe.

"When have I ever ignored your advice?" I had reached the end of the hallway and paused at a plain-looking wooden door, where I strained to listen for anything lurking on the other side.

Hmm... Well, there was that time when Werner tried to save our life in Egypt-

Bitterness caught me unawares. In my annoyance, I flung the door open, meeting sudden resistance. There was a sickening crunch.

A tangle of rags, rusting armour and brown-stained bones clattered to the floor from where I'd smashed the dead body against the wall. A helmet, an early-Medieval Great Helm with slit visor, rolled and came to rest at my feet. Gingerly, I picked it up, feeling the weight of a much-desiccated skull rattling inside, and sighed.

It's just my luck to break things before I get a chance to appreciate them in their natural, undisturbed state.

"Please don't do that again, Maggie," I spoke very slowly, weighing each word with patient deliberation. "In case you haven't noticed, this is *not* a suitable place to make me lose my temper. Kindly save it for when we're back at home."

Silence.

I grunted, tossing the helm away, and took a good long look around my new surroundings.

But what surroundings! My eye drank in arches and balustrades, tiled floors with rich patterns in ochre and gold, and a high domed ceiling as grand as Hagia Sophia itself. The air felt cool on my bare arms, and carried the faintest whiff of sulphur and woodsmoke.

Cautiously, I stalked the chamber's perimeter, wary of traps. The centre of the great room was sunken, and inlaid with exquisitely-detailed images of the zodiac, the planetary calendars and the seasons. The maiden Aquarius poured foaming jets of jade and lapis from a ewer carved from a single piece of mother-of-pearl, while Sagittarius, the Archer, leapt across a field of stars - his tawny centaur's body alive with threads of amber and mahogany-coloured agate. I was astonished at the artistry, and even more amazed that such a thing was set into the *floor*, where careless feet could tramp and scuff it into oblivion. It seemed sacrilegious to present such beauty where it could be so easily damaged. An eerie hush hung over

the chamber, undulating with the echoes of my booted feet, like being underwater. I felt there should be people - hooded and cloaked and chanting in solemn procession.

Maggie coughed, bringing me momentarily back from my artistic reverie.

There were thirteen doors leading off the hall. Plates of burnished gold hung above twelve of them - each plate etched with a random symbol, one of the old signs for each of the four elements.

The same four symbols made up the central montage of the floor - fitting together into one seamless whole. On the far side of the room, under a piece of broken stairway, four tiny alcoves stared back at me, their receptacles empty.

Nothing in Werner's notebook had prepared me for this. Nothing mentioned in Carvier's research had suggested quite such a grand hiding place for the Painting. I've learnt to keep a fairly liberal imagination of the things people can create when they put their minds to it. But to think that all of *this* had been constructed in secret, hundreds of years ago, below Paris - which even then had been a bustling city - was impressive to say the least.

I suddenly felt very, very small.

"So... logically... I can only move on once I've filled those four alcoves," I pondered, as I walked over to examine them in more detail. "The holders are all the same, except for the theme... Spring for water, summer for fire, autumn for earth and air for winter. And the doors-" I double-checked the symbols, "-should lead me to each - what, key? Crystal? Signed cricket ball? It's about the same size. But *twelve* doors, and only four receptacles. How will I know which is the right one?"

Brooding, I let my eye hover on the chamber's central chandelier. It dominated the room like a thundercloud made of black iron - its sconces thick with candles that smoked and gave off a heavy, languid light. It's uncanny how the places I explore almost always have some sort of lighting - be it cave mould, torches, or the wan, faerie-like lamps I'd seen earlier. It's not as though anyone else could have got into these sealed, ancient sites to light them before me.

I suspect there's a secret society behind it all.

Every now and then, a drop of molten tallow would drip down onto the magnificent tiled floor. If the normal laws of nature applied, then the bejewelled patterns should have been covered with several centuries' worth of wax - but even as I watched, the greasy blemish disappeared without trace.

Hmm.

Ever-alert for traps waiting to slice my face off, I took a deep breath and prodded the symbol for fire. Immediately, the three doors immediately opposite me groaned and shuddered open. Three doors - each with three symbols underneath them - and only one that would lead me to the key.

I approached. Through each door was a short hallway connected to its neighbours by portcullises. Identical levers were placed within each compartment, and it was obvious that pulling a lever would either open to a new chamber beyond, or possibly cause the not-very-stable wooden floor to collapse. It creaked alarmingly under my feet, and I hoped that dry-rot wouldn't do the same thing as mistakenly pulling the wrong lever. There was a plaque just above each lever, each with a different elemental symbol on it. As my fingers closed around the handle, it occurred to me that these were *different* to the plate-symbols hanging above the doors. I had chosen the doorway for fire, but the symbol by my hand was for *wind*.

How very sneaky.

I smiled, pulling my hand away and going back to choose a different doorway. Now the symbol above the lever in my hand was a sunburst of flames.

"Let's hope I'm as clever as I look," I gritted my teeth and wrenched the metal pole down with all my strength.

Chapter 13

The floor started trembling.

My whole body tensed to flee, but then the portcullis ahead of me rose a few feet, jerking up in a series of wobbly motions reminiscent of a drunk staggering up a flight of stairs.

Musty, sulphurous air billowed around me like a cloak. I held my nose and entered, feeling the temperature rise with each step.

Gradually, the room opened out into a long, low cavern, half-hidden in dusty gloom. Chills of foreboding ran up and down my spine, as though I'd stepped into the lair of a sleeping dragon. A blood-red gleam, like the scope of a sniper-rifle, winked at me from the far end. Squinting like mad, I made out a globular crystal, about the size of my fist, nestling in the cupped hands of a leering statue.

Bingo.

Let me be perfectly clear: Impatient people get killed very, very quickly in my line of work. I knew where I wanted to be, and I could see the obvious way to get there. But you'd have thought the floor was studded with ten-inch sharpened nails by the way I crept down from the doorway, testing each and every step before committing to it.

Some sixth sense made me pause, and look to my left. A fanged shape wound around the door frame, up and over and down the right side - becoming twin serpents. Their cold stone bodies were picked out with scales of obsidian that looked sharp enough to cut skin. Their ruby eyes seemed to mesmerise me and, as I stood there, a

threatening hiss escaped their mouths.

I had my gun drawn in a nanosecond but, instead of striking, their mouths glowed red, then white hot. A stream of fire oozed from between their fangs - thicker than treacle, deadly and hypnotic.

Iron, said Maggie, breathless in her awe. Molten iron. You can tell from the smell. Over a thousand degrees Centigrade, at least.

My gun tracked the flow as it cut across grooves scored in the flagstones. They had all been cut into curious hexagonal shapes, and sloped gently downwards to a sunken region of bare rock between me and my goal. The heat from the streams of glowing metal dripping inexorably across the stones was phenomenal.

Then it reached the bedrock, and the room exploded in fire.

A wave of concussion was my only warning. I threw myself flat, hands over my head. Rock smashed and cracked apart - obliterating everything in its path. Maggie was screaming, but I could barely hear her. The ground trembled, making me draw up my knees in a foetal position. The light burned red through my closed eyelids. I smelt singed hair, and shrieked as the skin on the back of my arms and neck began to blister.

Then, quite suddenly, the firestorm died. I was trembling as I dared raise my head, coughing from the smoke.

If I'd been standing when it hit, I'd probably have been vaporised.

The region between me and the crystal now shimmered with fierce heat. The entire floor was lost under a lake of bubbling, spitting liquid metal - scarlet around the edges where the walls were cooler, but brightening to the incandescence of a hundred-watt light bulb at the centre. A few lonely flagstones stood out as dark spots in the white-hot glare.

If I was to get what I came for, I'd have to cross it.

Somewhere inside my head, Maggie whimpered.

I was sweating, and not just from the heat. Holstering my weapon, and wondering how I'd talked myself into this, I made my way carefully down. Areas of the floor had been ripped apart by the force of the explosion, leaving behind rough-edged pits that smoked and smoldered. A haze of fine grey ash choked the chamber, stinking of rotten eggs and scorched metal.

Embers flew like crazed fireflies - darting into my face or patting harmlessly against my clothes. I paused, tearing off a length of emergency bandage from my medikit to wrap around my mouth and nose as protection. Particles stung my eyes as I squinted, picking out a path from the stepping stones.

I don't remember the words, but Maggie and I were both praying as we made our way across. The heat was indescribable - ten times more painful, more draining, than the split second you might let your hand hover over a candle flame. Each stone must have been less than a hand's width above the lake, and some rocked alarmingly as I stepped on them. The soles of my boots grew tacky - expiring in fine melted threads with each raised step. If I didn't hurry they would melt completely, and the prospect of leaping from stone to stone barefoot lent me all the extra impetus I needed.

My relief was a palpable thing as I reached the other side - practically falling into the statue's arms. For several seconds I leaned against it, struggling to breathe, dreading the trip back but grateful that I had at least made it this far.

You can't stay here, Maggie warned. Look! There's the crystal. Grab it and get out of here while we still can!

"All right, all right," I coughed, and gingerly pried the crystal from its holder. It was surprisingly heavy and hissed, searing my hands as I yelped, tossing it from palm to palm, until it cooled enough for me to slip it harmlessly into my backpack.

By then my lungs were aching - every breath like having acid poured down my throat. The heat was a crippling, hurtful thing - scalding my exposed skin like bad sunburn as I staggered back to the lake and started making my way across.

About a metre from safety, the flagstone beneath my foot wobbled and sank without warning. My arms flung out automatically as I fell, grabbing the shoreline. It crumbled but held my weight as I scrambled the last few inches like Wile E. Coyote. The stone disappeared with a fiery gasp - the toe of my boot just brushing the surface of the molten lake and trailing wisps of smoke as I rolled myself out of harm's way. I was almost crying with relief as I crawled past the pits, between the serpents, and through the open door.

The same moment I crossed the threshold, the ancient mechanism rattled and the door came rumbling down - vanishing the hellish chamber forever.

*

Something deliciously cool was wiping my forehead. A trickle of spring water (I could tell it wasn't bottled because once you know the difference, there's no going back) was eased between my lips. Although I knew it was an illusion, I nonetheless smiled gratefully.

Just checking up on you, my dear. A voice spoke from the darkness - the voice of both a God and an old desert woman, speaking in perfect unison. *We like to make sure, from time to time.*

The water was like life itself, running through every vein in my body - washing away the soot and grime, soothing and refreshing.

Can't you stay? I pleaded.

I'm sorry, they spoke with definite sadness. There was a breeze on my face, smelling of spices and oases, of rain on distant mountains. *You were doing well enough without our help!*

Thanks. Both of you.

Courage, Lara. We'll be here when you need us most.

*

My leg itched.

Groggily, I rose into a sitting position, massaging my stiff neck, prising my eyes open. My boot and gloves were still singed, still caked with filth and ash. But my blisters and burns were gone, and my lungs felt as clear as though I'd been sleeping high in the mountains of Eden.

"How long was I out?"

About twenty seconds, give or take, Maggie replied. Her voice trembled with something like wonderment. *What in god's name was that?*

"It seems I have friends," I smiled. "Some very resourceful friends." *I'll say! Was that Horus I heard??*

I sighed, amused by my subconscious' child-like enchantment with

magical forces. Perhaps I had become too blasé about my encounter in the desert.

For many long years I had relied heavily on the scientific, logical side of my nature. Putai - the Tuareg shaman who had guided me after my disastrous adventure in Egypt - had begun to open my eyes to the supernatural in ways I'd not really considered before. True, I'd battled fire-breathing dragons and ancient, immortal beings with tempers shorter than a reality-TV contestant's career. True, I'd seen things and places shaped by forces that science had still not fully understood, but until Egypt I'd been satisfied with the assumption that one day, with enough research and experience, science *would* explain everything.

Until Egypt, I'd never had faith in anything except myself.

I drew out the pendant from under my shirt - a shape that was almost, but not quite, an Ankh. The little girl who had given it to me spun in my memories, joking and laughing as we watered the fields under the hot desert sun.

Don't forget me, she had said, clinging to my arm as she drifted into sleep.

I slipped the necklace back, knowing I never would.

"Come on, Maggie," I said, walking back across to the element stones. "Can't let the home side down, can we?"

Chapter 14

I lost track of time.

There have been many instances when such a thing has happened to me, deep in the bowels of some temple or other. Isolated from external cues, we can adopt some very strange biological rhythms indeed. I knew it couldn't have been more than an hour or so since I'd entered the Hall of Seasons (as Maggie so poetically named it), but things like open air, skies and cities began to feel like they belonged to another world.

My hand cupped an off-white crystal, hefting its weight before placing it into the socket. The images surrounding this alcove were serene, dream-like - clouds and the changing hues of the horizon. What utter bullshit; I had bruises everywhere it was physically possible to get them from recovering the damn wind crystal. It had involved treacherous leaps from the tops of poles cut from ancient pines, bending and creaking above a terminally-deep pit, to reach a narrow ledge where the crystal rested. Gusts of gale-force wind from completely random directions had assaulted me as I'd made each jump - funnelled from the mouths of monstrous stone heads ranged around the walls. They had reminded me of Chinese temple dogs, right down to the rankness of their breath that sought to buffet and unsteady me. My ears still ached from the creaking of the poles as they swayed underfoot, like the ghost of a tea-clipper running full sail around the Straits of Magellan. I was shivering and queasy when I returned to the hall and placed the crystal next to its neighbours for

fire and water.

Water! At least there I'd been fortunate. Those dank and dripping chambers would have posed more of a problem if their traps hadn't rusted into immobile lumps long ago. It had taken a lot of patience and all of my training in deep-breathing, but at least I hadn't been skewered, bent or crushed by the arrays of menacing spikes and blades. A few forlorn-looking fish had been the crystal's only guardians, but I still couldn't shake off the feeling that my every move was being watched.

The cobalt-blue stone shimmered in its socket as I scanned the alcoves, and returned once more to activate the final doorway. My clothes had mostly dried out after my sojourn in the wind room, but my boots squelched with every step.

"Earth," I muttered, drawing myself up as the door rose before me. "It can't be any worse than fire, can it?"

I wish you hadn't said that, Maggie groaned. Every bloody time you jinx it by saying it can't get any worse. You can practically guarantee it.

"Enough whining. I know what I'm doing. Anyway, this is the last one. The Painting can't be far away now."

You hope, Maggie sighed, mentally shaking her head as I peered into the murk. Dust motes swirled in the rays of light from the hall, guiding my way down a set of shallow steps to the largest room I'd seen yet - bigger than the other element chambers, or even the main hall. The air was chilly and fetid with the smell of an old grave.

I froze, almost swallowing my tongue. A giant towered ahead of me, across an acre of tiled floor. Its gaze was fixed upon me - its shining black eyes filled with demonic intelligence. Vast wings stretched out to its sides, and its lordly head was crowned by two curling horns. Twin globes of flames sputtered and smoked in its outstretched hands, the ash drifting up and veiling the creature's snarling face in haze.

Only then did I realise it was a statue.

Uncertainty gripped me, though my fear eased considerably. Years ago I'd fought a bull Tyrannosaurus (don't ask) - a predator three times my height that could have cheerfully swallowed me whole. But he would have looked as ludicrous as a Yorkshire terrier next to this

monster.

Maggie, as always, swooped in and lent me her courage.

Steady, girl. Take it nice and slow. There's no reason to expect it to come alive, just because it looks so lifelike. See! There's the crystal, down there between its ankles. You just need to ease arou- BLOODY HELLFIRE!

A tremendous barrage shook the chamber, louder than several express trains colliding. I was knocked over, unable to keep my balance as the floor suddenly bucked like an angry horse. The tiles seemed to ripple, disintegrating before my eyes. Great sections collapsed, tumbling down and smashing against each other with terrifying violence.

Holding onto the steps for dear life, I watched in horror as the statue shuddered and broke apart under the strain. The fires tumbled from its hands and were extinguished. Its body shattered into car-sized pieces, until at last the great head toppled off the shoulders and crashed through the floor.

Almost as quickly as they had begun, the tremors eased. I stood, brushing myself off, and struggled to see through the dust cloud that hung over the remains of the floor. Great rents and fissures had torn it apart. Unsettling sounds echoed from the depths, as though the remains of the once-grand chamber were being welcomed and tormented by the denizens of hell.

"Oh, boy..."

See? See! I told you! Oh no, you had to open your big-

"Maggie, shut up!" I rubbed the grit from my eyes and pursed my lips into a thin line, trying to pick out a safe path. "Okay, you're my subconscious, *okay* you sometimes make very valid points but right now I need to *concentrate*. And that means giving me space. Right?"

Hey, you're not actually...?! She squeaked as I shuffled across to the nearest outcrop. The floor gave a warning tremble.

"You're the one who gives my heroism a kick up the arse. Watch me."

I leapt.

Truth be told, I was counting on bravura more than actual confidence. There have been many times when I've acted

spontaneously and with more than a fair share of recklessness - despite the fact that, inwardly, I might be trembling in my boots. Experience had gifted me with enough insight to spot this trait in good leaders - or at least, people whom others would follow without question.

The gaping abyss held plenty of terrors for me; memories of being buried alive aren't something a woman can brush idly away. But if I didn't face them now, then when?

I landed exactly where I'd intended to, but had barely enough time to think as the stone beneath my feet shuddered and began falling.

Adrenaline coursed through me - lending me super-charged strength to leap to safety. My perception sharpened, judging distance perfectly. I felt my brain buzz as white-hot reflexes seared through muscle and sinew, dodging tumbling rocks and vaulting across gaping pits with ease.

There was no time to analyse. No time to be cautious and rational. *This* was the other side of my exploits I had always loved. The daring, the adventure - the hair's breadth roller-coaster with death snapping at my heels. I was laughing as I made the last jump, confident in the knowledge I had finally reunited with my true self.

And missed.

I cried out, eyes widening in horror. My fingers brushed the last column, but I simply didn't have enough momentum to reach the other side. I screamed, scrabbling the air in my sudden terror, feeling the chasm yawn open to devour me.

I don't know how I grabbed the outcrop, or how such a tiny ledge held my weight.

The earth's trembling vibrated through my fingers, my palms becoming slick with sweat. I was choking on the dust that seemed to be swirling everywhere. Somewhere above me, a man was shouting.

"Quickly girl! Before it collapses around you!"

"No," I breathed, blinking up at the apparition, "Not again! You're dead!"

Gravity tugged at me. Beyond the bounds of normal hearing, a hawk was shrieking.

"No time. Your hand, Lara, give me your hand!"

“Werner!” Tears coursed down my cheeks. “You can’t be here! I saw you killed! *What are you doing here?!*”

“I can pull you to safety!”

“You’re not real! You can’t be real!”

Lara...

A shape stirred in the gloom. A hot wind embraced me, smelling of the desert and painful memories.

I looked up into Horus’ burning eyes.

“You again! Why are you *doing* this to me?”

Surely even you can see you are doing it to yourself, he replied mildly. His hawk’s features never moved.

“I don’t understand-“

Dear Lara. After all you’ve seen and done, are you still going to let this hold you back?

I was standing upright, on the expensive parquet floor of Werner’s apartment, watching my mentor argue as the thunder rumbled outside. His frailty and fear dawned on me with fresh empathy, as I saw my earlier self growing more and more bitter - cutting herself off from his distress.

You wouldn’t have come to Paris at all if you hadn’t begun to forgive him.

“You think? I’m hunting his killer as we speak! Of course I’ve forgiven him!”

Horus’ eyes seemed to twinkle in amusement. *Indeed. But have you thought about whether your motives are pure?*

“Why are you so concerned?”

Because you might not realise when your desire for justice turns into need for revenge. You may choose either, but vengeance will not help you to forgive Von Croy for abandoning you.

I watched my memory of Werner’s death fade into blackness. A gunshot rang out, and its echoes disappeared among the crashing of stone.

“How will I know the difference?”

You will know, Horus’s voice reassured. Your healing is going well. By the time the choice comes, you will know.

The rock beneath my fingers solidified. I opened my eyes, and

swung myself up the last few inches, pulling myself to solid ground just as the last of the columns tumbled into the depths.

My heart was pounding. Sweat clung to me like a clammy, dust-coated second skin as I lay, regaining a measure of control after the rush of hormones. My water bottle brought welcome relief as I swilled the dust from my mouth and drank gratefully, wondering if it was godly prerogative to pester people only during life-or-death struggles. Perhaps my desire for closure had been too eager, too soon; the similarity between this place and my near-death experience back in Egypt were too close for my unconscious mind to ignore.

I just had to hope he was right.

The earth crystal shone with sickly green fox-fire, and seemed to pulse like a beating heart as I plucked it from its resting place. I hadn't bothered to wonder till now how I would get back to the hall across the now enormous pit, but as soon as I tucked the stone inside my backpack, the choice was made for me.

A crystalline chiming filled the chamber, swiftly growing in volume until, to my astonishment, the abyss dissolved in churning mist the colour of maple syrup. Fragments of stone rose from the haze and swirled in formation like a flock of starlings - arranging themselves into a new floor even more grand and elaborate than the last one.

Cautious but inwardly fascinated, I crept forwards and tested the nearest edge with my foot.

It held my weight.

You know what you said earlier, about impatience? Maggie ventured nervously. *Well, it certainly seems a good-*

"I've got another one for you, Maggie," I interrupted, taking a deep breath. "He who hesitates is lost."

I ran for it.

To my eternal surprise and delight, the floor did not collapse and plunge me to a violent death. Relief washed its cooling balm over me; as refreshing as stepping into a tropical shower.

In retrospect, I should have known better than to let my guard down.

The door rumbled open, and a shape crashed down in front of me - a ringing *clang!* setting my teeth on edge.

An assemblage of bones and rusted armour stood *en garde* before me - the very collection I had demolished earlier with the door. It staggered as I pushed past - its headless body searching for the source of the noise. The broadsword raised sparks as it scraped along the ground, and its owner turned, rising for another swipe. It had almost decapitated me with that first swing, but this time, I was ready.

I'd popped a dozen shells into its torso before it could complete the manoeuvre - decent nine millimetre rounds this time, not the expensive shock darts. With an unearthly wail the body tripped backwards and fell. Pieces flew everywhere with a noise like someone dropping an accordion.

I felt like laughing - it seemed I still had my touch. My foot nudged the pile of bones, and for the first time I noticed the arrow-like emblem sewn on the surcoat.

The Lux Veritatis, Maggie murmured, having finally gotten her breath back.

"It looks like the same symbol, doesn't it? Hmm... Must be some sort of reanimation curse. Everyone seems to have their own brand of it to discourage people like us." I holstered my guns, "Not that it works."

Oh, so suddenly the love of violence makes a comeback. Shall I tick it off the list? Her voice was peevish as I approached the alcove with the earth crystal clutched in my fist.

I sighed. "You know as well as I do that museum guards and police are one thing, and undead fiends born of unholy magic are another. Now be quiet and let me focus. We both know these places like to spring traps at the smallest provocation."

Chapter 15

We both held our breath as I fitted the crystal into its socket. The greenish glow flared, like a winking eye.

For an age, nothing happened.

Do you feel something? Maggie whispered, but I was already registering a change in the room.

The tremors began through the soles of my feet - a vibration as distant as a laden truck passing the other side of the street. A clanking sound echoed up from beneath the floor, as though ancient machinery was groaning painfully into life - clockwork and hydraulics, heavy with rust and the neglect of centuries. Dust drifted from the ceiling, coating my shoulders and upraised eyelashes. Lamps swayed fitfully, throwing ghoulish shadows across the walls.

Transfixed, I could only watch as those exquisite tableaux of gemstones and loving artistry set into the floor began to rise. Each panel crept upwards on columns higher and higher - driven ceiling-ward by hidden ingenuity and engineer's cunning. Then, just as smoothly, they descended - each pillar appearing to bow to its neighbours - before coming to a hovering pause at my eye-level and beginning their stately journey once more.

The floor was a staircase, one that only the most intrepid - or foolhardy - would dare to climb.

"Which are we, Maggie?" I murmured, approaching the nearest pillar. At the very top of the chamber, at the dome's zenith, was an opening I had not noticed before. It was an oculus - a circular skylight

common in Classical architecture from the 1500s onwards. Some forgotten disaster had claimed the upper balcony, and sheared off a section of architecture the size of a double-decker bus.

Wan torchlight shone through the hole - beckoning, tempting.

The Painting could only be up there, somewhere.

It wasn't hard to haul myself onto the lowest pillar. It seemed to float, adjusting to my added weight, and then began rising. I kept my centre of gravity low, taking care not to slip on the onyx and jet tableau of Scorpio, its tail poised to strike. Patiently, I waited for the next pillar to drop into range, then the next, and the next. Sagittarius, Taurus, Gemini - works that any Renaissance craftsman would have been privileged to create, and even more distraught to see me tramping all over.

At last, the pillars' journey terminated within reach of the great iron chandelier. Without hesitation, I stepped lightly up and threw my arms out for balance. Heat frazzled my senses as I picked my way across the tallow-encrusted metal, until (with considerable relief) I could vault over the low balustrade and onto the balcony.

It was Maggie who saved my sight.

The wall exploded. Chips of marble sliced my upraised forearms; she had instinctively thrown them up to cover my eyes before I even registered what was happening.

Half-blinded by dust, I stumbled to avoid chunks of stone the size of my body. Coughing, I scooted backwards on my backside, training my guns on the shambling figure that had broken free of its entombment. It spotted me, hissed a challenge, and swung its greatsword at my unprotected flank.

I hate being made to feel unwelcome.

Howling a war-cry of my own, I lashed out and shattered its kneecaps with an awkward kick. Rotting teeth and stinking chain mail toppled forwards, descending with a furious gargle to crush me. At the last moment, I rolled to one side, emptying my guns through the slit in its helm.

Scrambling, I leapt to my feet, not waiting for it to rise. The thing clawed at my retreating footsteps. The Lux Veritatis arrow flapped from its torn surcoat.

“Persistent bugger, aren’t you?” I reloaded with grim intent, backing away to safety.

Or so I thought.

As if the knight had been a signal, the stone walls along the entire length of the balcony rumbled and broke apart as more Lux Veritatis guardians emerged from their slumber. In seconds, the sweeping crescent of the balcony became littered with hunks of masonry. A choking cloud of dust reduced the approaching figures to little more than shadows and baleful glowing eyes.

There were no more stairs, no doorways. I was cornered.

“Any ideas, Maggie?” I ventured, sounding much calmer than I felt. “They don’t seem to notice being shot at.”

So I can see, she replied. The guardian with the broken legs and bullet-riddled skull emerged from the gloom - its splintered bones reattached any-which-way. Its steps were faltering, but nothing less than pure, implacable hatred powered its movements.

Krrsssssss!

In a heartbeat, the other knights drew their swords and took up the cry - a sound that would have emptied the bladders of lesser men. Bringing back the dead isn’t as difficult - I’ve encountered the practise several times in one form or another - but preserving a body’s purpose and will is another matter. Whatever power was being employed by the Lux Veritatis, it was pretty high quality stuff; only in Egypt and a handful of Chinese tombs had I seen reanimated corpses with such initiative and persistence. My thoughts automatically seized on the lump of C4 still in my backpack, but I doubted even that would slow them all down for long.

My back thudded against the wall. The crossbow dug into my shoulder blades, and I unslung it, ready to wield it like a club.

Fighting’s not an option! Maggie urged. *They’ll pick you off if you stay here. Climb! Climb!*

Cursing, I re-slung the crossbow and scanned for a route up the almost-sheer surface. The handholds were crumbling and spaced too far apart for comfort, but I wasn’t about to argue. I’d barely hoisted myself up when the nearest corpse reached me. The tiled wall yielded to his rusting sword as easily as butter - his swing missing me by

millimetres.

The thing screamed in frustration, but I didn't dare look down. Higher and higher I climbed - my spine arching as I traversed the curving face of the dome. More than once my handholds gave way, dissolving into grit that stung my eyes. Gravity increased with brutal efficiency, tugging at my burning shoulders. The crossbow thumped against my butt with every motion, and the added weight made me sweat. *Why* had I thought it would be a good idea to bring it along?

At last, impossibly, I dragged my aching body through the oculus and rolled onto stone. Wonderful, cool, *solid* stone.

"Never again," I panted, too relieved to care about the enraged caterwauling far below. "Never again..."

Well, at least we're better off than that lunatic with the diary.

"Maybe," I allowed myself a rueful smile. It was sobering to feel the difference in my body; two years ago, I wouldn't even have broken a sweat for a climb like that. Still, no sense being overly-critical; I had survived, and my enemies were fruitlessly venting their frustration instead of hacking me into bite-sized pieces. It was something to feel thankful for, at least.

While I paused to catch my breath, I suddenly felt a deep relief that Werner had not attempted to retrieve the Painting himself. It would have been suicidal for a man in his condition to even contemplate gaining entry to this tomb, let alone defeat its guardians. Once, perhaps, he would have done so - and hired a battalion of thugs to do the dirty work for him. However, with his perceived need for secrecy, and the terror of Eckhardt breathing down his neck - not to mention his physical frailty - it would have been unthinkable for the old man to even try.

My heart softened. Regardless of our history, he'd done the right thing asking for my help.

The space above the oculus was a low-ceilinged, narrow hallway choked with cobwebs. The light came from up a flight of steep stairs - a single torch that only seemed deepen the shadows. After my experiences of the chambers below, I was surprised by such incongruous simplicity. Perhaps I'd come to the wrong place?

At the top of the stairs Maggie gasped, and I realised my doubts

were unjustified.

It felt like stepping into the nave of a Gothic church. Bronze braziers sat between stout granite pillars, and gave off cloying smoke that crept over the bowls and trickled across the floor like sluggish ghosts. Their ruddy glow did not extend very far, and the ceiling was lost in vaulted, inky darkness.

A monk carved from black basalt stood directly facing the door - his hands proffering a fantastically polished marble plaque like a herald displaying his Lord's emblem at a tournament. Four more identical statues stood at intervals around the room - their impassive faces turned to the walls as though watchful for intruders.

My eyes narrowed. In the centre of the choking haze, on a raised dais, stood six more statues on whose shoulders rested a sarcophagus. All were chiselled from more of the coal-black stone, except for the marble skulls in place of the pallbearers' faces.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the room, however, was the trench of smoldering embers that encircled the dais. It cut across the floor like a crack in lava - subtly threatening, a boundary that should not be crossed. The glow of firelight made the statues' eye sockets seem to flicker, and lip-less smiles stretch into hellish grins.

There was no sign of the Painting anywhere.

As I have already mentioned, impatience is not a virtue in my line of work. The trick is to examine every detail, not to jump to conclusions based on a just cursory examination. I've lost count of the number of archaeological sites that others have visited and disregarded as worthless, only for me to come along and point out the hidden meaning staring them in the face. A hairline crack can be a door; a pebble out of place can mark a trip wire; a riddle of broken hieroglyphs can warn you not to feed the crocodiles.

No joke. Those ancient Egyptians had a twisted sense of humour.

With all this in mind, it will come as no surprise that I entered with the utmost caution. Surprisingly, all of the statues' plaques were blank, with nothing to suggest identity or purpose. The sarcophagus was a different matter.

"Maggie, I hope you're taking note of this," I muttered, approaching with care. Words were carved into the sarcophagus' flanks, under a

light covering of dust that I easily brushed away.

"Brother Mathieu Obscura, 1461," I breathed. "That's the monk who was supposed to have painted over the original Obscura Paintings. I wonder if Carvier knew he was buried here..."

What does the rest of the inscription say?

I pursed my lips, struggling to decipher the text. "It's in Latin... *Ultra Vigilis Unbram, Ecce Veritas.*"

Through the Spirit of the Keeper, Behold the Truth, Maggie translated. *No... I'm just as puzzled as you are.*

"There are times when-" I began, but got no further.

My vision exploded in scarlet, fractured agony. I was shoved back, cracking my skull on stone. The temperature plummeted, freezing my eyelids shut. The air in my lungs crystallised with sickening speed, as though I'd swallowed broken glass.

For a moment, I was back under the Pyramid, lost under crushing darkness, helpless and broken.

About to die.

A shriek pierced my delirium, thrusting me back to full consciousness. I've done some things I'm not proud of, but I was sure my afterlife wouldn't contain sounds like that.

Something vaguely man-shaped blurred past, hovering just out of reach. Coldness emanated from it like a doorway into Antarctica. Frost clung to my eyelashes, and numbed my outstretched fingers. Again that eldritch scream crucified my ears - like a demon who had unearthed the legal papers from the Fall and learnt who had sold them out.

It dived at me again.

Move!! Maggie cried, as I avoided its touch by a whisker - banging against a pillar in my haste to get away. Stars exploded across my vision. The howling, wailing apparition sailed past, circling to the far side of the chamber.

I came to lying scant inches from the smouldering trench. Its warmth caressed me, thawing me out. I regained my senses, but one blinking mote of light refused to disappear.

It was the plaque of the statue in front of me - its form suddenly alive with a twinkling blue halo. I shook my head, refusing to be

distracted by concussion-induced hallucinations.

I had not imagined it. In the centre of the radiance was a painting.

The Painting, capital O.P.

Well, wouldn't you know it?

For god's sake, just grab it and get out of here! Maggie yelled.

Discretion and valour! Discretion and valour!

"What the hell do you think I'm doing?" I cried back, perhaps confusing the spectre as it circled towards me for another assault. The braziers went out one by one as it floated past - its unnatural aura sapping the flames' energy. Stupefied, I realised the truth.

The fiery trench wasn't there for decoration, or defence.

It was a prison. The spectre couldn't sustain itself without the constant heat.

I had a chance.

The ghost hovered, choosing its moment. Its tattered robes flapped in disturbing patterns, as though blown by winds not of this Earth. I tried to predict its motion, but there was nothing remotely human about its movements. Its eyes were like burn holes in the fabric of reality.

I made the mistake of meeting its gaze, and had my second epiphany in less than a minute.

Memory overwhelmed me, scored deep with teenage emotions - the sour-sweet smell of mould and mildew, the drip-drip-drip of rain leaking through rotting thatch. For the space of a heartbeat, I was taken back to a dark and gusty night in a forgotten chapel, lost in the Irish Sea.

I'd seen this ghost before.

There was no time to think about that now. I tore my gaze away angrily, pushing the thoughts aside. Maggie would help me understand the connection - if there was one - some other time, *if* I managed to get us out of here.

I fainted left. My dodge turned into a roll - the spectre missing me by inches. A blast of cold pushed me to my feet and I made a blind grab for the Painting.

My hand tingled as though electrified, but grasped at something solid. The Painting was barely the size of Werner's notebook. Even as

my fingers tightened around its frame, the ghost swooped down for another attack.

I didn't look back. Clutching my prize, I dodged the statue - upending a brazier and scattering hot coals. The ghost howled. A desperate leap took me over the trench's boundary, through the yawning doorway to safety. At the last moment, I pulled my long braid out of the way as the door clanged shut.

The ghost's scream of rage must have been heard all over Paris.

Chapter 16

The tomb was flooding.

I'd survived Brother Obscura's vengeful spirit, and made it past a troop of undead guardians.

I was alive, and had the Painting.

And now the freaking tomb was *flooding*.

"Oh, come *on*," I growled, sloshing in ankle-deep water. The hallway was already awash with rippling reflections. A single torch sputtering fretfully was the only illumination.

Without a moment's hesitation, I slipped the Painting into the relative safety of my backpack. I was only just in time.

With barely enough warning to take a breath, a wall of black water burst through the far door. Its roaring bore down on me with freezing, implacable violence - lifting me off my feet and sweeping me along in its grip.

Instinctively I fought against the current, only to be battered and tossed about like a cork in a river. My ears rang but I had enough presence of mind to tuck my arms around my head; if I got knocked out now, it would be game over.

A brilliance lit up behind my eyelids, and I blinked through the chaos to find the bridge lanterns winking bravely as they resisted the ever-increasing pressure. I was back in the entrance chasm. With the lanterns to guide me, I kicked upwards - my lungs aching harder with every stroke. Bubbles thrilled past me like silvery fish.

Those final twelve seconds might as well have been a decade, but

just as my ears began popping, I breached the surface. In the cold darkness I trembled, tasting bile as I fought to control my stomach, but could not resist the laughter welling up inside me.

For long moments, I let myself float as the water continued to creep up the sides of the cavern. Maybe one day, the Louvre archaeologists would find their way down here and go diving for the buried treasures of the Hall - never realising that the main prize had already been taken. Perhaps they would be lucky enough to find the drowned remains of the Lux Veritatis guardians, although part of me doubted that even this amount of water would faze the skeletons' undead dedication to duty. I wondered if, by removing the Painting, I had unwittingly removed the one thing perpetuating their existence, and that the vitality that had animated those faithful bones was already being washed away.

The ink-dark water finally stabilised near the top of the cavern. I sculled until my feet touched stone, and I recognised the oak beams that had forestalled my fall. After only a short climb, I was back at the dig site - peering through the cogwheel entrance like an owl emerging from its aerie at dusk. The harsh glare of electric lights hurt for a moment, until my eyes attuned to the change. My ever-reliable (and mercifully waterproof) watch said a little past two in the morning. I'd been in the tomb for almost three hours. The guards' unconscious bodies were gone, but no alarms blared, and no one was waiting for me with handcuffs and a police escort. My awareness sank deeper - my movements slowing to a deliberate, watchful gait. Apart from the soft whir of air conditioning, the place was silent and deserted.

It worried me. A lot.

Well, did you think it would be that easy? Maggie grumbled. My unconscious registered the change even more profoundly, at an almost painful level. The Painting in my backpack sagged, as though gaining a metaphysical weight.

I waited a long time, listening for danger, before I eased open the basement doors. In one fluid motion I cocked my guns, foregoing the shock rounds or tranquiliser darts. Maggie's approval was a reassuring thing. The signs of trouble were all there, and I was not

about to defend my life with nothing but a guilty conscience.

What's your next move?

"We follow Werner's lead," I replied softly. "We go upstairs, get to Carvier's X-ray facilities and find out what the hell this Painting is hiding."

Chapter 17

I met my first problem at the top of the stairs - confirming my worst fears.

The roving light from his rifle-mounted torch was my only warning he was there at all, and I quickly flattened myself against the wall before he spotted me. The man was dressed in the kind of apparel you only see in the top echelons of military-grade outfitters - complete with infra-red goggles, webbing belts and a respirator.

He sported no badges, no identifying features; even official SWAT teams would at least have had their names sewn on their lapels.

I groaned inwardly. Why did it *have* to be mercenaries?

Men like him were the bane of my archaeological career - men who sold their services, whether amateur or professional, and cared for nothing beyond their own necks and the next shipment of cash. It was bad enough when I encountered them from time to time in the field, when they were normally to be found in the pay of an upstart rival. A reputation like mine tends to attract bodyguards, hired guns and outright thugs into my co-workers' employment.

I can't imagine why anyone would be so paranoid; I'm an okay girl, when you get to know me.

On the other hand, mercenaries belonged in the Louvre as much as a Cape buffalo with jock itch belonged in a nursery playgroup. Such things just couldn't be allowed.

I pounced as his back was turned. He reacted with trained reflexes -

whipping around to bring his weapon to bear. I didn't let him complete the move, but snarled and jabbed with stiffened fingers. His Kevlar vest was no protection against a strike to the throat, and he collapsed, gasping - his windpipe crushed.

I pulled him into a darkened corner and held the pressure till his spasms ceased. Any qualms I might have had about using mortal force were quashed by the specs of his weapons - not least the short-barrelled semi-automatic rifle dangling from his shoulder strap. He wasn't some budget muscle-for-hire, but a trained soldier. The notion did not add to my sense of well-being.

With great care, I took the complaints of my muscles - the hundred-and-one little aches and pains that had been bothering me - and locked them into a secure compartment within my mind. Such things would be dealt with later; right now, I had bigger problems to worry about.

Only then did I smell the faint whiff of gas.

That first, almost-imperceptible breath almost made me pass out. Numbly, I unbuckled the dead man's respirator and clamped it to my own mouth. Through the underwater-blurriness of its visor, I watched the room turn steadily green as the gas cloud expanded. It reminded me of pond scum or diseased flesh.

I was running out of time.

Like a ghost, I slipped back through into the galleries, avoiding two more guards in the forest of pillars and shadows. I felt like a ghost, too - insubstantial but sustained by willpower stronger than mere physical flesh. Several Louvre security officers lay where they had fallen, limbs thrust out awkwardly. I couldn't tell if any were still breathing.

My security pass still worked, thank the gods. Making doubly-sure I was alone, I slid into the office marked 'X-Ray and Spectral Imaging'.

Silver moonlight shone through the skylights, bathing the room in appropriately wraith-like shadows. Even through the protection of my respirator, my eyes began watering at the smell of acetone. I crept past priceless oil paintings, denuded of their frames, and neat trays of restoration equipment, through a sliding door of toughened, radiation-proof glass into an adjoining room.

The X-ray machine was only a little bigger than a photocopier - designed for examining paintings rather than medical patients. Fortunately, its controls were intuitive and relatively simple; my four-year retraining as a radiographer could be put on hold. Casting a glance over my shoulder, I slipped my precious find into the scanner and pushed a few likely-looking buttons.

The images began processing on the screen, and my hands started trembling.

"Maggie..." I murmured. I could hardly tear my eyes away. "That device... We've seen it before haven't we?"

Yes, she whispered. *In Werner's notebook, and Carvier's office.*

With great care, I leafed through the pages of my dead friend's journal, finally finding what I was looking for.

And there it was. Not quite believing my eyes, I held the journal against the screen - comparing Werner's sketches to the flickering digital image.

"The machine can't identify the material, except that it's definitely a metallic compound. The Painting also contains two pictures, one on top of the other. Brother Obscura *did* paint over the original image, just as Carvier's notes said!"

I swallowed, taking note of the device's deceptive simplicity. The implications were enormous, too much for my over-burdened brain to process all at once.

The myths, and all of the research my friend had died for, were true.

I was holding a piece of the Sanglyph.

"*This* is what those mercenaries are after. They're hunting the Paintings, hunting for the Sanglyph. Werner suspected but was too scared to step in and go after it himself."

If this piece of the puzzle is true, then there will be others... Maggie said. *Four Engravings, four Paintings, four more pieces of the Sanglyph.*

"Vasiley faxed all but one of the Engravings to Von Croy. They'll provide the locations to the other Paintings - locations those mercenaries will kill to possess."

Well, it's obvious - we've got to find them before anyone else does. We've got to get back to Werner's apartment and find them - now.

Instantly, my mind became clearer. The mystery had deepened, but

I knew what the next step must be. My gut instinct was utterly certain. There, in the place where my friend had died, I would find the answers.

Gingerly, I removed the Painting from the scanner. Every brushstroke was as fresh as the day it had been applied, showing a chorus of red-robed angels descending on a pastoral scene with the golden light of God in heaven at their backs, as though He was urging them down onto the world below. I ran my finger lightly across the painted surface, knowing that some other image lurked beneath the veneer of oils - something substantially less devout in its subject matter, no doubt. With a shiver, I realised I could even feel the uneven bumps where the Sanglyph fragment was buried - hidden by its micrometre-thin coating of paint.

I hoped I was imagining my fingers tingling at the contact - as though I was holding a cable carrying lethal current, with nothing but a pair of rubber gloves for protection. I slipped the thing back in my backpack, suppressing a shudder.

Whatever the Sanglyph was to be used for, my instincts told me it couldn't be for anything good.

Chapter 18

“Nepřítel spozorován!”

I had already ducked at the first syllable - deafened by a catastrophe of breaking glass - and hit the deck as fragments fell like hail.

Incensed at being caught out, I glared through a tangle of table legs and fired at the first set of kneecaps that came into view.

The semi-automatic in my hands barked with barely any recoil, but not loudly enough to cover the screams. Using the brief window of opportunity, I broke cover - planting bullets with conservative care until the two mercenaries lay unmoving. Blood - blackened in the moonlight - bubbled from deep wounds. They'd died quickly, at least.

My time in the Louvre had just run out.

Turning away in disgust, I dashed back down the moonlit hallway and practically flew down the metal stairs, back to Galerie 3. The poison gas was thicker here, muffling everything in sickly green haze. A tickle in my throat grew too insistent to ignore and I coughed.

The sound attracted the attention of two more mercenaries who were creeping through the foyer. They didn't pause to identify the source; they just turned and opened fire, yelling into their microphones.

I can't dodge bullets, but I *can* close the distance on people who don't take the critical moments needed to properly aim at their targets. Ricochets whistled through my hair as I responded with short bursts from my own gun - downing one and swinging the rifle's heavy stock to clobber the other. His face mask cracked and instantly he

went down on his knees, clawing feebly at his mouth.

Onwards I ran, past promotional posters and signs directing people to the restrooms. Hallways and rare artworks went past in a blur. I couldn't help but be uncomfortably aware that I was leaving a trail of conspicuous evidence that the invaders couldn't ignore.

As I ran through an exhibition hall, a tingling of premonition thrilled through me, and was rewarded when the glass ceiling disintegrated. Fist-sized holes appeared in the floor, tracing my dash for cover.

Furiously, I sighted on the soldiers just as their abseil lines reached the ground. A stray bullet pinged against a cabinet, raining glass onto my head. A superb Islamic blue bowl teetered, and then smashed onto the floor in a shower of ceramic dust.

12th century Syria, I glared. *You bastards.*

I plucked extra rounds from the bodies and fled, leaving them dangling pathetically in mid-air. With more force than was strictly necessary, I reloaded - my fury souring with distaste. Whoever these mercenaries were, they had absolutely no appreciation for culture.

As I jogged along, another fact nagged at the back of my mind; whoever was behind this invasion wielded more than a little temporal power. Mercenaries infiltrating the Louvre - especially ones as well-equipped and trained as these guys - would not come cheap.

Passing squads forced me to seek the cover of shadows, and I slipped away in the opposite direction, down a stairwell into Galerie 2. Although the gas seemed to be dissipating, the Louvre's corridors seemed to go on forever. My subconscious sighed in agreement; *where was the exit?*

The air was definitely cleaner down here. With relief I slipped off my mask, letting it dangle within easy reach, and paused at the entrance to Galerie 2. It seemed to buck the trend from the others I had visited - being low-ceilinged and lit only by the long display cases that divided its length. Some impressive examples of Egyptian and Greek vases obscured my view across the room, and I slowed, listening out for danger.

There was hardly any chance to register the threat. It blew past making a sound like the whetting of a Damascus-steel blade - a

golden blur of eye-searing intensity - turning my evasion into a awkward spin. In moments my gun was out, and my eyes widened.

It was a discus - its bladed edge shining like the glint in the eye of an angel - and it was buried almost completely in the solid marble wall. The glow faded, quiescent.

I tensed, knowing it had missed me by inches - knowing that it had *changed direction* as it flew. In silence, I snapped a fresh round into my purloined machine gun, scanning the room. Nothing else seemed to be poised to attack me, but caution made me hesitate.

Very slowly, I began backing up the way I had come.

Something cold pressed into my back, and I stopped dead.

Of course...

How could I have been so careless? In the hullabaloo of finding the Painting and avoiding hired guns, I'd completely forgotten about my stalker. He must have been waiting for me all this time. I almost asked if I might be permitted to walk over and bang my head against the wall, but I couldn't imagine him taking such a request in good humour.

Don't kick yourself too much, Maggie sighed. I didn't even notice he was there. Whoever he is, he's good.

He was also far, far too close for comfort.

When the hero (or heroine) is threatened with a gun in the movies, they always seem to have a clever trick to escape their assailant. The editor and director will work their magic, and in a few well-cut camera shots you'll see the hero pull free, knee their attacker in the groin, and generally end up holding the gun, jumping on a horse and riding off into the sunset.

Yeah, right.

That stuff only works in the movies, I'm afraid. As any sane person will tell you, when a man is holding a gun's muzzle against your carotid artery, the only sensible thing to do is freeze. Any threatening move on my part wouldn't leave me chance to blink, let alone gain the advantage.

Even though I knew it was the logical and prudent thing to do, I was not in the least bit calm.

I was bloody furious.

The man's free hand clenched my shoulder, drawing me to him. His unique scent filled my world - sour-male sweat, cheap tobacco and the faintest trace of diesel fumes from his motorbike. There was something oddly provocative about the combination.

For a crazy moment, I remembered how good-looking he was.

But then his hand was sliding lower - past my elbow, down to my wrist. More gently than taking a gift from a lover's hands, he eased the dangling gun from my grasp and let it clatter to the floor.

My pulse rose, beating in a furious lump that couldn't be swallowed. My indignation threatened to boil over as I felt that same hand slide across the plain of my stomach, down to my thigh. His questing hand found my pistol, still in its holster, and pulled it free - disarming me.

A slight pull on my shoulder straps, the sound of my backpack being opened, and I knew by the changing weight that he'd taken the Painting.

Any thoughts about his looks, or his skills, evaporated in the white heat of my outrage.

He'd stolen *my* Painting!

Enough was enough. If there was ever a time for movies to imitate real life, this was it.

In the microsecond it took for the man to slip the loot into his pocket, I attacked. It was a simple judo throw, brutal and no-nonsense. My leg wrapped around his and wrenched to knock him off balance.

It should have worked.

I'm still not sure how it didn't.

Panting, and miraculously free of bullet-holes, I beheld his face. Somehow he'd reversed my throw and now stood facing me - tilting my chin up with the pistol so that our eyes were on a level. For an instant, I felt the pressure of cold metal increase. Its message was clear - *don't try that again*.

But his expression took me off guard. He wasn't angry, or surprised.

He was *amused* - the corner of his lip lifted in an engaging half-smile. He was still wearing the same clothes as I'd seen him in earlier, with his dark hair falling rakishly out of place. His eyes were the colour of Egyptian lapis.

Give me walking corpses and whirling-bladed death traps. Give me howling blizzards and muddy assault courses. Give me thirst and heat and chafed skin. Give me anything, I would have said, except for someone who can beat me and make me look a fool.

This man, this *thief*, had done just that. With *style*.

It was humiliating.

It was also - damn, how could I even be *thinking* the word? - *sexy*.

I was shocked. More than that, I was impressed. Many people - most of them male - had tried to challenge me over the years, intellectually, physically, or philosophically. You can go and visit them if you like, if you don't mind venturing into bottomless chasms or the stomachs of wild beasts. None of *them* had ever succeeded.

With a jolt, I realised I was contemplating the attractiveness of a man who might have murdered my friend. His head tilted, questioningly - the gun not leaving my neck - and with a supreme effort I forced myself to relax, to *feel* as Horus had taught me. Maggie's gentle strength bathed my perception, as I focused my untested skill.

I detected resolution and competency completely at odds with his easy-going appearance. Despite his threatening attitude, there was no trace of the corruption I'd sensed in the man leaving Rennes' pawnshop. The blue-eyed gaze holding onto mine had witnessed the pollution of violence, but carried none of the Monstrum's malice.

He wasn't the killer I was after.

That didn't mean I was willing to trust him, though.

The moment passed. He was backing away, putting distance between us - his weapon trained on my heart. I felt empty, deflated - and not simply from being unarmed. Something vital and alive was withdrawing, leaving me cold.

To my shock, the discus-thing began to thrum and glowed with radiance once more. I could only watch, mesmerised, as it detached itself from the wall and swirled around me, sparkling like a deadly, priceless jewel, or a dog circling a stranger - unsure whether I was friend or foe. The doggy analogy held true as it suddenly flicked away and soared across the room, straight to the man's outstretched hand as though returning to a beloved master.

It fitted his fist like a glove. The blades retracted, becoming a simple golden disk. Its gleam was mirrored in the man's eyes as he noted my fascination.

He winked, turned, and ran for it.

Chapter 19

I only hesitated for a second, but a second was an age too long.

The hypnotic power that had held me snapped like a rubber band and I was running - running for all my worth. *I couldn't let him escape with the Painting!*

It was only when the pounding of my feet was overruled by a louder, sharper noise that I realised what was happening.

Someone was shooting at me.

And I'd left my guns behind.

I blew past the glass display cases - the air becoming deadly with flying splinters. In a suicidal instant, I glanced back long enough to register the gunman.

It was a mercenary - almost hidden behind the flash of his submachine gun's muzzle. Beside him loomed a Goliath in uniform - his chiselled head shaved to the quick and eyes fixed on my retreating back. My heart shrivelled up in sudden fear. Nothing that adamant in its cruelty belonged in a human's body.

In seconds I had left them behind. The gunshots ceased, but I did not pause for breath. My still-damp boots skidded on polished tiles and I entered a columned hallway - the fleeting shadow of my quarry disappearing around a corner. To my horror, the hallway's exit was blocked by a security gate. The thief clearly registered its presence, too, as he darted sideways from behind the protective cover of the columns.

There's no way out! I almost yelled, but barely had the thought

formed in my head when a terrific report made my eardrums rattle. Incredulously, I watched the thief lower his hand and dash for the place where a locked door had once stood, but which now lay in matchwood ruin in its frame.

A blur of gleaming radiance raced through the air in his wake and the connection was made.

Telekinesis. A human with telekinetic ability.

The very idea made my jaw drop, or would have had I not been sprinting full-pelt in pursuit. With preternatural grace he evaded my grasp, and the discus swept backwards in an arc that almost decapitated me. A resonant note, like the peal of a giant church bell, made my teeth clang as the discus sliced through the chains holding up a giant Tibetan gong. I ducked and rolled, using my forward momentum to regain my feet-

-And froze, paralysed by the visceral weapon that was suddenly levelled at my throat. My gaze travelled up the stranger's arm, to that knowing smile.

Me, impressed at being bested for the second time in one night? Surely not.

With the inevitability of an avalanche, the gong began to roll - a vast wheel turning slowly to block off the exit.

The exit!

The stranger nodded with mock courtesy, withdrew the discus and backed out through the open doorway. He was fast, but I was desperate. I just managed to squeeze through the gap as the bronze gong closed the gap, almost crushing me.

The mercenary who tried to follow in my wake wasn't so lucky.

I whipped round, hearing bones snap and an agonised grunt of pain. The man's Kevlar-clad body hung like a limp doll, crushed by the weight of metal. A resounding *doooooong!* made me jump, as though someone had just thumped the gong in frustration. The memory of the giant's implacable gaze reminded me not to hang around to find out.

Feet pounding, I rounded a corner, bruising my shoulder on the wall as my footing slipped, and caught sight of my quarry once again.

He wasn't running, but sitting on a railing as though he had all the

time in the world. He even waved when he saw me - flashing me a jaunty salute with that infernal discus. I almost grinned back - catching myself just in time. It was like a game to him, and his playfulness was infectious.

Then he simply let go of the railing and toppled backwards, dropping the four storeys to the ground.

Who was this guy?

I don't know, Maggie gasped. But I like him.

I took the stairs four at a time. Through the gaps in the balustrades I could see him calmly stand, brush himself off, and turn to watch my progress. I was still two stories up when he bolted.

Desperation clutched at my guts, and I all but flew down the last staircase - leaping the final railing in my haste to reach the ground. The floor was so highly polished that I slipped and fell, losing precious seconds.

Almost crying with relief, I made it to the end of the corridor and burst through into a rain-soaked alleyway, into the embrace of cold night air.

The alleyway seemed deserted, apart from a verminous rustle from a nearby dumpster. A chill ran through me that had nothing to do with the Parisian night, and everything to do with the stranger's body spread-eagled on the concrete.

He lay on his front - his sleeve darkening where it rested in a puddle. Thunder grumbled overhead, and seconds later the rain started - heavy, invasive drops that drowned out the murmur of distant traffic on the Rue de Rivoli. We had emerged into some form of service entrance - a drop-off point for deliveries, perhaps. It wouldn't take long for the mercenaries to figure out where we'd gone.

I bit my lip and inched closer. The man was disturbingly still. If it was a bluff to get my attention, he was a damn fine actor.

The Painting!

Reaching with tentative fingers, I crouched over his prone body. There was a Painting-shaped lump protruding from a baggy trouser pocket, if I could just-

The rapid footsteps caught me off guard as something heavy impacted the base of my skull. The nausea almost made me vomit

and I felt my head lolling.

Dammit... was my last thought, before my world contracted and faded to welcoming black.

Chapter 20

There was something I had to get to - something I had to reach no matter what. It spun before me like a firefly, bobbing just beyond my snatching fingers. I cried as it began to fade, either getting further away, or dying altogether...

A coarse hand was slapping my face. The dream evaporated into new sensations - concrete, damp, a gritty taste of rainwater.

"You okay?"

"Bouchard?" I croaked, sitting up. The crossbow had been digging in my back. Ouch. "What are you doing here?"

The shadow of the gang boss lifted as the man got to his feet. "No time now, quickly!"

His worried tone sobered me back to consciousness more effectively than ten raw eggs and a pint of espresso. I glanced around, and a knot of anxiety tightened in my belly.

The stranger was gone.

A slice of reflected light caught my eye where he'd been lying, and on reflex I picked it up - something smooth and crystal-cool. Hurriedly, I tucked it into my backpack and darted to the crime lord's side before Bouchard noticed.

"Was anyone around when you got here?"

"No, no one," Bouchard said, sounding puzzled. "Come on! We 'ave to get off the street."

He gestured to a somber-looking Mercedes, where a pink-faced

young driver stood getting steadily wetter in the now pouring rain. The passenger door was open.

"Bouchard, I *must* get back to Von Croy's apartment," I said. "There's... something I have to check out there."

"Your friend's place, of course..." His walk slowed. For a moment, he seemed genuinely concerned, as one victim of the Monstrum to another. "Where is it?"

"Rue Valise," I prompted. "The Chantell Building. Do you know it?"

He sneaked a hurried glance down the alley. "My driver will," he replied, gesturing to the soaking man. "Get in."

Something about his manner struck an off-note, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what. Besides, the rain was worsening and I could hear sirens in the distance. I thrust my doubts aside and squared my shoulders, determined not to show my unease.

The car smelt of expensive upholstery and Cuban cigars. It was a relief to be in the dry as I leaned on the window sill and gazed at the rain-lashed streets gliding past. I was suddenly aware of my still-damp clothes. It felt like weeks since I'd last been properly clean. Bouchard perched next to me on the back seat. He kept fidgeting with his hands - resting them on his knee, tapping on the sill, stroking his flaccid chin.

"What were you doing at the Louvre?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"Trawling police shortwave," he said curtly, with the ghost of a smile. "You were attracting a lot of attention in there. I figured you might need some 'elp."

"Thanks." *Huh*, Maggie grumbled, surprising me. She'd been quiet for a while, perhaps subdued by my still-throbbing blow to the head. *He doesn't strike me as the generous sort, and he didn't answer the question. Why was he out here in the first place?*

Unaware of my inner monologue, Bouchard slid his hand across my knee. The gesture - more possessive than protective - made my hackles rise. "Wouldn't you prefer somewhere safer than your friend's apartment?"

"I found some leads in the Louvre that may link to his death," I said, unsmiling, and replaced his hand tactfully on the seat. "I have to at least *check* his apartment, Bouchard."

His smile vanished, and displeasure tightened his lips into a white line. "Don't fuss. We're almost there."

Indeed, the car was slowing, idling along familiar streets. The bulk of the Chantell Building emerged from the pouring darkness ahead, making my heart throb with foreboding. I could hardly believe how much had happened in so little time.

As the car slid to a halt, Bouchard coughed. "There's something you should know... The police bands were full of details of another Monstrum killing, in Prague."

"Prague?" A neutron star seemed to drop into my stomach. The name in Werner's notebook seemed to leap into my mouth. "Not a dealer named Vasiley? Mathias Vasiley?"

He seemed surprised. "Yes. You knew 'im?"

Careful, Maggie warned. "He's... connected with something I have to find at Von Croy's apartment."

My hand was on the door handle when Bouchard started rising. I looked back, meeting his eye. "I need to go in alone."

For a moment I thought he'd insist, but much to my relief he shrugged, and subsided back into his seat. "Alright, I'll wait 'ere. You be careful, now."

It was my turn to smile, despite my weariness. "Appreciate it, Bouchard."

He flicked me a carefree salute and I slammed the door, turning my steps towards the entrance. I glanced backwards, spotting Bouchard already chatting away on his mobile. *Humph, probably ordering in tonight's pizza.*

I hoped he saved me a slice or seventeen. I was famished.

★

Pushing my hunger aside, I prowled up the stairs to Werner's floor. His door was covered by a web of crime scene tape.

Making doubly sure I was unobserved, I snapped the flimsy barrier and slipped inside - the door had been left unlocked. Beams of light parted the shadows like gentle hands pulling away the blanket of a sleeping invalid - cautious, tentative, and unsure as to what lay underneath.

No time for sorrow, or regrets, Maggie steeled me. We're here to observe, and to find those Engravings. There'll be time to mourn him later.

With my inner-self supporting me, I forced myself to take notice of every last detail without emotional involvement. This was a crime scene, and I had to think like a detective if any of it was going to make sense.

With a deep breath, I stalked past Werner's peace lily (badly in need of watering), and entered the living room. A muddy stain spread out from a knocked-over coffee pot. Matching crockery lay amid the ruins of the low table. Armchairs lay like dazed sumo wrestlers - their legs pointing at nothing. Books from a handsome mahogany case littered the floor: *Fingerprints of the Gods... Akhenaten: False Prophet... Principles of Egyptian Art...* The remains of a jade-coloured Denby vase stood out like shards of bone amongst the books, and the baleful eyes of Werner's walking cane stared back at me from where it lay abandoned by the fireplace. I suppressed a shudder, even though I knew the inlaid jackal's head was only a reproduction. Perhaps my earlier judgement of Werner had been right after all; it didn't seem right to carry a constant reminder of a creature that had enslaved your mind and tried to destroy the world, just because you had recurrent gout.

I walked towards the window, taking everything in with as much dispassion as I could muster. Diaphanous curtains wafted slightly in the breeze from the shattered pane. I hadn't remembered it breaking.

A flash of lightning threw ghoulish shadows across the bloodstained wall. Despite my earlier resolve, emotion tangled in my belly as I beheld the symbols - as incomprehensible now as they had been two days ago. I stepped closer to examine them and was startled by a warning tinkle of glass.

Bending, I lifted the broken frame with care, tenderly brushing away the shattered glass. Thunder rumbled as I beheld the photograph, and blinked with surprise. Professor Von Croy dominated the shot, brimming with the pride and experience of a man in his prime. I remembered his travelling clothes, tailored on Seville Row, and the cream fedora partially shading his face. His hand

rested on the shoulders of a teenage girl. Her expression blended modesty with mischief, and a genuine excitement from being in the Cambodian jungle. Her brunette hair was restrained by two playful pigtails, and she couldn't have been more than sixteen years old.

I'd had no idea Werner had kept it after all these years.

"Focus, girl," I muttered. The irony of the photograph was powerful - a memento of our first shared adventure, in the very place my mentor had met his death.

But what *exactly* had Werner died for? Only by finding and understanding that would I come close to avenging his murder.

With great care, I set the photograph down on the sideboard and leaned on it while I gathered my thoughts. My reflection in the gilt-vermeil mirror gazed back in challenge.

"Help me out here, Maggie," I murmured softly. "I *know* the answers. *Think, girl!*"

I closed my eyes, letting my senses rise to the forefront. It had been stormy the night of his murder, too. *Listen to the thunder - remember his voice, the sound of his words. Smell the meal he'd prepared that afternoon, something with fish and onions - powerful scents that carry memories of that night.*

Remember!

Help me Lara... Five Obscura Paintings... But he's a psychopath!

Get out! Get out... of... the....way...!

I sucked in my stomach, remembering the jab of a gun, but my eyes had snapped open.

Yes!

Footsteps, soft but deliberate.

An arm on my shoulder, impossibly strong, sweeping me aside.

I staggered back, shock coursing through me. Dazed, I bumped against the far bookshelf, and my shoulder blades winced in remembered pain. The books at my feet... *I'd knocked them off the shelves.*

Werner had cried out - in terror, not pain.

My gaze travelled to the place where I'd found him - where his blood was still a glutinous black puddle on the Persian rug.

He dropped the gun... I heard it thump on the rug and skitter away.

I rushed over to the dining table, emerging a moment later with an antique handgun; a Rigg 09 or early Luger model. It was exactly the kind of curio a distinguished Austrian professor might keep as a family souvenir from the War - or the kind of sub-standard rubbish a harassed Parisian crime boss would fob off to a frightened old man. The magazine held room for eight rounds. There were seven bullets left.

There had been a shadow across me, doubled and misshapen. The sound of a last, gargled exhalation and the heavy thud of a body dropping to the ground.

Werner... strangled to death.

My eyes rolled upwards, beholding the panelled ceiling.

A figure had stepped over me, fleeting as a phantom - one clumsily-wrapped hand dripping hot liquids.

Awkwardly, I tried to triangulate my position. The figure had left by the front door, so he must have passed me by, leaving me unharmed. But *why*, and *who*? My eyes squeezed shut as I ransacked through the fog of dreams and after-images. There had to be *something*, some clue as to who it was...

The realisation, when it came, nearly pole-axed me.

A man brushing me aside in the entrance to Rennes' pawnshop. Grey suit, grey hair, an aura like a death-shroud, with eyes like muted fire behind smoked glasses.

He'd been *here*, the night Werner died. *He'd* killed my friend while I lay senseless.

All unknowingly, I'd bumped shoulders with the Monstrum.

I was suddenly shaking, violently and uncontrollably. A strangled gasp escaped my throat. The doubt I had carried - the question of whether I had actually been the one to end Werner's life - was suddenly drowning in heart-wrenching guilt.

I should have trusted my instincts and paid more attention to the stranger in the pawnshop. The murderer couldn't have got far - I would have caught him if I hadn't been so preoccupied with collecting Werner's equipment!

It was all I could do not to fall over. Dizziness and shame roared like a black tide through my thoughts, blinding me to the room and

the ever-present stench of blood.

When you've quite finished beating yourself up, Maggie drawled. *You might want to have a look around for those Engravings we came for.*

"But the Monstrum-"

-Was here, so you know what he looks like, she interrupted, not unkindly. A warmth seemed to infuse my limbs, like sunrise in the desert. Other memories returned to me - memories of dear friends and my soul's cleansing. *You're not about to let yourself spiral into self-pity over a wasted opportunity. We didn't know then what we've learned now. The sooner we find those Engravings, the sooner we can track down Werner's killer.*

I took a deep breath. Her words - austere though they were - lent me the objectivity I so desperately needed. Again lightning cast its anti-shadow into the room, followed by bone-rumbling thunder. The storm was gaining strength - its fury whipping the skies into turmoil. The curtains snapped aside, and I suddenly felt the full force of the wind buffet my face - piercing my damp clothing like an icy shock to the heart. It was like a dream of being beneath a raging waterfall and discovering that, instead of being simply swept away, you could stand and welcome all that awesome power as your own. I drank great lungfuls of the wind's freshness and gasped, feeling new resolve enter with every breath of expelled doubt.

Willingly, I embraced the memories invoked by the storm, and felt them unfold from within my subconscious like a flower opening its petals to the sun. For a fleeting moment, I was an elemental being - undaunted by petty gangs and cryptic clues. My feelings of guilt, fear and anger - however strong, however justified - no longer held any sway over my determination. Werner, Carvier, even Rennes and all the other faceless victims of the Monstrum... I would avenge them all.

The sound of pattering rain increased, drawing me gently back into my body. The wind relaxed, and the curtains seemed to whisper a farewell as they settled back into place. The moment had passed.

"You were right, Maggie," I whispered, my head bowed. "There's more in me than I thought."

'Plus est en Vous'. If my subconscious had lips, she would have smiled. *The Gordonstoun's motto. About time you figured that out,*

wouldn't you say? I'm glad you're taking Putai and Horus' lessons to heart. Now, where were we... Checking Werner's apartment for information, hmm?

I realised I was shivering. My feelings of invigoration were sinking into the depths of my mind, where they could no longer let me ignore my bodily needs. My purpose for coming here returned with a rush, and I began to search in earnest. Those Engravings had to be around here, somewhere.

The kitchenette held little except a lingering reek of fish; a partially-filleted sea bass lay on the cutting board, next to a stew pot filled with wilting onions and leeks. There was a magazine on professional horse-racing on the counter top; I'd never have placed Werner as a gambler. With a slight pang, I realised I'd never really known much of Werner's hobbies outside of archaeology.

A quick scout upstairs revealed a handsome, if bland bedroom, and a shower room decorated in classic bachelor style. Socks and shirts fought to escape the laundry basket, and the bin in the corner was overflowing with used tissues, most of them speckled with blood. I frowned. Werner had always been meticulously clean-shaven; evidently, his nervousness had made even shaving a dangerous chore. A quick search of the drawers uncovered a basic first aid kit, which I pocketed with the gratitude of long experience. I doubted Werner would have begrudged me using his supplies. All in all, the apartment was a tidy little retreat for the middle of Paris, though still a far-cry from Werner's family estate in Vienna.

His office area - crammed with bookshelves and files - turned up far more informative prizes.

"Bingo," I smiled, examining the folder titles. "Look here... The Lux Veritatis! Werner says they were '*a 12th century offshoot of the Knights Templar, dedicated to suppressing works of sorcery and alchemy*'. Huh, apparently they were also responsible for destroying the Black Alchemist, Pieter Van Eckhardt, in 1445."

That would tally with the diary entries of that fanatic who tried to find the Painting before us, said Maggie.

"There's information on the Sanglyph, too, but... damn! There's nothing here we don't already know, except that it was an artefact 'of

great alchemic power'. But what in the blazes does it do?"

It's something to do with the Nephilim. I can feel it.

I squeezed my lips together in a frown. "I'm sure Father Patrick would be able to offer us some pointers. But look here... *'The Cabal: A powerful alliance of five alchemists and sorcerers in the thirteen and fourteen hundreds. Eckhardt is said to have betrayed and murdered almost all of them to control their secrets'*. Now *that* is interesting... Power-hungry megalomaniacs don't play well with others, as a rule. He must have needed their expertise. Eckhardt was working on something - something he didn't want to share. Could it have been the Sanglyph?"

Perhaps. Werner also mentions that the Cabal and the Lux Veritatis battled constantly even after Eckhardt's disappearance in 1445. If our mouldy friend under the Louvre is anything to go by, Eckhardt gathered a pretty rabid set of followers to support him for this 'Great Work'.

The thing that had been bugging the back of my mind suddenly bore fruit. "Maggie, what if the Eckhardt Werner was working for is the *same person* as the Black Alchemist?"

Well, he'd have to be over five hundred years old by now...

"So, not impossible; we've banged into a couple of immortals before. It just seems too much of a coincidence that the name and the purpose are the same now as they were then. The first Eckhardt created the Sanglyph and hid them in the Paintings. Now *this* Eckhardt is searching for the Paintings, and Werner, *Werner Von Croy*, was living in mortal terror of him. I can't see Werner being intimidated by just another everyday client, can you?"

True, Maggie agreed, grudgingly. But even if we assume that the 15th century Eckhardt and Werner's client are the same person, it still doesn't tell us what the Sanglyph's purpose is meant to be!

In frustration, my gaze travelled back along the desk. My eyes narrowed at the sight of Werner's fax machine, and the enigma of the Sanglyph was nudged aside by a more pressing concern: Where would Werner have hidden something as important, and as dangerous, as the Engravings?

In the best hiding place of all, naturally. Plain sight.

"*Something hidden, go and find it,*" I quoted Kipling under my

breath. "And to find something, all you need is.... a... map!"

Excitedly, I reached for the large painting hanging on the office wall - a print of the old Silk Road, Persian, circa 1590. It was delicate and not a little heavy, but as I lifted it from its pegs, something slipped out from behind the frame.

A plain brown envelope.

Crouching, I held it open and the contents fell into my hand. Four, A4-sized sepia-coloured sketches - at first and even second glance looking like the mad offspring between Da Vinci and M. C. Escher at his most macabre.

I'd found the Engravings.

I didn't get chance to have a third glance.

Chapter 21

I ducked without thinking - narrowly avoiding the firestorm of bullets that shredded the computer monitor like it was made of paper. The shadow that had flickered in the corner of my eye had already vanished.

I swore, diving for cover, but there was precious little shelter to be found. More bullets hounded my ass as I flung myself behind a brick pillar. I stuffed the Engravings into my trouser pocket, not caring about creases, and assessed my surroundings. The gunman had ducked behind the kitchen counter - a perfect position to keep the whole room in view. His weapon was high calibre, but using a silencer - it coughed rather than roared. My would-be assassin was a professional.

Apart from a few tranquiliser darts, all I had was Werner's antique Luger with seven bullets. Oh, and a five-hundred-year-old crossbow that probably belonged in a museum.

Huzzah.

The shooter had paused, probably to reload. I cast my gaze up, past the Cambodian photograph. Using the mirror, I sighted on a dark shape and squeezed off a couple of rounds over my shoulder.

To my surprise and delight, the little gun actually worked. One bullet went wide, shattering the mug stand, but the other caught the gunman somewhere tender and he let out an involuntary grunt, stumbling into full view.

Instantly, I advanced - darting from cover to the shelter of an

upturned chair, and planted a couple more rounds in his direction. Both shots landed squarely in his chest. I hissed in triumph, but the man must have been wearing reinforced Kevlar; he staggered but kept his footing. A burst of retaliatory fire chewed into my chair; coin-sized holes appeared in the upholstery only inches from my face, and my nose was suddenly filled with the reek of cordite.

I played dead for all I was worth. At last I heard the gun click empty, and the rattle as it was tossed disdainfully away, like a tourist chucking a disposable camera.

I readied for another attack, but instead was nearly knocked to the ground as the man blew past me, heading for the door. He wasn't waiting to be picked off. I made a grab at his ankle but missed.

Cursing, I dashed after him, out into the hallway, and met a nasty surprise.

A blinking light in the periphery of my vision was my only warning. With an indrawn gasp, I threw my forward momentum into a belly flop. My eyes widened as I beheld a near-invisible line of scarlet laser light scarcely a foot above my head. My gaze slid to the side, where a digital timer was strapped expertly to pencil-sized cartridges of TNT and wedged into a lump of C4.

Had I been running at full-tilt, even dental records wouldn't have been enough to identify me.

The gunman was nowhere in sight, but I took no chances. I splayed my body across the carpet, pressing right into the crackling woollen pile, and crawled under the treacherous beam. My shock gave way to anger; such indiscriminate ordinance could destroy half the building. There were other people - ordinary residents - in here besides myself. The gunman didn't have to involve them.

I really, really hoped my business was concluded before they called the police.

Cautiously, I peered round the corner. It was only a single corridor to the exit stairwell, with recessed doorways spaced evenly along its length.

There! A hunched figure, over by the stairs. The muzzle of a rifle snuck its deadly nose out into the corridor, breaking up the man's silhouette. Even worse, I could spy at least two more lumps of

explosives along the walls, linked by a knee-high red beam.

I drew back, pondering my next move. There were only three bullets left in my gun.

An idea formed.

If this works, I'll ask Winston to build a temple to Horus in the garden, I muttered silently, and took aim.

The light fixture above the gunman exploded with a *pop!* of fractured glass. In an instant I was running, not letting him recover from the microsecond's distraction.

Sometimes, a microsecond is all that's needed.

The man was already turning when my crossbow scythed through the air and struck him full in the chest. I followed in its wake - leaping over the laser trap and emptying my last two bullets where they mattered most - the underside of his chin.

The back wall exploded in scarlet and he stared at me through skewed sunglasses, incredulous. Then he was falling, tumbling in a limp tango down the stairs. His neck broke somewhere along the way, and he landed in a boneless pile. The crossbow bounced after him, and shattered on the hard tiles of the lobby.

Never underestimate the tactical power of a lump of wood.

Coldly, I descended the stairs - not letting myself breathe until I had convinced myself he really was dead. His neck was bent at an impossible angle, and the tiled floor was sticky with a growing red puddle. He was absolutely still. Despite the inescapable revulsion of taking a life, I felt relief sluice through me - deeper than I'd realised was possible.

There didn't seem to be any clues to his identity. The red bandanna covering his shaved head was stained a deeper scarlet where it touched his wound. His trousers, sweater and weapon rigs were all black, as were his fetish of a moustache and goatee.

His phone started ringing, making his pocket vibrate.

Well, well. Just my luck.

Slyly, I eased it from its holster and flipped it open. The reception was terrible but an unmistakable voice growled through the static.

"Is she taken care of yet?"

Maggie sighed. *Just for once, I'd like to be proved wrong about people.*

“Allo?” Bouchard sounded irritated, distracted. “Is she dead yet? We ‘ave to get back to Prague!”

“No, Bouchard, she isn’t,” I drawled, allowing myself a grim half-smile. “But your little friend is. I’ll take care of you later.”

I hung up, tossing the phone away. It gave me a fleeting glow of satisfaction to imagine the look on his face, but personal sniping wouldn’t give me the answers I sought. I looked down at the body, fighting disgust.

Bouchard was just a cats-paw - a convenient bit of local muscle for my true adversary to bribe and threaten into taking me out of the way. Whoever he worked for must have decided I wasn’t needed anymore. Bouchard’s distracted manner, and his elusive answers, suddenly all made much more sense.

After only a brief rummage, I found what I was looking for. I drew the detonator control from the dead man’s sleeve and disabled the explosives. An electronic whine, almost inaudible, fell silent.

Just then, the backwash of adrenaline decided to stake its claim for services rendered. Fatigue plucked at my muscles and blurred my vision. I remembered how damned hungry I was. Just the *thought* of sinking into a hot bath and sleeping for a month was painful in its attraction. The least I could do would be to find a safe haven for a few hours - somewhere I could catch a little sleep, and maybe grab something to eat that wasn’t processed in a factory six months ago.

Despite my practicality, I knew that - however much I tended to my physical needs - I would only find true rest - true relief - when either Werner’s killer lay dead at my feet, or I lay in my own grave.

With such life-affirming thoughts for company, I set about systematically looting the body of everything I could carry. His weapons were of the highest quality - a Colt Viper SMG, cleaned and oiled and with plenty of spare ammo, and a pair of rather delicious Scorpion X pistols. I even found keys for a four-wheel drive - a bonus that simplified my travel arrangements immeasurably. The thought of trying to hitchhike my way across Europe was not that appealing when one considered the conspicuousness of my new arsenal. I wasn’t in the mood to involve more innocent people than I already had.

As if affirming my decision, I found a business card in his back pocket. The name *Vasiley* leapt out at me in curling, artsy script, and there was even a phone number and address printed on the back. A charged thrill raced up and down my spine at the sight of a symbol beside his name - the same arrow-like emblem of the Lux Veritatis that had been sewn onto the surcoats of Brother Obscura's undead knights.

I had four of the Engravings in one hand, and the key to finding the last of them clutched in the other. I breathed out slowly, letting hope override my weariness.

"Well, then... I guess it's time I visited Prague."

Oh, goody, my inner-self mused. Can I come too?

"When do you not?"

Ah... she replied, sounding smug. Now we're getting metaphysical.

Part II

Prague

Chapter 22

It's amazing how even the comfiest seats can turn, without any prompting, into devices of torture.

The assassin's vehicle was some kind of converted Plymouth Reliant estate - old, but lovingly modified and as well-equipped as I could wish for. Air conditioning, GPS, even one of those dinky little holders for coffee - it had everything. Its seats were like padded marshmallows, deliciously hugging my every contour. The engine purred like an athletic cheetah, scorning my paltry eighty miles an hour.

Thanks to the benevolence of the Union's border treaties, I did not have to stop and answer awkward questions as I crossed through Germany and the Czech Republic. It was a relief not to have to produce my passport; quite apart from my status as a wanted murderer, I get touchy about people ogling my photograph. My expression suggests that I've caught Winston dancing the hornpipe in my underwear.

The old car assisted me in other ways, too. Its roomy interior made for a moderately comfortable nest, but its custom-tinted windows also granted merciful privacy. My last break had been just south of Mannheim, over four hours ago. I'd pulled into a concrete-walled lay-by, eaten cold, roadside food bought from an anonymous vendor back in Luxembourg, and all but collapsed on the back seat. My urgency to reach Prague lost out to prudence; I had no desire to end up in a ditch because of sleep deprivation.

I'd awoken at around noon, grunting as I tried to sit up. I felt as stiff as through I'd spent the night in traction, and my skin was blotchy with scarlet and purple bruises - most of which I couldn't remember getting. Some painkillers from Werner's first aid kit and a few stretching exercises eased the worst of the aches. With a practised eye, I checked my gear - bypassing a torn belt here and substituting a new buckle there. Bouchard's hit-man had packed the car with enough supplies to keep me soldiering on for another month - let alone get me the five hundred and fifty miles to Prague.

After almost fifteen hours since setting out from Paris, the luxurious driver's seat had transformed into a sackful of rocks beneath my buttocks. The weather had also deteriorated as I drove east. I peered through the clean crescents on the sleet-splattered windscreen, squinting at the road signs as they flashed past in a blur - praying that my journey would soon be over. Even though it was only about six o'clock in the afternoon, the March skies had darkened and night was closing in with a curtain of worsening snow.

Prague, 13km.

I felt troubled, and not just for the obvious reasons. During my meticulous double-checking, a crystalline object had slipped from my backpack - the same item that had been dropped by my mysterious stalker outside the Louvre. I'd examined it in astonishment - hardly believing that I'd forgotten picking it up.

Superficially it resembled a dagger - perhaps a Yemeni jambiya or curved Persian blade - about half as long again as my hand. I traced a finger along its inside curve, drawing a line of blood finer than a human hair along my skin. The black, oddly-gleaming 'blade' was sharper than the finest Japanese steel, and colder than mere glass or crystal had any right to feel. It seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. The blade portion morphed seamlessly into a milky-white handle, which was ridged to give a decent grip, and flowered at the pommel into an angelic face. Its expression met mine with infinite serenity, and seemed to counter the unease I felt in its presence. I couldn't convince myself that here was something shaped by human hands. It didn't look made; it looked *grown*.

I also couldn't shake the feeling it was watching me.

Werner's notebook was only marginally helpful. Whilst ironing out the rumpled Engravings and slipping them between the journal's pages for safekeeping, I'd found several references to the 'Periapt Shards' - supposedly three crystalline 'weapons of light' said to be in the hands of the Lux Veritatis. Over the years I've learnt that, when it comes to nuances of language, one person's vase can be another culture's chamber pot. I dismissed Werner's nomenclature as unreliable at best, misleading at worst: The artefact in my hand certainly didn't *look* much like the 'spearheads' the Shards were said to resemble.

Come to that, the stranger hadn't looked like much of a Lux Veritatis knight either.

"Is that what you think he was?" I'd asked under my breath, as my subconscious gave me a speeded-up review of my escape from the Louvre.

The circumstances are suggestive, she'd concluded after a long pause. Trailing us through Paris, his professional skills, knowledge of the Painting and our role in getting it... He knew what we were doing, perhaps before we even saw him in Cafe Metro. Then there are his telekinetic powers, his possession of what appears to be a Periapt Shard, sexy eyes, athletic-

"Enough," I clicked my tongue, feeling heat rising in my cheeks. "Get back on topic. Just carrying a Periapt Shard doesn't make him its owner a Lux Veritatis. For all we know he could be just another mercenary - or someone else working for Eckhardt. And if you're going to be preoccupied over this *crush*, maybe I'll pull into a hospital and ask for a lobotomy. He could too easily be an enemy."

Well, I'll admit it even if you won't. You are attracted to him, at my level - the deepest part of your mind. Why else why would we be preoccupied with him?

I recall already mentioning that my subconscious and I don't always see things eye-to-eye.

"Look," I said, tightening my grip on the steering wheel. "Perhaps you've forgotten that he *stole* my Obscura Painting? He's not interested in making friends when he can just *take* what he wants. Now be quiet; I need to *concentrate*, and that means no distractions."

Dear Lara, my inner voice chided, reminding me eerily of Putai. Are you really going to be so defensive all your life? Open your eyes. In the desert you found a new source of strength - me. I've always been here, and you can always trust me, knowing I've our best interests at heart. But your heart is also a source of strength you haven't embraced yet. You've always been the loner, yet this man appeals to you because he proved himself our equal.

"You're saying I should just trust him?"

I'm saying that you shouldn't close yourself off from the possibility. Whether you want to admit it or not, you are a human being and a woman. He's obviously resourceful and more than capable of looking after himself. If it becomes possible to work together, you need to take that chance. In the present circumstances, we need all the friends and allies we can get.

Her reasoning reassured me somewhat. It would have been perfect had Maggie not gone and added, *And who knows? He might even be single.*

I sighed.

Perhaps I was going crazy after all.

★

The GPS beeped just as I pulled into an open square in New Town. The cobblestones, parked cars and silent fountain were already under a foot of snow. Icicles as thick as my wrist dangled from the fountain's bowl. Quaintly-wrought street lamps twinkled through the swirling snowflakes - almost as though they'd been plucked from that famous, snow-bound forest on the other side of the wardrobe. Prague's buildings were works of art; a humble bakery was given the same attention as any grand cathedral. At any other time, I would have appreciated its urban beauty.

As I killed the ignition, however, I began to revise my earlier opinion. The square and the buildings seemed to shrink as the snow came down heavier - as though someone was slowly turning down the contrast and filtering my view through panes of smoky purple glass. The streetlamps' luminance grew hushed as the near-invisible snowflakes swirled into sudden clarity around their glowing halos,

like swarms of dark moths. As I sat there, listening to the soft pattering on the roof while the windscreen grew a speckled coating, my attention zeroed in on the grandest building, on the far side of the square. Vast windows of exquisite stained-glass made up most of its frontage, and reams of familiar police tape criss-crossed its entrance.

I'd come to the right place.

As my gaze roamed, I spotted a red car - a shabby 1980s Skoda, and the only vehicle free from snow - that was parked nonchalantly across the street from Vasiley's house. Its owner was standing with the door open, and nursed a steaming paper cup while he made notes on a pad propped on the car's roof. He kept glancing at the building and jotting things down - even getting a camera out and snapping off a few surreptitious photos. Even at this distance, there was something about him that just didn't fit with an official investigator. It wasn't late, but he was the only person around.

Time to make enquiries.

"A little cold to be standing around?" I said, pocketing my car keys as I crunched through the snow. I'd found a long, yew-green coat in the boot that had served as my blanket during my morning nap. It made a satisfying swishing noise and billowed theatrically, but more importantly kept me warm and my weapons concealed from casual view.

The man jumped, gulping too-hot coffee in surprise, and treated me to a suspicious once-over. He wore a beige jacket too short to be called a trench coat, a shirt with the top button undone so that his black tie hung at a skewed angle, dark trousers and an ageing fedora that cast his face into shadow. There were brownish stains on his shirt and the hems of his trousers were getting soaked in the deepening snow.

I sneezed, and he smiled. The effect transformed him from shady second-hand car dealer to favourite uncle. The lines by his eyes, almost hidden behind thick spectacle frames, crinkled with mirth.

"Ah, English? You're enjoying our weather, no?"

"I've had better," I replied good-naturedly. "Do you know anything about that building over there?"

"Eh, what?" His smile froze, as though I'd caught him doing

something naughty.

"That one?" I tilted my chin. "Big thing with snow on it?"

"Beat it, I'm busy."

I cast my eye across his notebook, which he was casually slipping into his coat pocket.

"On an important case, are we?"

He laughed, leaning against the car door. "Yes, actually. I'm a reporter. You didn't hear on the radio? There's been another of those Monstrum killings, right here."

"Is that a fact? Well, my radio broke, so I'm short on a few details. What happened in there, exactly?"

"You want information, lady, it'll cost you. Or you could just wait for the morning edition."

"Oh, I can pay," I said, pointedly tapping the bulge in my pocket. His eyes narrowed, as if calculating how much cash that represented. "I need that information, and I'm willing to pay for say, the seven pm edition?"

Smirking, he set his cup down on the car roof. "What the hell, why not? Ask your questions."

"I gather this Vasiley was some kind of art dealer?"

"Hmm, you know the victim's name then. Yes, he was. But more than that," he glanced around, lowering his voice. "He was involved with the *Mafia*."

"Mafia? What makes you think so?"

"Lady, I *know* so," he said, nudging the brim of his hat up to scratch his hairline. "I've been following Vasiley's activities for quite some time. He was - how do the English say - 'up to his neck in it'."

"Tell me why he was murdered, then."

"Simple. He found something they wanted, and got smudged because he tried to hang onto it. Not very clever. They set the Monstrum on him."

"He found something?" I echoed, my ears pricking up. "Do you know what it was? A painting perhaps?"

"I don't know about that, but he was definitely silenced. The Mafia tidied away all the evidence before the police got here. Took it to the Strahov."

"Now you're going to tell me what the Strahov is, aren't you?"

"Nope," he scrunched up his now empty coffee-cup and flashed me a brittle smile. "Your credit just ran out."

I sighed, wondering if leaving my weapons holstered in full view might have made him more talkative. "The money hasn't dried up just yet. You can keep talking."

"It's not that," he said, at once miserable and eager. "This is dangerous stuff I'm telling you! I shouldn't be shooting off my mouth."

"You're a big boy, I'm sure you can handle it," I smiled coyly; well, it had worked before. "Tell me your name?"

"Luddick, Thomas Luddick." He said, preening a little. It was flattering - if somewhat tragic - that my 'persuasive skills' were as effective as ever.

"Okay, Luddick, what else can you tell me about the Strahov?"

For all his concerns over 'dangerous' information, he showed more than a little swagger as he divulged his trophies of knowledge. Behind her shield of invisibility, Maggie rolled her eyes. *Men*. "Well, the Strahov is the Mafia centre of operations in Prague. There's been a lot of activity there recently, much more than usual."

"You're obviously well-informed."

"Informed? I'm a professional! It's my business to know these things. I've gathered dossiers on all the main players..." his eyes gained a furtive look. "It'll cost you."

"Okay," I waited for him to rummage in the car, and grimaced when he flourished a dirty lever-arch file like it was a Royal decree. "You call these dossiers?" I asked levelly.

"Lady, *you* try doing better under these conditions," he smirked, leafing through the pages with me. "They don't make it easy. See there, that's Dr. Grant Muller. He runs a pharmaceutical business out of Rome, but not for any drugs you'd buy over the counter." He pointed out an obese male with a pale, preoccupied face, and I turned the page.

"That one is Boaz, Kristina Boaz. I think she was working in Argentina when she got those scars. I've linked her to the Strahov Psychiatric Institute where she's listed as a surgeon, but there's no

record of where she trained or what her specialism is.

"Luther Rouzic hardly ever leaves the Strahov, so it's been difficult to get any information on him. I *think* he used to work at the Municipal Prague Archives.

"The man with the blonde hair is Dr. Joachim Karel. He's a lawyer, with investments-" Luddick chuckled, "-as you English would say, left, right and centre. He's the second-in-command, as far as I can tell."

Doubts were starting to puddle in my stomach. These people certainly didn't *feel* like any Mafia figureheads I'd ever encountered, and I was in the rare position to speak from personal experience.

But then a photograph of someone I knew all-too well leapt out at me. There was no name attached - only a date. "Luddick... Do you *know* who that is?"

"No, he arrived this morning," The reporter sounded curious. "He was at the Strahov so I thought I'd take a couple of-"

"That's Bouchard," I said. "He's a Parisian gang boss I ran into over a... personal matter."

"Really?" Luddick brightened, his notebook appearing almost magically in his hand and he scribbled some notes. "Is he Paris Mafia, then?"

"No idea," I said. The thing that had been knocking at the back of mind, vying for attention, suddenly materialised. "Wait, what do you mean, *'this morning'*?"

"He arrived this morning," Luddick repeated, slowly as though talking to a baby or imbecile. "Oh, about six, seven o'clock. Why? You sound surprised."

"It's nothing," I shook my head, pursing my lips. I'd seen Bouchard in person less than half an hour before I set out for Prague, at - near-as-made-no-difference - three o'clock in the morning, Paris-time.

How could he have got here so quickly? Maggie wondered. *Paris to Prague in less than three hours, by car? Impossible!*

Eventually, Luddick sighed and turned over the last two pages. "Well, there's only Gunderson and Eckhardt left. I linked Gunderson to a mercenary outfit a few years ago, but all my evidence got shredded when my colleague spring-cleaned my office without

permission,” he sniffed, and his moustache twitched. “He’s always in Eckhardt’s shadow - I think he’s his bodyguard nowadays. Eckhardt’s the top Mafia guy, from what I can make out, but I know less about him than the others.”

I had to swallow the urge to recoil. I recognised Gunderson - even in such a poor-quality photograph, his gigantic frame stood out (no pun intended) alongside that same, dispassionate stare that had so chilled my veins in the Louvre. He’d been the one pursuing me, only to be thwarted by the Tibetan gong. But Gunderson was the least of my worries.

The photograph labelled ‘Eckhardt’ showed a man of medium build and height - wearing superbly tailored, if eccentric, clothing. His hair was knotted back into a ponytail and his eyes were all but concealed behind smoked glasses. His right hand was held up as though acknowledging someone - a hand that was covered in bandage-like strips of cloth and riveted leather in clumsy imitation of a glove.

I knew him instantly. The realisation overpowered me like a lion clamping its jaws around a gazelle’s neck.

Eckhardt was the Monstrum.

The Monstrum was Eckhardt.

Luddick was speaking, though it took a moment for me to organise my thoughts enough to register what he was saying.

“Hang on... You mean they’re *all* in the Strahov now?” I blurted.

“Lady, I’ve been watching them very carefully and I assure you, all six of them-” he tapped the file, “-are in there as we speak.”

“Luddick,” I said, my pulse thumping insistently. “I have to get in there - today. How would *you* manage it?”

“Well... It wouldn’t be easy. The place is heavily guarded. They’ve got security gates, cameras, ident scanners...”

“But...?”

“But I *could* get an access code,” he said, rubbing his moustache as he perused his memory. “I have contacts. It’ll take me half an hour.”

“Okay. While you’re on your errand, I’m going to start with Vasiley’s.”

I started to turn away, but Luddick caught my arm. “What do you mean, ‘*with Vasiley’s*’? You’re not going *in* there are you?”

“Luddick, please don’t complicate things.” My eye strayed to the dossiers tucked under his arm. “You’re already in deeper than you should be... We’re talking way, way past your neck.”

“Humph,” he bridled. “Lady, I can take care of myself. But...” he trailed off as I fixed him with my trademark glare. “Look, if I get this code, I want the exclusive story of events in Paris and whatever you find in the Strahov. You can pay me for the dossiers when you come out.”

“Fine. Deal.” I shook myself loose and started to walk away.

“Lady!” he called. “Be careful in there. And don’t keep me waiting! It’s just not healthy to hang around on the streets... especially in weather like this.” He stamped his feet, drawing his coat tightly around him, and for a moment I detected real concern. Smug and inquisitive Luddick might be, but he knew enough to urge caution. I was also familiar enough with how men reacted around me to note a tarnished hint of chivalry lurking in the reporter’s natty little soul.

“Stay warm,” I nodded and trudged towards Vasiley’s cordoned-off house. A moment later Luddick’s ancient Skoda coughed into life, leaving me alone in the square.

It began to snow even harder.

Chapter 23

As Luddick's car sped away, I found myself keeping to the shadows as I edged closer to the late art dealer's house. The front door, overlooking the square, was an obvious no-no. Even as I slipped down a side alley, I spotted a lone policeman saunter across the street. A handgun glared from his holster and a large Alsatian padded along beside him, leaving a rough-edged channel in the snow. They didn't appear to notice me.

I kept my head down. The best I could hope for was a back door or window that I could scramble through before the patrolman returned.

The building was separated from its neighbours to the sides - and the Vltava River behind - by narrow alleyways and a promenade wall. Ice squeaked under my boots, and my breath was a billowing wraith under the yellow streetlights.

As I had predicted, there was a back door to Vasiley's, down a short flight of steps, but the steel-reinforced door turned out to be locked tight. The wind stung my face, and pried for the gaps in my clothing. I drank in the air through my nose, tasting the metallic odour of snow and the retreating fumes from Luddick's car. He was still using four-star petrol.

I chewed my lip, wondering if it was worth checking the nearby buildings, when a whiff of methane made me pause at the top of the stairs.

Now there's an idea...

After a few seconds of tramping around, I found what I was looking for - a hollow booming that replaced the dullness of concrete. Excited, I felt around under the snow until I uncovered a metal hatch. It was awkward, but I managed to pry the cover loose with half-frozen fingers and heave it open.

Cat-like, I let myself drop into the hole and pulled the hatch closed behind me. Maybe I'd get lucky, and the police patrol guy would decide to go for his break rather than circle back and wonder why the hatch was suddenly free from its snowy covering.

I hurried along in the fetid dark, my fingers never letting go of the wall as my eyes slowly adjusted. After only a few steps, the corridor branched and joined the sewers. I heard, rather than saw, the water directly in front of me. It lapped against the walkway with a *shush, shush* whisper. A charnel stench mated grotesquely with the gases from the sewer to create something that was almost solid. It was virtually identical to the same gut-curdling miasma I'd encountered at Rennes' pawnshop. Falling in was not even to be contemplated.

A short way up ahead, light spilled from a ruined hole in the wall. There were enough things floating in the sewer to make me regret the illumination, but with its help I picked my way along and peered through the hole.

Providence, it seemed, chose odd moments to make my life easier. I'd been hoping to find a service door in the sewers to gain access to Vasiley's cellars, but instead a localised explosion had torn through the reinforced-concrete wall. I stepped carefully through, and edged around a steel cabinet that lay on its side, warped and buckled as though from intense heat. A few crusty paint pots had also been caught in the blast; their contents splattered the brickwork with the lurid abandonment of modern art. A table and chair lay on their sides. Box files were scattered like giant Lego bricks, spilling their contents at random. I spotted the security door I'd seen from outside, surrounded on the inside by heavy-duty crates in various stages of unpacking. Papers covered most of the floor like autumn leaves. By the light of a stuttering fluorescent bulb, I found invoices for expensive antiquities and dozens of newspaper clippings - most of them with '*Monstrum*' featuring in their headlines. The art dealer, it

seemed, had built up quite a store of information about his killer.

My nostrils flared, and I had to suppress the urge to gag. It was as though the memory of violence had been stamped into every molecule of the air; each breath felt like it was choking on calculated, inhuman malice. A radio lay face-down at my feet, as though averting its gaze from the back wall.

My gorge rose as I approached; the irrepressible stink growing, if possible, even worse. Familiar symbols had been smeared in blood across the wall in the Monstrum's gory signature. Crimson hand prints traced a tortured pathway across the floor. There was more blood here than at Von Croy's place; Vasiley had been conscious and struggling when the Monstrum began gutting him.

There were stairs leading up out of the cellar. Mould glistened in the light cast by a single, naked bulb. As I reached the top, the walls became plasterboard, painted a utilitarian grey, with stacks of antique picture frames leaning against them.

I froze, listening.

Beyond a closed side door, from the end of the hallway, came an insect-footfall - a whisper of paper shuffling against paper. I crept to the open doorway - my weapon loose and ready at my side. There was a cough, masculine and impatient, and I peeped around the door frame.

Standing with their back to me was a very familiar pair of shoulders hunched over a desk. The man's brutish, heavily-scarred hands were rummaging through an open box file under the glow of a bottle-green desk lamp. The man didn't notice me, but muttered curses in French under his breath, shifting his weight to the other foot.

It was too good to be true.

Bouchard never looked up as I closed the distance between us and pressed my pistol against his fat neck. He sucked in his breath.

"Croft?"

"Bouchard. How are things?" I struck, catching his skull with the butt of my weapon. He stumbled, and I kicked him back into a chair, his head lolling. A bead of blood dripped from his scalp.

He was groaning, barely conscious, but I felt no pity. When I hit someone, they usually stay down. Quickly I searched his pockets,

disarming him of a palm-sized handgun. There was a packing case next to the desk, with a length of security chain and combination padlock to deter would-be thieves. In moments, I had looped the chain several times around Bouchard's unresisting arm and the nearby radiator. The padlock clicked, locking him in place. Like a bear rousing itself from hibernation he shook his head, swaying as he returned to full consciousness.

The crate bounced and thumped against the floor as I dragged it over and sat opposite him, crossing one ankle over my knee and holding my pistol with the safety catch on.

"I want some answers, Bouchard. Yes, I know you can hear me. *Why* did you want me dead in Paris?"

His eyes swam into focus. "You were jus' a side issue... a loose end that needed tidying up."

"*Who ordered it?*"

"A madman, called Eckhardt." He dabbed at the blood oozing down his cheek and glared. "E was putting pressure on all my operations - threatening my family, killing my men... You remember Arnaud, eh? Imagine dealing with that every day!"

"Your typical psycho."

"The worst kind. Eckhardt *is* the Monstrum."

"Is that right?" I almost laughed. "Believe it or not, I *had* started to piece that together. What exactly did *you* do for him?"

Bouchard shrugged. "I 'ad to take delivery of a Painting that was in the Louvre, and bring it to the Strahov, 'ere in Prague."

"*My Painting!*" I said, and spat. "That wasn't easy to get out of the Louvre, Bouchard."

He seemed to notice his incarceration for the first time and clinked at the restraints. "Seems everyone's a loser."

"So why Prague?"

"Eckhardt is protected by a group based 'ere, called the Cabal. They're almost as dangerous as Eckhardt and at least as insane."

"The *Cabal*?" I had a brief mental image of a bunch of crack-pot alchemists running around the city, and of Luddick's dossiers. Their singular oddness suddenly seemed to fit. "Not the Mafia, then?"

"No. They're much more sinister than the Mafia. No one even

knows 'ow old they really are, but I've seen records suggesting they were active during the Second World War."

A chill slipped into my belly, leeching the warmth from my innards. The idea that this Eckhardt could be the fabled Black Alchemist, missing for five centuries, gained some plausibility. Killing his original Cabal had not, apparently, given him any qualms about assembling a new one.

"Interesting." I mused.

"Anyone too inquisitive about Cabal business simply disappears." Bouchard said, his fingers parting like a flower's petals. "Pfft!"

"Like my friend Von Croy," I nodded. "What was *his* involvement in all of this? Why would the Monstrum kill him?"

"E was 'ired to locate one of the five Paintings that was in the Louvre, but 'e found out too much. 'E contacted Vasiley, 'ere in Prague-" he gestured around the room "-and they exchanged information."

"I found Vasiley's faxes, plus four Obscura Engravings he sent to Von Croy." *Right before your man tried to riddle me with bullets,* Maggie added silently.

"Hmm, proof that your friend got careless," Bouchard said. "The faxes were intercepted by the Cabal. Suddenly Eckhardt didn't need Von Croy anymore. 'E was another loose end to be '*tidied up*'... like Vasiley."

"*Killed* like Vasiley, you mean!" I said, and swallowed the memory of Werner lying in my arms. "Haven't you been downstairs, Bouchard? Haven't you *seen* how Vasiley died? *Why* does Eckhardt do that to the bodies? And what does he want the Paintings *for*?"

"I don't know the details," Bouchard said wearily. "But it's something to do with reviving the *Cubiculum Nephili*."

My confusion lasted mere moments. Then in a rush of images, Maggie hurled through my memories, and back to a disused tram in the middle of a Parisian slum, to the pages of Werner's notebook - open on my lap in the light of dawn some thirty-six hours ago. In a trance of recollection, she read out the entry:

The Sleeper, or Cubiculum Nephili - literally 'sleeping cask' or 'chamber'. Thought to be the last intact specimen of the Nephilim race.

Supposedly buried in Anatolia, TURKEY.

It was as though a laser beam had switched on in my head, connecting the facts into one coherent beam. What had been fragmented theories and notes began linking up into a pattern - one whose final details were still unclear, but whose silhouette was terrifying.

"The Sleeper," I breathed. "Last of the extinct Nephilim race. What the hell is Eckhardt doing with *that*?"

"You've 'eard of the Sleeper?" Bouchard exclaimed. "Eckhardt is insane! 'E thinks 'e can use the Sleeper to breed the Nephilim back into existence!"

So, my theory was confirmed. "There's no faulting his ambition, is there?" I said, rubbing the tender spot between my eyes. "So, this fifth Engraving Vasiley kept back is the key to the last Obscura Painting Eckhardt's after."

Bouchard slumped in his chair, but flashed a predator's smile. "Clever girl. The Engraving shows a location called the Vault of Trophies. The Vault was one of the last Lux Veritatis secret strongholds, and Eckhardt's been desperate to get into it."

"And just how do *you* know all this, Bouchard?" I said. "I doubt most Parisian gang bosses take much of an interest in Biblical legends."

"Information is survival. I'm a survivor." He spread his hand expansively. "Not unlike you, eh?"

"So do you know where the Vault is located?"

Again, that one-armed shrug. "Only that it's somewhere beneath the Strahov."

"And the Painting is definitely there?"

"Eckhardt thinks so. It's one of the reasons the Cabal built their stronghold there in the first place."

"Well, then," I got to my feet. "I'd better take a look around and find this Engraving, hadn't I?"

Bouchard was unrelenting. "It'll be well 'idden. Vasiley was very cautious."

"Not cautious enough." I replied, heading for the room's only other door.

“Are you going to leave me like this?” Bouchard asked, a tremor of panic in his voice. There was a satisfying sound of the chain clinking, immovable.

“Yes,” I said simply, relishing the look on his face. “Take a break, Bouchard; you’ve been running around a lot. I’ll be back with the fifth Engraving. Don’t worry, I won’t be long.”

Chapter 24

I kicked the door shut, finally allowing myself to breathe freely. For all that it had revealed, the encounter had left a greasy taint on my nerves.

My instincts had proved correct; Bouchard was a thug - a clever, dangerous man but ultimately just a tool to be used at the whim of someone with far greater subtlety. Bouchard's loyalty to his men was all the leverage Eckhardt had needed to make him do absolutely anything. I could now understand just how far Eckhardt's influence had extended; the Monstrum's alter-ego had obviously added all of the necessary persuasiveness to negotiations.

Oh, Werner, I thought. Why did you have to go and get mixed up with this scum?

"Well, Maggie," I said aloud, scanning the room. "The sooner we find that Engraving - and the Painting - the sooner we can put an end to Eckhardt's plans."

And the sooner we can make that monster pay for his crimes, she added softly. No need to be coy with me, Lara. I know what you really want. Don't worry; all your dark-side-of-the-force impulses are safe with me.

"Very reassuring," I said. "Now, where to start?"

It was a fair question. I'd entered what was unmistakably Vasiley's famous gallery - the grand entrance hall that also functioned as an exhibition venue, sale room and a boastful reminder that even walking through the front door would take a juicy bite from your

cheque book. The ballroom-like chamber soared over three storeys high, and could have played host to half a hundred browsing millionaires and their attendants.

Its architecture practically dripped with Art Nouveau opulence - from the curling wrought iron balustrades and staircase, to the balletic marble figures embracing the bookshelves on the mezzanine floor. Exquisite vases and oil paintings stood on plinths or rested against easels - tastefully chosen to convey quality over quantity.

The parquet floor was so highly polished I could see my reflection, except for the room's centre, where a twelve-foot diameter circle of enamelled tiles portrayed scenes of country life with astonishing artistry. A band of ebony surrounded the extraordinary display, and was studded along its circumference with gilded Roman numerals like the face of a magnificent (if hand-less) clock face. It was an eerie reminder of another decorated floor I'd seen recently, and set me thinking.

I checked all of the obvious places - the bookcases, the desk with its antique brass cash register (the kind that has a drawer that bursts out like a gunshot), even inside the many vases on display. Nothing. My feet carried me up the staircase, along the balcony and past the magnificent stained glass window that took up almost the entire frontage of the building. There was scaffolding up here, with dust sheets hung to protect the fragile books on the shelves behind. The scaffolding's purpose was opaque to me, though I did pause to consider the mural across the back wall. Two black-robed, scholarly men were painted standing below a Christ-like figure reaching towards the skies. To my surprise, the 'heavens' he was reaching into was actually the figure of a woman; in one hand she held a bird of prey, and in the other a spiked circlet.

Surely not...?

I squinted, incredulous. That *couldn't* be the same device the stranger had used to nearly decapitate me at the Louvre... could it?

Abruptly, frustration rose in me like magma, until I felt like exploding with the pressure of a thousand unanswered riddles. Ever since Werner had died, questions had assaulted me without reprieve: who was my stalker and what was the truth behind his mysterious

crystal shard? Why did he leave it behind? How could I find and defeat Eckhardt before it was too late?

If I was Vasiley, where the hell would I have hidden that bloody Engraving?

“Dammit, I want answers!” I swerved, lashing out at the scaffolding, dislodging a tight coil of rope. A counterweight the size of my head crashed onto the balcony, and the pulleys shrieked in protest as the rope whipped around like a striking snake. A circular pane of glass in the very centre of the window tilted alarmingly in its frame. Just as I was sure it would shatter on top of me, it stopped. A cold wind howled through the gap. Snowflakes wafted in like curious moths, melting where they settled on my face.

A tiny flutter of curiosity led me to wander directly beneath the window. My investigative instincts tingled in the way that always meant I was on the brink of something. The minuscule compass on my car key’s fob chain told me that the window was facing due east.

Inexorably, I turned and looked over the balcony. In my mind’s eye, I pictured the room as it would be at the break of dawn, as the first rays of the sun rose and pierced the perfect circle in the window.

The sunlight would strike the floor - right onto the elaborate mosaic, on the Roman numeral III. The numeral seemed to wink at me, tantalising, and suddenly I knew where the last Engraving *had* to be.

I flew downstairs, unable to rein back my natural caution. On closer examination, the floor appeared to be seamless; nevertheless, I *knew* this was the right track. With fresh objectivity, my gaze swept the room, looking for any reference to threes. Hitting ‘3’ on the cash register proved fruitless, and there wasn’t any kind of object in the room that appeared three times. Even the hands of the handsome grandfather clock behind the desk pointed to midnight, not three.

Wait, Maggie said, pulling me up short. Midnight?!

My watch said half past seven.

“You know, sometimes you’re too smart for your own good,” I muttered, and spun the clock’s hands around to the three o’clock position. There was a barely perceptible ‘click’, and with a soft *whoosh*, the tiled floor behind me collapsed in a smooth descent -

forming a spiral staircase.

At the bottom of the stairs was Vasiley's *real* office.

James Bond, eat your heart out, I thought, giving a low whistle. My feet sank into a crimson carpet - my eyes adjusting to the muted light from four case cabinets in the room's centre. A walnut desk and leather swivel chair waited patiently by the far wall - supporting a computer that looked like it had been built by NASA. Shelves within easy reach displayed an array of bottles and decanters that any oenophile would sell their soul to possess.

"I knew that back room was too dull for Vasiley's tastes," I murmured, pausing by one of the cabinets to admire an alabaster statue - *Nephilim figurine, c. 1350 B.C, Cappadocia, Turkey*. Come to think of it, every object and artwork in the room was a testament to a life-consuming passion for the Nephilim legend. There were carvings and fragile parchments in hermetically-sealed cases, but there was nothing to point my way to the Engraving's hiding place.

A quick search of the desk proved to be just as disappointing, but I'd hardly expected Vasiley to keep the Engraving in such an obvious place - not when he'd taken such trouble to conceal his office. Rather frustratingly, I found a numerical key code pad mounted on the wall next to a rather ominous painting, but there was no sign of a safe or secret door.

Almost by accident, my eye fell on Vasiley's wastepaper basket.

You can tell a lot about someone by examining what they throw away. Some of the most fascinating archaeological finds have been made while sifting through ancient middens and rubbish heaps - from poignant soldiers' letters at Hadrian's Wall, to the charred bones of sacrificial animals.

An email from Vasiley to Mademoiselle Carvier lay crumpled at the bottom of the bin.

"*Mlle Carvier*," I read, smoothing out the creases. "*Please refer to shadowhistories.pr. To access restricted information, type code 31597*."

Well, it's got to be worth a try, Maggie urged, and I tapped the code into the keypad. To my delight, the painting rolled to one side, revealing an alcove hardly bigger than a box file.

The Fifth Obscura Engraving, etched on the original calf's vellum,

lay inside.

"Gotcha!" I hissed, not bothering to hide my smile as I lifted it out with tentative fingers. The evocative odour reminded me of every archivist's library I'd ever worked in. "Wouldn't you know it; the Vault of Trophies is directly beneath the Strahov Fortress. Bouchard was right!"

Speaking of Bouchard, shouldn't we be getting back to our little friend? Maggie prompted. I realised somewhat belatedly just how much time had passed, and slipped the Engraving carefully into Werner's notebook. Normally it would be sacrilege to even think about exposing such a fragile artefact to the ambient outside air, but at least the notebook would protect the vellum for a little while longer.

*

A spark leapt from the door handle as I reached to turn it.

Strange, I thought. *Surely there can't be air conditioning running in here?*

The hinges creaked as the door swung inwards and I stopped dead, unable to fathom the change in the room.

The chain and padlock were still there, but Bouchard had vanished.

I've seen dragons and Atlantean goddesses, been inside a UFO, and beaten Winston at chess. Nothing, however, was quite as mind-boggling as the concept of Bouchard somehow managing to slip his one-hundred-and-twenty kilo bulk out of captivity without me hearing him. The door wasn't soundproofed.

In no time, I slipped the safety catch off my pistol and double-checked the handcuffs. They held fast, although I did fancy I felt a slight greasiness where they'd touched his skin - nothing so lubricating as to help him escape, unfortunately. There had been specks of his blood staining the wall where he'd leaned his forehead against it, but they too had disappeared.

There was only one other way he could have gone.

The corridor was deserted as I stole my way back down to the basement. The shadows crowded in - suffocating the already-meagre light. Damp gleamed thickly on the walls, stinking and foul.

I froze. A sound, a breath of air, a change at the subconscious level - *something* made me pause beside the closed side door I'd passed earlier.

Standing to one side, my gun held ready, I placed my hand on the handle and jerked the closet open.

Bouchard towered over me - a behemoth in stained Italian leather, with his mouth stretched open in silent rage. But before I could shoot, his whole body pitched forwards and struck the ground - as stiff and lifeless as a felled tree.

On reflex, I leapt back. "What the *hell's* going on around here?"

My yelp echoed off bare plaster and wooden flooring, becoming lost in the nooks and crannies of the building. Only silence answered me.

Paranoia is such a lovely feeling - guaranteed to make one feel all warm and secure.

It was awkward - keeping my gun at the ready in my right hand while I examined Bouchard with my left - but somehow I managed it. Even my own shadow started to look threatening, until I forced my shaken nerves to the back of my mind where they belonged.

That's odd, Maggie noted, her cool voice of reason easing some of my tension. *The blood's already clotted, the body's cold, and rigour mortis has already set in. He's been dead several hours, at least!*

"How is that possible? We were just *talking* to him," I said, and spotted something that made my gut clench uncomfortably. "The blood's not coming from where I hit him. There isn't any mark on his forehead or scalp *at all*. All the blood's from this wound through his heart, like he's been stabbed."

Huh, amazing that someone could even find a heart in the first place, Maggie sniffed as I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing myself to take a fortifying breath. The facts just didn't add up. *He's probably not going to answer any more questions, Lara. Check his pockets; he might have keys or a phone we can use.*

Dead bodies as such don't bother me - it's those that won't *stay* dead that are the problem. It was tough trying to shift that amount of limp weight, but eventually, I managed to heave him onto his side. A search of his cavernous pockets revealed a packet of breath mints, a silk handkerchief, the usual fluff and detritus of a chronic cigar

smoker, and a bristling set of keys.

Sheer curiosity led me to try them out on the cellar's security door. The second to last key of the bunch was a perfect fit, and I gratefully stepped out into the bracing night air.

I almost gave Luddick a heart attack.

"There you are!" he exclaimed, settling his glasses back into place. "I said half an hour; it's been nearly forty minutes! I was worried you'd forgotten me."

"Small chance of that," I said, not bothering to hide my impatience. "Did you see anyone just now?"

A frown creased his otherwise amiable features. "Yes - Bouchard just crossed the square as I got here. He was in a real hurry!"

"Bouchard?" I echoed, incredulous. "Bouchard's dead! I've just seen his corpse in there!"

Luddick peered at me, clearly wondering if I'd suffered a blow to the head. "Lady, I know what I saw. Are you posit-."

"Never mind," I cut him off, my glance darting around the alleyway. There were no figures lurking in the shadows, and no footprints besides our own. Yet another mystery had joined the queue, jostling for space. The pressure was becoming uncomfortable. "Did you get me the Strahov code?" I asked, rubbing my temples; the headache was definitely getting worse.

"I told you, I'm a professional!" he said, and flourished a scrap of paper - his business card, I realised, with a twelve-digit number scrawled on the back. "This pass code will get you into the warehouse area. It's only a low-level pass, but at least you'll be inside the complex."

I accepted the card with a nod. "I can take it from here. Have you tried this code out yourself?"

"Me? No! The place gives me the creeps!" he said, his face turning several shades greyer. "Workers have gone missing and all kinds of spooky stuff."

"What goes on in there, exactly?" I asked as we walked to his car, parked at the end of the alleyway.

"God knows," he sighed. "I'd give my innards to find out, but... Well, it's way too 'Gothic' for me. Remember, if you uncover anything, give

me first shot at it, eh?"

I smiled humourlessly. "Sure thing."

Luddick unlocked the car and gallantly held the door as I climbed in. White stuffing poked through the seams in the upholstery, and the floor was littered with discarded papers and fast-food bags. I wrinkled my nose, wondering if the engine would even run long enough to get us to our destination.

"The Strahov isn't far," Luddick reassured me, and coaxed the ignition into life. Ice crunched under the tyres as we turned out of the square, into the gathering night.

Chapter 25

“We’re here.”

I straightened in my seat as Luddick cranked the handbrake, cutting off the ignition. Almost immediately, snow flakes began to settle on the windscreen, but I could still make out our surroundings. Our short journey had taken us away from the grandeur of inner Prague to a strictly industrial neighbourhood.

We sat in the shadow of an enormous, red-brick warehouse - one of a dozen or so that crowded together like giants around a campfire. All had windows only on the second storey, and armies of chimneys marched against the skyline like battlements. Occasionally trucks and fork-lifts would rumble past, coughing exhaust, but no one saw us. My subconscious noted rather more razor-wire and electrified fences than might be warranted for an average industrial estate, and there were dark shapes positioned at strategic points that could only be CCTV cameras. The lack of graffiti or general passers-by was oddly disturbing.

Luddick leaned on the steering wheel and nodded. “That one, in the middle. That’s the Strahov.”

“Impressive,” I murmured. “Do they get many visitors?”

“Plenty, but not all come back out. There’ve been deliveries arriving for weeks now - courier vans, HGVs, you name it. They all enter there-” he pointed to an opening in the fortified perimeter. Inside the loading bay, the slush and ice was criss-crossed with tyre tracks, and I spotted a vast set of metal doors emblazoned with a snarling lion’s

head logo. The doors could have accommodated a couple of jumbo jets with room left over. "Last week a whole convoy arrived with armed escorts. They unloaded the cargo and forced everyone inside. I don't think the drivers were expecting that. I haven't seen them or their vehicles since."

A sick feeling rose in my throat, and I forced it down with a gulp of water from my bottle. "Anything else I should know?"

"Look in the glove compartment."

I did so, and drew out a newspaper. Puzzled, I shook it out and saw it was an international edition - something way out of Luddick's normal league. But I was silenced by the headline;

DOUBLE MONSTRUM MURDER IN PARIS.

Under the 'WANTED' sub-headline, my own face stared furtively out from a grainy CCTV photograph. The Louvre's signature parquet floor formed the background, along with an unconscious security guard.

Luddick met my eye, smiling gently.

My mouth was dry, despite my drink. "Why are you helping me?"

"You thought I'd just turn you in without getting a story?" he said. "Bah, this could be my big break. You're famous!"

"I was framed! Von Croy was a dear friend and-"

"Lady, I believe you! Why else would I let you get in my car?" He pushed the brim of his hat out of his eyes and gave me an appraising look. "I'm an excellent judge of character, and I don't think for one moment that you did... that." He waved a hand at the paper, still open on my lap. "Besides, if you *did* murder those people, how did you get to Prague in time to kill Vasiley? The timing's all wrong - unless you can be in two places at once!"

"Whatever is going on at the Strahov, it's big, and I want to be the one to uncover it. Eckhardt and his gang have been spooking people for a very long time, but this could bring them down *if*-" his eyes pleaded, "-we help each other."

"I've already promised you whatever juicy information I can find in there," I said, gritting my teeth a little. "You've got a noble cause, Luddick, but I don't see you risking your neck to go get this information yourself. It's not going to be a child's tea-party, even for

me.”

“Ah, I have something that might help with that,” he winked. “No need to get nasty, Lady - I’m on your side, remember?”

I tensed automatically as his hand reached into his inner pocket; it’s a reflex I find hard to suppress. But he drew out a compact object wrapped in a paper bag and passed it to me below the level of the dashboard. “I got you this. It could come in handy; the Strahov is one weird place.”

“A machine pistol!” I exclaimed, unwrapping my prize. “Skorpion M84A, semi-automatic. Not bad.”

“You know your stuff,” he grinned. “No invasion force should be without one.”

“How much?”

“The full story,” he said, and raised a hand. “No, I won’t take money... Well, unless you want to hang onto it afterwards.”

“What about what I already owe you?” I lifted an eyebrow. “For showing me the dossiers, driving me here?”

“Bah, put it on your tab for later. I have a feeling about you, Lady. Maybe it’s the Strahov that should be worried.” He grinned again, and tapped the dashboard with an emphatic finger. “Just remember - exclusive! I’ll be waiting for you.”

I could only sigh. “Thanks, Luddick.” Despite the dangers (about which he was still woefully ignorant), his excitement was obvious. It was tough to be hard on anyone that naive; to be so would have been like kicking the proverbial puppy. Even so, I was firm. “You better get out of here though. This isn’t a healthy place to hang around - doubly-so if I start stirring up trouble. Go home and make some coffee. I’ll come and find you.”

“Lady, just get going - before I change my mind about turning you in.” He shook his head, but his eyes were smiling as I got out the car.

Snowflakes settled on my eyelashes as I looked up, taking in the fullness of my target.

Set against the night sky, brooding and cloaked with snow, the Strahov had the hunched look of a predator guarding its kill. The red lion on its gates bared its fangs - a clear warning to look elsewhere. Using the shadow of passing vehicles, I timed my dash across the

street and down a side alley, gliding under the radar of the guards patrolling its high brick walls.

Quick as a shadow, I ghosted along the wall - flattening my profile and keeping to the dark spots. It was hard. Most of the compound was bathed in stark security lights. Suddenly, I found the snow to be my ally; I found a rhythm to moving with the swirling gusts that obscured my movements from any watchful eyes.

In hardly any time at all, I had circled to the rear of the building, where I found a locked fire exit half-hidden behind a drift that came up to my shoulder.

Before my fingers had a chance to go numb, I tapped in Luddick's pass code and gave a silent prayer of thanks when the light by the door blinked green.

My tracks were already being covered by fresh snow as I slipped inside.

Chapter 26

By sheer, blind luck, the security guard turned his back to me just as I stepped through the door.

Crap! Blurted Maggie - ever the voice of assistance. Utterly exposed, I shrank against the wall and ducked sideways for the cover of a nearby container. The edge of my coat whipped out of sight just as I heard his footsteps turn and close on my position. I held my breath - expecting the business end of his gun to peer around the corner and target me at point blank range.

But no. The measured tread of his boots carried on, past my hiding place. No alarm was raised. He hadn't seen me.

In total silence, I eased through the container's open door - disrobing myself of the cumbersome coat and checking my weapons by touch. Now that the pounding of my heart had eased, I could make out individual voices scattered around the warehouse. All were male, and all were speaking Czech, with hollers and counter-orders echoing around the room. From my earlier glimpse, I knew the interior of the warehouse was vast - at least seven storeys tall. I could smell diesel and burnt plastic, and the air had a dry, acrid taste. Brick and steel contained the clanking of machinery and heavy cargo, with nothing to soften the stark echoes. The sounds formed an audio map, and I half-closed my eyes to improve my concentration.

A whirring sound was closing in on my location. Before I could react, a heavy *thunk* jolted the roof of my container, and the whole thing was suddenly rising. I threw my arms out for balance as the

container began to sway - caught, no doubt, in the jaws of an overhead crane. I cursed inwardly, but held my tongue, knowing I had not been discovered - yet.

Through the gap in the container's doors, I watched the floor drop away. My container was being hoisted over a dividing wall - yet another layer of security that bristled with machine gun emplacements and infrared tracking sensors. I counted several bored-looking guards patrolling along its length; they all wore the same no-nonsense gear as the mercenaries at the Louvre. Swap the Kevlar for chain mail and the rifles for crossbows, and I might have been infiltrating a medieval castle rather than a twenty-first century warehouse.

The crane juddered to a halt. I braced against the walls, pinning my discarded coat under my foot to stop it from sliding out and betraying my presence. The operator clearly believed that the container was empty, and set it down with a bone-jarring lack of concern. I felt my teeth rattle and clasped my weapons to my body, mindful not to let them bang against the walls. Moments later, I heard the crane release and move away - returning across the wall to pick up more cargo.

Well, at least I was on the right side of all that security.

Shall we dance? I asked Maggie in silence, and slipped the safety off the Skorpion.

The first guard unfortunate enough to wander past the container's doors didn't know what hit him. I caught him a ringing blow under his jawbone with the pistol's stock, and dragged his limp form into the container before anyone could spot him.

I am a hunter, and everyone in this room is my prey, I thought. Noiselessly, I slipped along the container's flank.

The mantra was an old one, but one that always bolstered my confidence. It didn't take an archaeologist to know that mystical men (and women) had known for centuries that most 'magic' was simply a colourful term for positive-thinking - that deliberate and determined application of willpower can achieve changes that are, in a word, miraculous. As long as I *believed* I was the most dangerous thing out there, I would be - certainly in the eyes of anyone careless enough to

cross my path. The moment I started doubting my own abilities, the spell would be broken, and I would probably end up as a bloody smear on the concrete.

Good thing you've got me along then, eh girl? Maggie said. *Go get 'em!*

I spotted the sweep of a gun-mounted flashlight and froze. Its owner muttered in Czech - his voice raised in a querying tone that made me press back into the shadows.

A heartbeat later the man came into view. He was so close, I could see the gold filling flash as his mouth opened in shock. He raised his rifle to fire, but I dealt him a swift punch right on his chin. His rifle went spinning across the floor, but against all probability, he managed to re-balance from the blow. A knife appeared in his hand, and thudded into the container scant inches from where my head had been.

He yelled, "Někdo tu je!" and in a split second, I twisted my fist out of his grip and elbowed his stomach. The warehouse thundered as bullets traced across the container's side, and a ricochet struck the luckless guard right in the throat. I backed off, out of immediate range as he fell, gargling and spasming.

"Shit!" I hissed, readying my own gun. Sparks flew as incoming fire ricocheted off the steel container. I was trapped.

Guards would be converging, hoping to come at me from both sides of the container. I had only seconds to act.

I am a hunter, and everyone in this room is my prey.

The standard response to being threatened is to freeze or attack. Instincts don't normally waste valuable grey matter when death is only moments or inches away. Fortunately, training and experience can help.

I had both. In abundance.

My finger was already pulling the Skorpion's trigger as the first man entered my field of vision. I spun - the man dropping as my shots found their target - and rolled as incoming fire whistled harmlessly overhead. My second target ducked, and the bullet burst a nearby pipe instead. Steam spewed forth and he screamed, breaking cover just as I dispatched a third guard trying to ambush me from behind.

His eyes rolled up as he expired - his neck broken by the force of my fist's precision strike. I had a glimpse of the scalded man stumbling, blinded and blistered, before he lost his footing and tumbled over the gantry. He bounced off the cargo container and lay thrashing on the ground, maddened and howling. The ice within me thawed just a little, and I put an end to his suffering.

My head snapped round, alerted by the hiss of a radio. Not ten yards away was a roofed-over guard station - its door was open and a man in uniform was scrambling to dial the bright red emergency telephone. The handset fell from his hand as my bullet found his heart. The man slumped, dead before he even hit the floor.

I am a hunter, and everyone in this room... was my prey.

Calmly, I replaced the receiver. The dead guard yielded up a security pass with Mark E. Zimmerman typed above the red lion logo - not a high-level pass, but one that would at least beat the now-useless code Luddick had given me.

Thank you, I thought, closing the man's eyes.

There had been too few opportunities for compassion during the last few days, and I intended to take them where I could. The alternative stirred within me as I pocketed Mark E. Zimmerman's card - like an adder stalking through the undergrowth. If I relaxed my vigilance, the same implacability that might save my life could also turn me into another Monstrum.

The dead guard was suddenly repulsive to me. His expression, gormless in death, made me heave under the upsurge of contempt that rose within my heart. *Witless sheep, I thought, blindly following a master who delighted in torture - who was so far over the sadist horizon he couldn't see humanity on a clear day.* The temptation was overwhelming: *I should kill the lot of them, purge the Strahov from the inside out. Yeah... Pathetic, foolish, weak... They all deserved to burn, except for Eckhardt. That would be too quick. I'd draw out his death just like he drew out Werner's guts, make him beg like the animal he was...*

With that thought, I felt the weight of the Tuareg cross against my chest, and the voice of a little girl whispered through the tide of memories.

The only real monsters are the ones we create for ourselves.

It was like getting punched in the stomach.

"Maggie... What am I *doing*?" I croaked. My legs were suddenly weak and I stumbled, leaning against the guard's workstation - unable to even look at the dead man. In horror, I realised that my eyes were wet.

It's this place, she said. It's what I felt when we passed Eckhardt at Rennes' pawnshop. His presence is like pollution, infecting everything that gets too close. Even the guards must feel it corrupting them, eroding their souls a little at a time. It's enough to chew a person up and spit them out into insanity. I bet Eckhardt's staff turnover is enormous.

"Those who survive the longest in service to him will be the worst," I sucked in a ragged breath, nodding grimly. "No consciences, no morals of any kind."

And no free-will to question their master, she agreed. Eckhardt knows what he's doing. He wants obedient killers, willing slaves, not soldiers. We're feeling that influence, even now.

"Then we'd better hurry," I raised my head. A fresh round was jammed into the Skorpion as I made a beeline for the nearest security door. "Eckhardt's not winning this fight. I've a promise to keep."

With a supreme effort, I focused on Salieah's gift, squeezing it in my hand and forcing out the aura that was trying to sap the strength out of me. Now that I was fully aware of it, I could almost taste the cancerous undercurrent of the atmosphere. It crept along my skin, clinging and damp, and penetrated my body and mind like tendrils of plague-ridden smog. But it was not merely passive ambiance: the aura was being directed - driven by a mind of singular willpower. Invisible, insidious - it oozed over and through the entire Strahov until even the brickwork and panes within the windows were saturated and dripping with malevolence. I didn't dare imagine what such a thing might look like to someone like Putai, who had trained her mind's eye since childhood to perceive such things.

The aura grew in strength, as if sensing my resistance. *I will not submit, I'm Lara Croft, I will not submit.* My eyes screwed tightly closed as I repeated the words in my head, like a life-saving mantra.

The pendant grew warm against my skin - its heat spreading through my body and galvanising my resolve. My tremours ceased, fortified by the cry of a desert hawk. I opened my eyes and I felt them spark briefly with the black-within-gold gaze of the sun god.

Courage, Lara.

The force within me exploded.

Helplessly, I felt it sweep through me - too much for mere flesh-and-blood to contain. For a burning, exhilarating moment, I was something more than a mere human woman.

I was the dune, the zenith sun, the beetle and the hawk; I was children's laughter and the bark of camels, the cold trickle of an oasis and the sweet nectar of scarlet-lipped flowers. I was crisp melon and the gritty tumble of pebbles, the sanctuary of a mud-brick house and the impossible vastness of the sky at night, turning with a billion stars.

The hawk soared, and I was every ruffle of its feathers, every twitch of its head as it scanned the ground for prey. It stooped, and I was the wing bones as the effort flexed them to the point of pain, racing for the ground at over a hundred miles an hour. I was every grain of sand and every leaf of the acacia grove.

The Tuareg of Putai's village lived semi-nomadic lives, and the camel trains would travel the dunes from Egypt and Libya in the east, to Mauritania, Mali and Morocco in the west. A train had clearly arrived only a few minutes beforehand, for the air was full of dust and joyful cries of men and women embracing and scolding each other in equal measure. I was the anxiety of an old woman searching the faces for her son, and the stir of desire in the pair of newlyweds who stole a kiss in the confusion of unloading camels and ferrying supplies. I was every drop of sweat under indigo-dyed turbans, and every jingle of golden anklets sparkling in the firelight.

I screamed without making a sound.

What kind of being could *survive* this kind of power, if not a god?

We're with you, always.

I blanched in terror. Something heavy was enclosing me, a prison that moved of its own accord. Air rushed in and out like a hurricane, in counterpoint to the bird's-wing flutter deep inside.

My breathing. My heartbeat.

Lara? Lara!

“ ’m all rite,”

The swollen flap and its flexible openings moved, altering the flow of air. How...?

Tongue, lips, breath...

In a starburst of clarity, I was back.

My fear faded, overcome by shock. The confining prison was my own flesh and blood, stuck with a single viewpoint since birth. The vision - if that's what it was - had almost made me forget the limitations of my human existence. The details faded as I tried to hang onto them, like soap bubbles that I tried to grasp in my hands, but perhaps that was only a blessing. To be everywhere, in everything, all the time... no human could withstand it.

It was small wonder that prophets had a reputation for being crazy.

“I'm... all right, Maggie,” I managed, steadying myself against the wall. The bricks felt rough under my fingertips, but they and my fingers were separate, disconnected - just like the air filling my lungs or the concrete beneath my feet.

At some level, I was still conscious of the spiritual blight infesting the Strahov, but it no longer held any sway over me. I reached my hand towards the door and felt the dank malevolence shrink back, as though repelled by my presence. I laughed, and the sound banished the last of my fears. My skin tingled as if warmed by the Saharan sun.

Straightening my shoulders, I looked down at the security card still in my hand.

If anything had a right to be afraid, it was the Strahov.

“Thank you”, I murmured softly, and slipped the pendant back under my shirt.

*

Beyond the security door, I followed the train lines to a cross-junction thronged with shadows. A turntable set into the floor presumably allowed heavy goods to be directed into one of three fenced-off areas. I kept my gun in hand and padded cautiously along the wall, sticking to the gloom behind wooden crates and oil drums.

With no windows, and only a few flickering sodium lights, the interior of the warehouse felt doubly threatening. Steam hissed from heating ducts and condensation drip-dripped into noisome puddles. There didn't seem to be anyone about.

Two of the three junction offshoots were inaccessible - guarded by electrified fences that buzzed like nests of angry hornets. With a twist of frustration, I realised that my security card matched the sign on a door immediately beyond one of the fences. Even assuming I could manage to slide my hand through without getting fried, there was no way my whole body would be able to do the same. I had to turn off the power first, and that meant more exploring.

In a mad spirit of cooperation, the last junction happened to be protected by a bog-standard chain-link fence and a couple of hefty Rottweilers on the other side. The dogs watched me balefully, and growled as they detected my unfamiliar scent.

Fortunately, my unexpected disarmament while in the Louvre had not robbed me of Rennes' tranquiliser gun.

Don't look at me like that. I *like* dogs. Brainwashed humans toting heavy artillery are another matter entirely.

Apart from a surprised whimper, neither of the dogs made a sound as the darts did their work. In less than a minute, they were both dozing with all the limp grace of pillowcases stuffed with warm jelly. The mass-to-weight ratio could only be guessed, but I was pretty confident that it would be at least an hour before they woke up.

Eckhardt never does anything small, does he?

My inner voice had a point.

After vaulting the fence, I dusted off my hands and surveyed the workshop that would have done credit to an aircraft hanger. At the centre stood a low platform, at least thirty feet long and twenty wide, upon which rested a carved limestone tablet of equally gigantic proportions. Two saw-toothed cutting wheels on swing-arms stood poised above it - as menacing in their barbarity as surgeons back in the days when brandy and bone-saws were still considered to be medical chic.

To an archaeologist, it was akin to seeing a puppy tied up under a bacon slicer. I know I've inflicted my share of collateral damage

during my career, but this was deliberate, methodical butchery of cultural artefacts with no regard for their preservation.

What? I'm allowed to have my sentimental moments, too, you know.

Two more tablets leaned against the walls, easily weighing several tonnes apiece, yet still managing to look small in the huge workshop. The designs were badly eroded, but I could still make out a lamassu-type figure - a bull-bodied man with the braided hair and beard common to Mesopotamian regions throughout the Bronze Age. The nearby crates were all stamped with '*Anatolia: TURKEY*'. However, I didn't recognise any of the scripts chiselled below him. It certainly wasn't Arabic or Hebrew.

Perhaps they came with one of those convoys Luddick was talking about, Maggie suggested.

"Hmm," I mused, leafing through the notebook. "Werner mentions the Periapt Shards having been looted from '*underground cities*' in ancient Turkey, so perhaps these tablets were brought from the same region. I'm sure I've heard of the place... Damn, it's been a while since I studied it..."

The knowledge was within me, a reference that linked back to one of the many theological debates I'd shared with Father Patrick.

Where had I seen the name written down *recently*?

An angelic statuette, gleaming in the low light of Vasiley's secret office, and the handwritten card resting at its feet.

Nephilim figurine, c. 1350 B.C, Cappadocia, Turkey.

"Cappadocia!" I exclaimed, and snapped the book shut with a smile. "Of course! It's one of the richest archaeological sites in all Turkey, and it's slap bang in the middle of Anatolia. Father Patrick mentioned it when Schmidt started excavating Göbekli Tepe further to the south in the '90s. If there was anywhere I'd be willing to bet connected to the Nephilim myth, Cappadocia would be top of my list."

If that's true, Maggie ventured, then maybe Bouchard was right, and Eckhardt really has managed to salvage the Cubiculum Nephili. It might even be here, right now, in the Strahov.

"One more thing for me to clean up," I said, pursing my lips. "Maggie, back to business. If we built this place, where would we

house the power systems?"

Oh, that's easy. Somewhere out of the reach of interfering intruders like us.

"In other words, behind one of those electrified fences we just passed," I sighed. My eye strayed upwards, caught on a hunch. "Say... doesn't that vent go straight through the wall?"

Thirty crowded seconds later, I emerged from behind a control panel, coughing and brushing dust off my shoulders. The panel fizzled and sparked, sending out wafts of smoke, while one of the big blades gleamed from its resting place, buried several feet in the wall behind me.

There are times when I think the gods just want me to have fun. Whether it's driving a quad bike at full speed over an electrified fence to gate-crash Area 51, informing Pierre that I'm a busy girl, or fantasising about using a wise-cracking American hacker for target practice over certain comments about my 'bony ass', I do occasionally have the chance to enjoy myself.

There was a tortured whine as the ventilation shaft swung down and crunched into the floor. The severed edges still glowed dull orange.

Perhaps we should install some of these blades in the gym? Maggie suggested. Excellent for practising dodging.

"And for Winston to carve Sunday roasts," I muttered, using a handy ladder to gain the height needed to clamber inside the vent. "Maggie... much as I appreciate the optimism that we will use the gym again, I could use some quiet now please."

As you like.

My head fell still, and silence closed in around me like the narrowing vent walls as I inched my way onwards. The temperature dropped. In the dark I crawled on, trying to limit any bumping or scuffling that might give me away. In fact, I was surprised no one had come running when the blades had been chewing through the vent. Perhaps the Strahov was just used to wholesale, ear-splitting destruction.

Shfft-shfft, shfft-shfft.

The air became cloying, like meat that had spoiled and gone rancid.

I would have swooned, but for the gentle thrum of power still guarding me. The sound was coming from below me, but was almost imperceptible against the whisper of my breathing. Dusty fingers of light shone up through a narrow grating.

Abruptly a door banged open below me and a man's voice jumped in volume.

"You can't keep me here! My paper will miss me if I don't report in!"

Oh, no.

In a heartbeat my eye was pressed against the floor. The room below was tiny, little more than a prison cell, and shared the same stark decor.

The giant form of Gunderson blotted out my view.

"Found him skulking around the loading bay," he rumbled, an ore crusher masquerading as a drill-sergeant. "Must have got a pass code."

He stepped to one side, and I caught my breath.

Cowering on a chair, his hat missing and glasses askew, was Luddick. The man he was addressing stepped into the light - unhurried and with his face empty of expression. Instinctively I felt my skin try to shrivel up and crawl away from his presence.

Eckhardt's voice was paper-dry. "Close the door on your way out Gunderson."

Oh.

Crap.

Chapter 27

Humans are pack animals.

It's nothing to be ashamed about. The herding instinct is simply built into us. When we see another human being in mortal danger, we will typically do one of two things: panic and bolt, or rally round to defend the one most in jeopardy. Even the most stubborn humans will react fairly predictably when faced with a situation that triggers this innate behaviour.

My hand was going for my gun before Eckhardt had even finished his sentence.

And, just as quickly, I remembered why humans also needed reason to survive.

The line of sight was peerless; I could have squeezed off half a dozen rounds into Eckhardt's skull before he'd even have the chance to turn around. Luddick would have escaped the Monstrum... only to be mown down by armed guards as he fled the room.

A diversion might work for five or six seconds, but I knew Eckhardt would not trouble himself to find and kill me personally. That was what his guard dog, Gunderson, was for.

There was nothing I could do. Luddick was already dead.

There have been many occasions when I've faced death, but never when it was someone else's head on the block, and never when I was powerless to stop it. Luddick - the poor, blundering idiot - was only here because of me. The knowledge grabbed my heart and squeezed with wrenching clarity. I felt my eyes burn and chest constrict - the

pain as futile as it was inescapable.

Nevertheless, I couldn't turn away. I owed him that much.

"-Have records on you Eckhardt! You c-can't hurt me!"

Eckhardt wasn't even looking at him. His right hand - practically mummified within its bizarre wrappings - traced gently across the far wall, like a child dreamily drawing pictures in sand. *Shfft-shfft, shfft-shfft*.

"If only there was time for us to read them together," he whispered. "But, it is too late now."

He advanced, batting the light bulb aside. Shadows danced and swung, and his own abruptly swelled in girth like demonic wings. "There are things... to be done."

To my dying day, I'll never forget Luddick's screams.

I flung a hand across my eyes, shielding them from the searing arcs that suddenly exploded in the room below. It was as though an electrical substation was overloading, sending out sparks and deadly lightnings in all directions as they frantically sought to ground themselves. The discharge made my hair stand on end. An old metal filling began to vibrate, setting my jawbone to a furious aching. Smoke began drifting up through the grating, carrying the stink of burning flesh and hair.

Throughout it all, Luddick was crying out - incoherent, indecent sounds, unrecognisable as human.

It lasted fourteen seconds.

It was fourteen seconds too long.

I realised I was breathing hard whilst trying not to breathe at all. With the cessation of sound I looked down, just in time to see Eckhardt roll his neck, clicking each vertebra in turn, before turning on his heel and leaving the room. His expression was unfocused, preoccupied, as though he was leaving a satisfying but not exceptional restaurant.

All that remained of Luddick was a smoking, twisted mess of black-charred gore - the bones popping as fires slowly consumed the remains and the plastic chair beneath.

My gorge rose violently. Fury raked cold claws through my stomach, but I wasn't reckless enough to give in to it. Instead of

releasing the tide of emotion, I squeezed my eyes shut and channelled the energy into my breathing. It took a few moments, but slowly I regained some measure of composure. The anger didn't go away; I'd merely directed it into long-term storage. It was a far-cry from the meditative ballet of violence - or the hunter's mantra that held fear at bay - but if my mental discipline didn't keep my anger under control now, I wouldn't be able to make use of it properly when the time came.

If I had any say in the matter, that time was going to come very, very soon.

★

The power. Get the power switched off.

Maggie's gentle reminder was like a nudge to my physical body. I leaned on her briefly for support, letting my emotions stabilise, until I felt I could trust myself to get to the end of the vent without making any noise.

The vent terminated in a slatted grill that wasn't even screwed on. I swung it up cautiously, thankful that the hinges were well-oiled.

A lone guard stood directly below me - invisible until I peered over the edge. There was no one else about. Eckhardt had evidently left to attend to some evil scheme or other (a habit shared by most supernatural villains). The boiling hatred was quashed almost as soon as it rose within me - a sign of my (hopefully) increasing self-control.

I weighed up my options, and simple won the vote.

The guard never knew what hit him - or maybe I wasn't being generous. He *briefly* knew what hit him, i.e. a heavily-armed woman dropped onto his shoulders and tightened her thighs around his neck until his spinal cord snapped like a child's glow-stick. I leapt clear of his crumpled body and took cover behind a jumbo-sized wooden reel of industrial cable before anyone else in the vicinity could protest my arrival.

I peered around the hallway - a continuation of the junction walled-off by the high-voltage fencing. Gas canisters, HGV tyres and other warehouse paraphernalia littered the area, although I doubted that miniature anti-personnel mines with blinking motion-detectors were

standard issue in Prague's industrial quarter. Several of the devices were placed along the hallway. Coupled to the electric fences, SMG-armed guards and dogs, it added a certain obsessive-compulsive flavour to the Strahov security.

Wonderful.

The approach of voices made me draw further into the shadows. The men evidently spotted the guard's broken body, because they suddenly began shouting.

They might as well have painted bulls' eyes on their foreheads. My faithful little Skorpion barked twice, and both men went down with neat holes just above their eyes - their deaths too swift to cry out a warning.

The ricochet that struck one of the nearby gas canisters, however, more than made up for that.

Had I been standing any closer, the concussion would have probably blown me to pieces. As it was, the blast swatted me aside like a tornado wielding a king-sized mattress - depositing me in a bruised heap twelve feet away.

Vague shapes began coalescing out of the murk. Floor. Walls. Ceiling. Something warm and sticky trickled from my right nostril and slid down my cheek as I lay on my side.

For a confused second, I wondered why the wooden cable drum was getting smaller. I blinked, and realised it was rolling away from me. The explosion must have nudged it out of position.

The return of coherent thinking was like an electrical jolt.

My body responded on autopilot. I scrambled for cover, and winced as I dabbed at the blood dribbling from my nose. Every breath felt like a sadist raking a cheese grater against my lungs. I'd had fractured ribs before, and knew there was bugger all I could do except rest and take plenty of painkillers.

Angry shouting suggested that such a luxury would have to wait. I cursed under my breath, biting my lip to keep the pain at bay, and cocked my gun.

The blast had thrown me across the hallway to a blocky, white-walled structure like a prefab-construction site office. I peered around the stack of crates and spotted a lone guard negotiating the metal

steps. The scope of his gun swung in wide arcs as he growled an irritated reply to his companion in the doorway; I didn't need to speak Czech to know he was both puzzled and pissed-off by the explosion.

My mental exercises to block out pain aren't just for show, you know.

I rose, firing from the hip, and struck him in the neck just as his own shots went wide. Gritting my teeth, I vaulted up the flight of steps and unloaded more rounds at the pair of guards surging from the tiny cafeteria. They came at me like Kevlar-clad grizzly bears - shoving tables and chairs out of the way as their sidearms unloaded military-grade rounds in my general direction.

Note general. Note shoving tables and chairs.

Despite their training, I'd taken the men by surprise. And knocking over furniture in a slippery-tiled cafe is a recipe for foot-tangling disaster. Both men stumbled - their shots missing me by yards. The smell of fireworks joined the warehouse's unique chemical aroma, and my ears rang with the thunder of gunshots in the close quarters. From my crouched position by the door, I was able to pick them off quickly, without wasting ammo or time.

A concussive boom rattled the teeth in my jaw, and I turned reflexively towards the source, back the way I had come. A second blast, smaller than the first, echoed down the hallway, and this time I could see what was happening.

The cable drum - in its unthinking benevolence - was rolling down the hall and setting off the motion-sensitive mines as it went. Even as I watched, the third and final mine exploded, and the battle-scarred drum trundled to a drunken halt. My escape route had just become a lot more straightforward.

But I still had to turn off the power.

Ignoring my body's protests, I stepped over the corpses and scrutinised the security station. I recognised several areas of the warehouse on the CCTV screens, and there was a status-map of the entire complex etched in glowing green lines.

I'd known the Strahov had to be big, but I hadn't realised just *how* damned big until I took a closer look at the map.

"The warehouse is just the surface structure," I whispered. Spots of blood appeared on the panel, and I wiped my still-oozing nose. "Look at it all... These rooms go deep underground... *much* deeper, and hello, what's this?"

I zoomed in on a peculiar feature, some eight or nine storeys below my present location. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like some kind of pressure chamber - the kind you see divers or caisson workers using to recover from the bends. It was suspended by taut steel cables over an enormous, iron-clad pit. Bio-hazard and radiation symbols flashed their sinister warnings alongside the map's schematics.

"I wonder what needs that kind of security?" I murmured. An itch started between my shoulder blades, or maybe it was just a shiver.

The map awoke a sense of *déjà vu*. Sure enough, when I checked the fifth Obscura Engraving against the glowing blueprint, the two were a near-perfect match. It took a few minutes, but eventually I felt confident enough to fold up the Engraving and return it to Werner's notebook.

"Well, it looks like my route to the Vault will take me through that Bio-dome," I said, glancing up briefly to make sure I was unobserved. "It's a long way round though."

Unless you shut the power off to that section as well, Maggie ventured. We still need to get through that electrified fencing, but who's to say we won't meet more locked doors between here and the Vault? Why not kill the entire grid?

"But what about that... whatever that is, in the high-security section?"

What about it?

"What if we set something loose that ought not to be set loose?" I pressed. "Unless you've forgotten Maggie, I've been there, done that, and don't fancy repeating the same mistake."

Lara, she sighed, this isn't Egypt. If Eckhardt is stupid enough to keep a, a... ravening monster locked up in a secret underground vault, then more fool him if it escapes. Besides, it might give us a useful diversion... if there's anything locked up at all.

"Well, when you put it like that," I muttered, and proceeded to flip switches. There was no password or login needed - the guards hadn't

had the chance to lock me out. One by one, sections marked in green switched to ominous red - reminding me not a little of the scene in Jurassic Park when Dr. Sattler reboots the park's systems.

I could only hope that my quest would not suffer the same fate as Mr. Spielberg's little adventure.

All at once, I felt my battered body demanding attention. The pain in my ribs blossomed like an obscene flower, leaving me gripping the console for support.

Steady, girl. There's no one around to see you lose control. Come on - there's some analgesics in your backpack.

"I know, I know..."

Oh, and while you're at it, there's a vending machine round the corner. Get something to eat before you fall over.

It would have been pointless to argue.

A few minutes later, I wiped the last crumbs of chocolate from my mouth and finished the last of my fizzy energy drink. Sterile wipes stemmed the bleeding from the burst capillaries in my nose, and the handful of pills from my medikit gradually began to take effect. My ribs might still be bruised out of recognition, but at least they wouldn't distract me from what I had come for.

Thanks to the cable drum, my route back to the warehouse junction was uneventful. The main lights were all out, but some kind of emergency generator kicked in just as I was loping along the hallway. The emergency lighting was dim, and for a panicked moment I feared the security systems had been reactivated.

The warning signs were still there on the fencing - still threatening me with 10,000 volts of hair-curling death. But the tell-tale hum was absent, and the metal was cold and lifeless. I tested it with the simple expedient of kicking it open.

The Vault of Trophies, and the Sanglyph, awaited me.

A grim smile touched my lips. If Eckhardt didn't yet know his fortress was under siege, he wasn't going to remain ignorant for long.

Chapter 28

When I was a little girl, my parents had unanimously agreed to further my education by sending me away during the school summer holidays.

At the time, I'd barely taken any notice of the Crofts' rather distant attitude towards their daughter. Being parcelled up and posted to every corner of the country instead of staying at home had seemed like an adventure every time.

On one occasion, I had to be rescued by coastguards when I wandered too far along the beach at Lyme Regis - convinced in my six-year-old way that, like Mary Anning before me, I would find a huge prehistoric monster buried in the cliff face.

Another time, I lost my sandwiches to a herd of fallow deer at Chatsworth House while I was paddling in a stream - too entranced by the shimmering stones and sticklebacks to pay the deer much attention.

I went water-skiing on Lake Windermere, counted puffins on Islay, and got into trouble in the Tower of London for leaving finger-marks on the cases that held the Crown Jewels.

Nowhere, however, had fascinated my younger self more than the Royal Botanic Gardens, in Edinburgh.

Should the opportunity ever arise, you might enjoy a visit. Head for the Palm Houses - those monuments to Victorian extravagance wrought from iron and sparkling glass. While you walk in the dappled light below the tree ferns and orchids, try to imagine a little

girl, all coltish arms and legs, her brown hair plaited and bouncing as she skips through the greenery. If you're lucky, you might even find the secret corner I found where I could lie staring up into the towering fronds, with warm coppery sunlight on my cheeks and the air redolent with the heady aroma of wet earth and fertiliser.

So evocative was the smell that it took me a moment to remember where I really was, as hot, rainforest-damp air wrapped me in its steamy blanket.

I stood, goggling like an idiot. Whatever I'd expected to find under the Strahov, this was not it.

A butterfly the size of a starling glided past - its wings glowing as though they'd been dipped in fluorescent paint. It alighted on a flower that could have doubled as a euphonium - one of dozens hanging down from a trunk wider than my outstretched arms, and covered in coarse nobbles. Poisonous orange stamens like octopus legs emerged from the magenta petals, and twitched lazily at the passing insects.

And that was the most *normal* looking thing in the room.

Already sweating, I stalked cautiously down the paved terrace that divided the room's length. Overhead, a glass roof arched tens of metres high, supported by lacy ironwork and brick pillars as magnificent as any hothouse built in Victoria's reign. The ceiling shone with an eerie, sourceless glow indistinguishable from sunlight. I could hear water tinkling as if from a dozen fountains, and hidden insects chirped, buzzed, hissed and croaked incessantly.

Plants were everywhere, climbing through, around and over each other with fractal complexity. The arrangements may have been intended as formal, but had long since spilled over into botanical anarchy - so that regal battalions of giant bulrushes were forced to stand their ground against encroaching, nauseatingly purple vines that throbbed like exposed blood vessels. Primeval-looking palms creaked under the weight of drooping, acid-green blooms whose fanged mouths gaped hungrily as I went past. I passed under the shade of three-metre-wide leaves like splayed hands, and leis of flowers tinier than grains of rice strung from cobweb. The air was so thick with moisture and smells it was like a drug - the wholesome

scents of rose and eucalyptus, mown grass and pine resin mingling with putrefying flesh, mildew and over-ripe fruit.

If Hell ever needed an arboretum, this would be it.

I had to pause to wipe my face. My long camouflage trousers, so well suited to raiding Parisian tombs and surviving Prague's late-season snows, were rapidly turning into quite literal sweat-pants. After a moment's hesitation, I hunkered down behind one of the flower beds and shucked them off. A minute's work with my tough little utility knife (thank you Rennes), and I had reduced them to more user-friendly - if slightly-frayed - shorts.

"What I have to work with..." I muttered, sliding them on. "Ahh, that's better."

Keep the rest, said Maggie. Leave no signs we were here, plus we might need them again later.

"Damn, and I left my sewing kit back home," I muttered, dripping sarcasm as thickly as sweat. A bee like a gilded walnut zoomed past my nose as I adjusted my holsters around my now-bare thighs. "One problem at a time, Maggie, one problem at a time."

I reflexively swatted at the bee, but jumped back sharply as a flower head lunged towards me. The insect - and very nearly my face - vanished in a crunch of striped petals.

"Bloody hell!" I sputtered, and slipped as I tugged my guns free. The monstrous flower withdrew into the tangled gloom as it masticated its meal.

Behold, the Mistress of quick wit and repartee.

"Who are you?!"

In seconds, my guns were levelled at the source of the voice. A portly man sporting an archaic pith hat stepped out from behind the curtain of leaves, brushing compost off his hands. His flabby mouth twisted in what might have been distaste as he spotted me.

"Intruder! Intruders in the Strahov!" He yodelled, and waddled away at high speed.

He didn't get very far. In a contest between me and him, even the handicap of my sitting-start didn't make any difference.

I rugby-tackled his ankles, and he collapsed with a porcine grunt - his immense stomach cushioning the impact with the paving. In

moments I had my Skorpion pressed to his brow, "Don't breathe, and definitely don't move," I snarled.

Either he didn't hear me, didn't see the gun, or didn't care. Watery-brown eyes blinked furiously as he struggled to right himself. His glasses hung off one ear and his hat had fallen off. "You're in big trouble w-whomever you are!" he wheezed. "Intruders don't last long in Strahov!"

"Huh, I bet," I muttered, not withdrawing the gun. "What exactly are you and your buddies up to in here?"

The man licked his lips, evidently torn between escape and pride at being asked to show off his work. At least, it might have been pride. From the manic gleam in his eyes, it might just as easily have been insanity.

"You mean you don't know? You don't know about the Great Work?"

"Enlighten me." My eyes narrowed, taking in his trembling jowls and the liver spots creeping across his scalp beneath his wispy hair. He could have been anywhere between fifty and eighty. I suddenly recognised him from the picture in Luddick's dossier. "It's Doctor Muller, isn't it?"

He opened his mouth, showing far too many teeth for it to be called a smile. "That's right. You really don't know what the Cabal is? We are the beginning of a New Order of Life on Earth!"

Beware of people who can speak in capital letters - they are not known for their wholehearted grasp on reality.

I got to my feet, keeping my gun out of its holster. "New Order? Is that what you're working on in here?"

Muller's eyes roved the hothouse and plants with glee. "Beautiful, aren't they? These are only the beginning of our Glorious Restoration. Every specimen you see has been bred for superior genomes. Nature has grown weak under Man, but with the coming of the Nephilim, the Earth shall blossom as never before!"

"Is that right? Well, good news for your shareholders in Cabal Composting, I suppose."

"Ignorant mortal!" he spat, with the venom normally reserved for addressing genocidal war-criminals. "The Cabal is more powerful

than you could possibly imagine! We control *everything* here that goes on here in Prague. It means that we are going to be *immortal*, and that you are going to be dead, dead! *Intruder!*"

"Immortal?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "That *is* impressive. How are you going to manage that?"

"Meister Eckhardt is about to return the Nephilim race to Glory! For our part in that triumph... *he will grant us immortality!*"

Maggie burst into peals of laughter.

"If I had a coconut for every time some lunatic said something like that..." I sighed, watching warily as Dr. Muller, puffing and blowing like a rhino, staggered to his feet and rescued his hat from a nearby puddle.

"See?" He glowered. "Your pathetic ignorance blinds you! We already have the last vital element from Turkey here in the Strahov! The Cubiculum Nephili - the Sleeper! Yes! The last of the extinct race, here in the Strahov!"

"Let me guess," I drawled, as he finally jammed his hat back on. "Wake the Sleeper, solve world hunger and bring peace to all mankind?"

"You see? Ignorance!" he cried, and glanced over his shoulder. I hoped it was my imagination that several of the plants turned their petals to listen. "With vital essences extracted from this precious specimen, Meister Eckhardt can breed the next generation of *pure Nephilim*. No more abominations to run amok like Boaz's Proto-Nephilim!"

"Yes, highly inconvenient having abominations running around loose, isn't it?" I mused, debating my options.

The man clearly ticked all of the boxes marked 'deranged maniac', but there was nothing to him that indicated true danger. Standing there in his water-stained green shirt, with his broken glasses and lips puckered in a fish-like scowl, Muller was hardly the picture of deadly arch-villainess.

Which just goes to show that you can be a world-renowned archaeologist-adventurer - the survivor of countless life-or-death struggles and a bastion against the forces of evil - and still get things, as it were, dead wrong.

A smile slithered across Muller's face. "You have no idea who you are mocking."

And before I could react, he snatched a big old-fashioned spray-gun from a pile of tools on the nearest planting bed and my world vanished in a choking acidic cloud.

I dropped the gun, flinging both hands out to soften my fall. My eyes and skin were suddenly on fire, as surely as they'd been drenched in petrol and set alight. My screams came out as nothing but a hiss. The infernal chemical reacted with my eyes and throat - swelling the passageways with bile and blisters, cutting off my air supply.

We take our ability to breathe for granted so often it's scary. Take that away and, without the benefits of foresight or training, most people panic.

I didn't panic, but it was a close thing. All thoughts of Muller vanished in my desperation, and my flailing limbs knocked blindly against bricks and yielding wet leaves. I tripped, but down on the ground the air was clearer, and I instinctively crawled towards the sound of water. My hands splashed into the basin of a shallow fountain and I threw myself under the blissful cascade.

By the time my normal thought processes resumed, Muller had, predictably, vanished. He must have known the poison wouldn't kill me instantly - just incapacitate me long enough for him to finish me off. But he hadn't. The attack had been a distraction, nothing more.

"Bloody mad scientists," I hawked and spat into the basin. My eyes had puffed up as though from a killer dose of hay-fever, and my throat felt like I'd been merrily knocking back mouthwash laced with drain cleaner. "We've g-got to get away from here. Muller'll s-send every guard in the place after us now."

Well, at least he confirmed our suspicions about the Sleeper, Maggie mused, far more clearly than I could have spoken at that point. Rinsing my mouth over and over was the only thing that helped. *We know Bouchard was right about Eckhardt trying to revive the Nephilim race.*

"Yeah, I noticed," I coughed, angrily retrieving my guns. My hands were shaking. Stupid hands. "A shame he didn't factor me into his

equations.”

What did you have in mind?

“Find him, kill him,” I growled. “I’ll destroy the Paintings regardless of what the Cabal throws at me, but Eckhardt is mine.”

Ah, always nice to have a firm objective, Maggie grinned, but then turned serious. *Be careful, Lara. I’ve been thinking, and Horus was right - you can’t let this turn into simple revenge.*

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I snapped. Another cool mouthful from the fountain helped regain my composure. “Maggie, as long as the Paintings exist, Eckhardt will try to use them. Even if we destroy them and Eckhardt escapes, he’ll keep trying to revive the Nephilim. He’s *the Black Alchemist*. Five hundreds years of imprisonment didn’t dull his ambitions, so a civilised chat isn’t going to convince him to give up. If he was just another misguided thug following orders, or hell, even an ordinary *mortal*, I’d say he’d warrant a second chance. But he chose this path a long time ago; he’s not interested in attending Villains Anonymous.”

I clicked a fresh clip into my Skorpion and, for good measure, made sure the straps on my Viper were loose enough for me to unholster it at a microsecond’s notice. “I’m not here as his confessor, or to help him find redemption. I’m here to save a lot of other people from getting killed, and I’ll leave the fate of his soul to those with better qualifications.”

Maggie fell quiet, although I could still feel her hovering close in my thoughts. Her agreement was a cautious thing - touching my awareness with something akin to regret.

Her actions didn’t surprise me; it’s sobering to realise you must take a life.

Eckhardt was a monster. The choice to kill him may have been made in anger, but all I felt as I ghosted my way thorough Dr. Muller’s hideous garden was a sense of cold purpose. Had I been in any doubt of Eckhardt’s humanity, my subconscious would have been mounting open rebellion.

But the memory of Luddick’s cries was still fresh in my mind. Maggie had been right to warn me, but we both knew things had changed. I wasn’t a fugitive seeking revenge anymore. My journey

had taught me that Werner's killer was something far more sinister than a disgruntled client or criminal mastermind. People like that get caught by the police. Those cases were easy.

Eckhardt was something else altogether. The authorities could do nothing against the Monstrum except examine the bloody scenes he left behind and tremble with mortal impotency. The Black Alchemist was not a foe to be taken into custody and tried by a jury, or one to go quietly to prison or the executioner's block.

By circumstances or fate, I had made it this far. It was arrogant to think I was the one chosen to destroy Eckhardt, but I was damned if I was going to let this opportunity just pass me by. Call me stubborn, pig-headed or just lucky (and people have, numerous times), but I'd already taken on demi-gods and monsters, rogue scientists and all the majesty and terror of good old Mother Nature. My trophy room was stuffed - often literally - with evidence of my exploits, with perhaps the biggest prize being that I was still alive to admire them. If anyone stood a fair chance of bringing the Monstrum's reign of terror crashing down, it was me.

Well, 'me' backed up with mountains of ammunition, boundless self-confidence and Egyptian guardian angels lending me their supernatural and moral support - but you get the idea.

A line of muddy scuff marks revealed Muller's trail. He'd hustled through the maze of bedding plants, past the dripping jaws of man-sized Venus fly-traps, up several flights of stairs and through an ornate doorway into an entirely functional service corridor. Here, there was no extravagant ironwork or painted tiles - just drab concrete and pipes wheezing steam as I went past. I kept one eye on the footprints, and the other scanning for trouble. My shadow bent and ballooned as I flitted underneath electric bulbs, but the corridor was too narrow for anyone to sneak past me unawares.

After five minutes or so, the footprints faded and then vanished altogether. *Trust the good doctor to be so inconsiderate*, I thought, but I needn't have worried. The corridor ended only ten yards ahead of me, next to a doorway with words stencilled in lurid yellow on the wall: "Bio-dome - Level 3 Security ONLY".

"Nowhere for you to hide now, Doctor," I said, standing to one side

with my gun held ready as I tapped the opening mechanism.
“FREEZE! I’ve got you- Ah... um...”

Through the open door, some... *thing* uncurled its long feelers, groping the air like a puppy sniffing food, and gave a thin screech. Its lumpy, grub-like body barely came up to my knees.

“What the devil...?” I stepped back, not wanting to let it touch me. *Something* screeched again, and waved stubby pincers as it shuffled forwards. “Oh, that’s just lovely.”

The love-child of a caterpillar and a squid, Maggie said, mirroring my aversion as I backed away from its pitiable cries. *Hungry, too.*

“Yeah, and it’s bringing the family,” I noted, turning to face more of the things wriggling up the stairs towards me. The stairs led into a lofty chamber decorated in Muller’s eccentric Neo-Victorian style. Instead of plants, however, the floor sprouted row upon row of upright glass cylinders - each one broad enough for me to have swum down. Many of them contained curled-up specimens virtually identical to the grubs that were squabbling after my boot laces. Several more tanks had been smashed - spilling urine-coloured fluid and presumably the escapees that were now crowding around my feet.

“Get OFF!” I yelled, and aimed a kick that sent the closest grub sailing away with a squeal. The others pressed in, until I opened up with short bursts of gunfire. The grubs died easily enough, bursting with sick-making effect. I kept my fire on manual to save ammo, but as the fifth or sixth grub died, the others turned as one disordered mass of bodies and scurried away.

“Ha!” I crowed, and skipped down the stairs in pursuit. “Go on, scat! No dinner for you here!”

Whimpering, the grubs scurried and hid behind the tubes like woodlice under a log. Their bodies were so bulky that not all of them could fit. Multiple appendages stuck out, quivering with hunger or fear. I could have picked them off easily.

But then the little horrors did something unexpected. They all raised their pincers and screeched a new sound - a sound so loud and high-pitched that most of the light bulbs in the chamber instantly shattered.

As did the remaining tanks.

“Bloody hell!” I clutched my head as blood trickled from my ears and nostrils - a pain so acute it was like having needles shoved into my brain.

Half-blind and almost deafened, I sensed myself becoming surrounded by dozens of scurrying bodies. I could *feel* their eager clicking, and just make out shadows bounding towards me at terrific speed. More abominations - some only babies, others the size of wolves - all of them eager to capitalise on their wounded prey.

Famished screeches arose all around me as the grubs closed in.

Chapter 29

“Aaargh!”

Admittedly, it wasn't the finest battle-cry of my career. But when you're surrounded by hungry, mutant grub-monsters, in the dark, and you have a splitting headache to boot, choosy isn't really an option.

I staggered backwards and brought my Viper round from its holster. Pincers lunged, ready to swipe a chunk from my belly, and disappeared in an explosion of light and thunder from the rifle's muzzle.

The light fell on a scene of chaos. I held my finger on the trigger for full automatic, spraying the swarm with controlled fire. Limbs burst and swollen bodies ruptured, grubs curled up and scampered but slipped in the slime of their fallen siblings. The bigger monsters were more heavily-armoured, and took several direct hits before they died. The screeching and reek of their ichor filled me with loathing on a primal level - from the deepest depths of time when the human race first learnt to associate maggots and their ilk with death and decay.

But still, there were more of them than my one little rifle could manage.

“I'd appreciate any suggestions!” I snarled, blowing the head off one rearing creature just as another took its place.

What do I know? You're the one with the gun! Maggie squeaked.

“Use those subliminal senses of yours! Find me a way out - I can't hold them off forever!”

*Look, I only know this place has two exits, the one we came in by and-
LOOK OUT!*

I hit the deck, too in-tune with my instincts to waste time *looking*. A sound like ripping silk sliced through the air and two vaguely human feet stomped down either side of my head.

“MRRRRRUUA!”

It was a bellow from the darkest reaches of sweat-soaked nightmare, and raked my already tender ears like a buzz saw through a meringue. All I could make out of the creature standing over me was a man-shaped shadow. Loops and spurs coiled through its misshapen flesh like barbed wire. It bellowed again - possibly because I'd kicked it as hard as possible where its groin should have been.

I scrambled, hauling the Viper after me and brought it to bear on the shambling newcomer. The grubs had retreated, whimpering - as if the man-thing was an even more intimidating foe than a woman toting an automatic rifle.

The thought was not a happy thought.

“MRRRRRRRRUUUAAAAA!” it roared, and its arms lunged towards me. I had a glimpse of bone-like blades in place of hands. As light erupted from the gun, I saw that its face - indeed, its whole *body* - was a tangled mass of living vines. It had no eyes - only holes with curling tendrils sprouting from the sockets that writhed like insect antennae. It opened its mouth in a roar and scythed those killer limbs again.

I was faster, but only just.

“Maggie, that second exit would be *really* handy right about now!” I yelled, and returned its attack with a few well-placed shots from the Viper.

To my horror, the bullets passed straight through without slowing it down. The creature hissed but kept coming, forcing me to duck another incoming blow.

So... more toyary-monster than tree-monster.

Over there! Ten steps to your right. There's a ladder, if you just jump-
“Argh!” I rolled, clutching my arm - caught by a glancing swipe from the creature's talons. Only my subconscious's quick intervention saved me from dropping the gun.

Come on, Lara, you can do it! She urged and - with blood spurting from my wound - I fought my way awkwardly through the confusion.

Topiary-man howled. "MRRRUUAAAAAAA!" It was all the extra impetus I needed to ignore my bleeding arm and throw myself onto the ladder, and climb like I'd never climbed before.

However well-designed the mutants were for killing, no one in the Cabal had thought to teach them how to climb ladders. Claws and pincers scrabbled at my retreating boots, but I was soon out of reach. For a hair-raising moment, it looked like topiary-man would try to follow me, but his talons were just too big to allow him to gain any purchase. As I reached the top and dared to look down, I saw him slice through the ladder with a swipe of pure frustration - his talons making short work of the solid steel.

Had I been a nanosecond slower, the same thing would have happened to my arm.

The bleeding was getting worse, so I quickly dashed through the service exit and into yet another bland corridor. I slammed the door, leaned against it, and listened with relief as the furious howls gradually faded.

Once again, I winced and mentally thanked Werner for the use of his medical supplies. The cut was long but shallow, and traced a sweeping, eight-inch line down my upper arm. I swallowed - acutely aware of how close I'd come to losing the arm entirely - and began sterilising and bandaging. It would have been neater had I been able to use both hands, but eventually I was satisfied that the bleeding had stopped and I wasn't likely to die of infection in the next ten minutes.

Any doubts I may have harboured about the nature of the Cabal's 'New Order of Life' had been thoroughly trampled. The thought of just one of those grubs on the loose in Prague was enough to inspire a shiver.

"And this is *before* Eckhardt's managed to re-breed the Nephilim," I muttered.

Don't despair, Lara, Maggie said soothingly. I felt the stinging discomfort in my ears lessen. Perforated eardrums hurt like hell, but I had enough hearing left over to reassure me that mine were still intact. *Whatever it takes, we'll stop them.*

"I'd glad one of us is confident," I said wryly. "Now, don't we have a psychopath to track down?"

★

I gathered my things, noting my ammo supplies with a twinge of dismay. Even with conservative usage, the fight had soaked up more than half of my Viper's ammunition.

"Muller probably went another way, or used an exit we didn't see," I said. "I doubt he'd have lasted long with those beasts on the loose."

Unless they saw him as 'Daddy' and left him alone, Maggie countered. The plants seemed quite responsive to him. He could even have trained them to attack strangers.

"Hmm, most people use guard dogs."

The corridor had opened out. I paused in the doorway, scanning for trouble. More cloned sunlight filtered down from the ceiling, illuminating a neat garden and terrace leading up to a set of wrought-iron doors. Butterflies sipped nectar from baby-pink and gold orchids. Ivy cloaked the brick walls, water trickled into a basin heaped with mosses, and the air was sweet with mown grass. It was as pleasant a scene as any I'd encountered so far in the Strahov.

The semblance of normality was, of course, an illusion. Standing sentinel beside the doors was a tree - its bare branches and greyish, pustule-covered trunk marking it out as one of Muller's home experiments. As I stepped up for a closer look, its limbs snaked their way through the doors' intricate metalwork like a speeded-up film of a bramble twining through a fence.

Gagging from the rotten-fish smell, I reached out and tried to tug one of the branches loose.

It slapped me across the face.

If you don't already know, I have very good acting skills. My dramatisation of '*Squealing Girly Yelp No. 4*' would have earned me a place with the Royal Shakespeare Company on the spot.

I staggered back, my cheek glowing red hot. The tree's strength was incredible - more steel cable than plant. The livid welt had just missed my eye.

The tree obviously wasn't going to be persuaded to let go, and, as I

swiftly discovered, bullets had about as much effect on it as soap bubbles.

“So, you’re not going to cooperate with the usual methods, are you?”

Time to introduce it to our friend, Lateral Thinking, said Maggie. Oh, come on, Lara, there must be some way to get it to release. How else do people get in and out of those doors?

“They ask nicely perhaps?” I seethed, wishing for some aloe cream to mask the stinging on my cheek. I would probably have a handsome scar as compensation. “Maybe I’m missing something...”

Grumbling, I conducted a thorough sweep of the garden. In a crowded shed tucked away behind a curtain of vine leaves, I found more evidence of Muller’s handiwork. Rows upon rows of shelves groaned under the weight of pots, seed trays, tools and jute sacks of fertiliser. The interior was fusty with the smells of leaf mould and tobacco. Antiquated spray guns were stacked along one wall, beside a table piled high with papers and jotters.

I slid onto the tottering stool and shuffled through the notes. There were diagrams of devices both familiar and outlandish - from straightforward irrigation equipment to organic-looking machines under the headings of ‘Intra-stomata Feeding Apparatus’ or ‘Chlorophyll Harvester’. Tables of ingredients had been meticulously copied, crossed-out and annotated. Several had even been stamped with a red barred-circle - the universal ‘no-no’ sign.

An idea formed.

“If I can’t persuade it or shoot it,” I said, mulling over the idea. “Maybe... I can try weed killer.”

Has to be worth a try, Maggie agreed, her mind-tone smirking.

“What?”

Oh, it’s nothing. Carry on.

“Look, it might not be sanctioned by the Navy SEALS, but it’s the only plan I’ve got.”

And if it works, you’ll be awarded a medal for Mistress of Unconventional Weaponry. Just get on with it.

It took five minutes to locate the various ingredients from the jars stacked hither and thither, and another five mixing the poison in a

handy steel bucket. I eyed the nearby spray guns but dismissed them as too finicky, especially when drops of the chemical soup sloshed over the side and left smoking holes in the wooden floor.

The fumes were starting to get to me when I finally lugged the concoction back to the guardian tree. Its roots spread out across the ground like the tentacles of a decaying octopus - my first choice of target.

There are reasons why I leave the caring, attentive side of gardening to Winston.

The tree went berserk.

I leapt back, dropping the bucket and barely avoiding the branches as they thrashed in a drunken frenzy. The trunk withered before my eyes like a drink carton being sucked dry, and the branches sagged with the limpness of overcooked pasta.

In less than a minute, the whole tree lay drooping and flaccid - barely able to support its own weight.

This time, I strode past unmolested, and paused to listen at the doors.

Well, it can't be anything worse than those grubs, can it?

I rubbed my eyes, and said quietly, "Do you know the meaning of 'Sod's Law', Maggie?"

'Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong?' Oh come on, girl, I was only trying to lighten the mood. If I said there's bound to be a... a giant, pink, mutant rhinoceros in a tutu on the other side of the door, then reality is bound to prove me wrong. Think of it as being prepared!

Sometimes, the impropriety of one's inner thoughts is enough to test even the most saintly patience. Shaking my head, I took a deep breath and resumed my listening.

The seconds ticked by, but either there were no nasties lurking beyond, or the doors were too well-soundproofed for me to tell. I made up my mind, and heaved until the wrought iron creaked open just enough to let me slip through.

My gaze travelled up, and up.

And up.

Well... At least it isn't a giant, pink, mutant rhino...

"You're right," I replied weakly. "It's crazier."

Chapter 30

Megalomaniacs are all the same.

Want to take over the world and remake it to honour your glory? It couldn't be easier. All you need is a naive adventurer, a long-lost trinket that only she is clever, brave (and insane) enough to find, and your own private island where you can breed a whole army of mutant soldiers to wipe all that annoying humanity off the map.

Setting yourself up as a new god? No problem! Simply found a secret order that vows itself to your protection, while you track down an artefact that will transform you into a fire-breathing nightmare that everyone shall respect and fear.

You can tell I've had some experience with megalomaniacs, and their psychopathic endeavours.

At five hundred years old, Eckhardt may only have been a junior member of the Evil Maniac League compared to some of the individuals I've encountered.

But he was showing promise.

The doors clanged shut behind me. The echoes ran to hide among the plants and creepers, but were quickly lost in the verdant haze.

I had entered a palm house garden - similar in design to those I had seen before, but built to a scale that shrank the viewer down to ant-like proportions.

My neck ached as I tilted my head, searching for a ceiling above the multitude of catwalks and verandas that were decked in floral extravagance. They criss-crossed and rose, tier upon tier, to hidden,

dizzying heights. Mature trees swayed in an artificial breeze - their rustling leaves sounding like distant surf, while their bare roots dangled freely through the hanging walkways. Colossal tree ferns and glossy-leafed bushes crowded and reached over their planting beds, like overly-eager groupies leaning for a glimpse of celebrities on the red carpet. Insects and iridescent humming birds darted from point to point in explosions of fuchsia-pink, emerald and gold.

It was uncomfortably hot. Fingers of mist shrouded the air, cutting visibility down to less than a dozen metres. Fine cascades drifted in rainbow-hues and trickled over stones into mossy dells full of tiny, transparent fish. Honeysuckle and exotic fruits laced every breath with intoxicating perfumes. I wiped stinging sweat from my eyes, forcing down my sudden craving for ripe mango and figs. The pathway before me could have accommodated a couple of shire horses walking abreast, and that eerie not-sunlight pulsed down from the invisible ceiling - possibly somewhere in orbit.

It took a considerable effort to remember that I was still in Prague, in March, where snowdrifts were piled several feet thick outside.

There was no time to waste. Muller *had* to have alerted security of my presence by now. If there was an exit to this place, I had to find it, quickly.

Holstering my Viper, I drew out and unclipped the safeties from the pair of Scorpion X pistols so generously bequeathed to me by Bouchard's assassin. There were too many dank and shady corners for me to feel comfortable using a single gun; the possibility of an ambush was far too high. The room held an oppressive feeling of intimidation that I had to fight to overcome - the reaction, no doubt, that Eckhardt had intentionally wanted in to inspire in visitors.

Winding my way through the maze of shrubs, I eventually came across an open clearing. Butterflies and bees droned ecstatically. Flowers of every shape, size and colour overflowed from pots, raised beds, and even from the branches that overhung a velvety lawn. At the garden's far end, marble steps led down to a lake of sluggish, stagnant water that was so deep and so choked with slime that its depths were invisible. No plants grew at its edges, and no insects overflowed it. I would have sooner washed my hair with battery acid

than risked a swim.

The manicured grass suddenly exploded. Clods of earth rained down on where I had instinctively flung myself under some bushes, when it registered that some idiot was *shooting* at me.

I rolled onto my stomach, looking up through the dappled branches. The dirt ten inches to my right erupted in a messy cloud as bullets whizzed and pinged. With a snarl, I slid backwards, further into the green gloom, and cocked my guns as I spotted my attacker.

He was crouched several metres away behind a ladder to an overhanging catwalk - partially hidden behind a spray of purple bougainvillea. His garb was strange - an all-in-one body suit with an opaque helmet; a Hazmat, or the Cabal's equivalent.

It wasn't bulletproof.

I took aim again as he cursed, hopping awkwardly. My first shot had clipped a muscle just above his ankle, without doing any real damage.

Cursing, I lined up to draw a bead on his heart for a quick kill, but the plant that reared from the bushes had other ideas.

The guard didn't even look up as the shadow descended. But then he was screaming as a barbed tendril the size of a python coiled around his neck and dragged him across the lawn. His fingers gouged long tears in the grass, and his cries were abruptly cut off by the snap of bone. In horror, I watched his body disappear into the scarlet-lipped petals of a titanic flower. The plant's leathery skin - tanned and hairy as that of a kiwi fruit - distended and raised foot-long thorns in a threatening display as it settled back to digest its meal.

I managed to get about four paces before being sick.

Dizziness overcame me and my head spun from the heat and cocktail of earthly smells. A powerful stench of rotting meat assaulted me and my stomach rebelled again.

Easy, Lara. Just breathe. You're not dead yet.

"Unlike some," I gasped, ashamed of my weakness. "What... the hell... is Eckhardt... playing at in here?"

Taken on its own, the attack wasn't even on the top ten worst things I'd seen during my long and sometimes disturbing career. It made my attack of nausea all the more embarrassing.

It's probably my fault, Maggie admitted. I'm your reflexes. You might

have trained yourself to control some of them in the past but-

“-But now I have you, my instinctual side given independence, and you’re more powerful than before,” I finished, wiping my mouth. “Maybe giving you a name was a bad idea.”

Give a thing a name and you give it a life, she replied sagely. But I’m still you. All of this is happening inside your head. You’re simply more aware of yourself, and more willing to trust your intuition, than you once were. Nothing else about you has changed.

“So what does my intuition have to say about *that*?” I gestured to the man-eating fruit.

I’d say we’ve got our work cut out for us.

“Quite,” I made a face, and sighed. “Isn’t there any way you can control that gag-reflex while I’m in here? I doubt this is the last vomit-inducing thing I’ll encounter.”

I’ll do my best, but just remember - you’re not superwoman. Some of your primitive reflexes exist for damned good reasons.

“How can I forget?” I grumbled, getting to my feet, but already my nausea was beginning to pass. “So, what would you recommend as our next move?”

You’re not going to like it, Maggie said, and my heart automatically sank, but it might be worth seeing if that guard left anything inedible behind - ammunition, security passes... We need every scrap of help we can get.

I glanced morosely at the bushes. “You know, I hate it when you make a valid point.”

To my everlasting relief, the dead guard had been kind to would-be scavengers like me. His rifle lay where it had fallen, several feet away from the pulsing mass of vegetable matter. I recognised it as the same model I’d picked up in the Louvre, with plenty of 9mm clips and options for variable firing. It met all of my personal requirements, and so was added to my repertoire, along with a plastic swipe card I found in a nearby flowerbed.

My appreciation of the palm house’s delights was definitely wearing thin. It was a positive relief when, after only a few minutes of cautious exploration, I came across an exit.

My smile quickly vanished, however, as the dead man’s security

card failed to produce results. The doors remained closed, despite me cleaning and re-swiping the card several times.

“Dammit!”

Don't give up just yet, Maggie chided. Look, there're three readers on the lock, not one. We simply need two more cards, from two more security guards. They've got to be running around somewhere close by.

“But this place is enormous!” I snapped. “We should be hunting down Eckhardt and the Paintings, not chasing after pieces of plastic. This is *exactly* what I didn't want to get caught up in!”

Oh, quit whining, girl. You can moan about it when we're laying in our own bed, in our own home. Now is not the time. Just get on with the job in hand.

My lips compressed into a tight line. She was right, of course. She also knew, as I did, that my crankiness was almost certainly not helped by lack of sleep, and the hundreds of other factors that my all-too human body had been coping with for the past three days. I was wise enough to acknowledge that fact, and fortunately still strong enough to regain a measure of control over it.

With Putai's teachings echoing in my mind, I slowed my breathing to a more deliberate pace.

I'm hungry.

We'll eat when it's safe.

This place is too unnatural, too creepy.

It's nothing we haven't handled before.

My head hurts...

On and on it went. For maybe five minutes I concentrated, isolating each distracting thought and sensation and carefully setting them aside. I envisaged a treasure chest, transparent but unbreakable, where I could fold up and place my worries one at a time. They were still *there*, but as long as they were in the chest, they could not reach out and interfere with me. I sealed away my hunger and aching muscles, my fatigue and revulsion. Some of the thoughts protested and fought back, but I kept at it until I pictured the chest's lid closing and the key turning in the lock. My mind fell silent, except for the steady sound of my breathing and Maggie's reassuring presence, surrounded by the faint aura of Horus' guardian influence. The

distractions were under control.

I could have killed for a cup of tea, though.

What? Nobody's perfect.

There didn't seem to be much point hunting for card-carrying guardsmen down on at ground level, so I retraced the path back to the service ladder I'd spied near to the man-eating pitcher plant. It didn't so much as twitch as I inched past and dashed up the ladder like a squirrel up a pine tree.

My hunt began in earnest.

*

Keeping my body low, I crept down the walkways and along the hanging terraces. Each was an island amid a sea of greenery - a sea that was barely restrained by its human-imposed boundaries and clearly resentful of that fact.

It became harder and harder to orientate myself. Eckhardt seemed to have taken quantum mechanics as his inspiration for the garden's layout; the wrought iron catwalks and staircases were a perfect three-dimensional maze. Here and there were dead ends, or stretches where the walkway passed underneath waterfalls and became treacherously slippery. The omnipresent plants and their bewildering disdain for human influence (and occasionally the laws of physics) did not make navigation easier.

Curtains of hanging vines would sway apart to let me pass, or bar my way with razor-edged tendrils that bristled with thorns. Trumpet-shaped blooms turned to watch me - some even venturing to pick my pockets with curious feelers. Even the most mundane-looking specimens would, on closer inspection, reveal a disturbing twist. There were apples that oozed and dripped pinkish slime, and beds of ornamental grasses that hissed like a nest of rattlesnakes when I stepped too close. There were trellises covered in sulphurous-smelling candy floss, and bushes whose leaves opened and closed like butterfly wings. It was impossible to stay in one place, but progress was tortuously slow.

Ironically, I found my second security pass without needing to fire a single shot. I teased it from the dead man's hand with infinite care, as

he lay spread-eagled on the ground with a thousand or more rust-coloured spines embedded in every inch of his body. His bio-hazard suit had been utterly shredded, exposing a face so badly deformed by pain that it seemed to be carved from driftwood.

The murderous plant stood in its own little plot, and was surrounded by prongs of metal that might once have been electrified. Its stiff, leaf-less trunk was the shiny purple of a fresh bruise, and tiny dents in its flesh testified to where those deadly spines had once grown. Even as I watched, new ones began appearing - soft and pale green as spring leaves.

Perhaps turning off the power wasn't such a great idea, I thought, giving the plant a wide berth as I headed for yet another staircase.

Without my being conscious of it, Maggie suddenly wrenched on all my muscles, freezing me mid-stride.

Quiet! Do you hear that?

My forward momentum wasn't so easily discouraged. I managed to pivot on the ball of my foot, and half-slid, half-fell behind a mass of tangled passion flowers.

Then I heard it - a frenetic tapping and clicking, hardly more than ten metres away.

"No, it can't be... Not the *whole* grid...?!"

Warily, I peered through the concealing leaves. Not ten metres away, a sweeping balcony rose like an island in the middle of a green ocean, and was dotted with desks and computers. A man was sitting at one of them, and peered myopically at the screen as his fingers typed a furious rhythm.

He wore a pith hat, grubby shirt, and his jowls trembled with disbelief.

"Muller!"

The doctor and I jumped in unison. Eckhardt strode into view - flanked closely by his aircraft carrier-sized bodyguard. The Black Alchemist's face held murder. "It's chaos out there! Why has the power been cut off?"

"Is this *your* doing, Muller?" Gunderson loomed threateningly over the terrified scientist, but he needn't have bothered. A man of his stature could loom by sitting quietly in a corner.

“N-no, the power’s down everywhere!” Muller said, licking his lips. “L-look for yourself!”

Eckhardt’s face took on a greenish pallor as he leaned towards the screen. Behind him, another man crept into my field of vision. His manner was so unassuming that for a few seconds, I didn’t even realise he was there. He wore an unremarkable black suit and a silk scarf the colour of old, dried blood. His features were sallow and unmemorable, neither lined with age or the softness of youth, and his neatly trimmed hair was so blonde as to be almost white.

I scanned my memory for Luddick’s dossier, and decided he had to be Karel, Eckhardt’s right-hand man.

“Very well,” Eckhardt said. His voice surprised me - a soothing, vaguely-Germanic baritone that shaped the words with the grace and eloquence worthy of a Shakespearean actor. A slight burr, possibly from an old throat injury, only mellowed its already attractive timbre. Whatever I had expected an insane evil genius to sound like, this was not it. “Just control things in the Dome for now. Make sure everything is locked down - we don’t want anything getting loose.”

Turning away, he leaned on the balcony railings, glaring straight in my direction. I drew back into the shadow of the leaves, my mouth suddenly dry. His fingers tapped a staccato on the metal, in counterpoint to Gunderson’s typing. After only a matter of seconds, the bodyguard grunted. In contrast to his master, Gunderson sounded like he had learned to speak only after arduous study.

“It’s under control, Master Eckhardt. The Dome is locked down. Emergency systems are online.”

“We have a problem down in the Sanatorium!”

A shrill cry made us all turn to the sound of footsteps. A woman skidded to a halt behind Eckhardt, all but falling to her knees before the Cabal. Her raven-black hair was cut in a simple bob, but could not hide the puckered scars that ran in a circle from forehead to chin - stretching her skin tightly across the underlying bones. Even from my hiding place, I could see her eyes were badly bloodshot. Tears streaked her mascara and mingled with her running nose. Her blood-stained surgical smock sought to cover a body as rail-thin as her voice, and her chest rose and fell with the effort to hold back sobs.

Her hands, clad in elbow-length PVC gloves, shook uncontrollably.

"What problem, Boaz?" Eckhardt sighed, not bothering to turn around. "Just have the guards deal with your inmates and pets."

Boaz – Dr. Kristina Boaz, I remembered – bent her head. Every word had to fight its way through her clenched teeth.

"Please... I have a confession... Master Eckhardt... I-I... didn't destroy the P-Proto-Nephilim."

Had she said *armed nuclear bomb*, the effect could not have been any more dramatic. Gunderson's head snapped up, and his gaze darkened with something between rage and abhorrence. Muller fell back in his chair with a whimper – his face draining to fish-belly grey.

Karel only narrowed his eyes, and glanced from the weeping female straight to his master.

Yep – he's the right-hand of the Cabal, all right, Maggie whispered.

"The Proto?" Gunderson demanded. "You are kidding, right Boaz? It's broken loose? I have to supervise this personally!"

Without asking for leave, he strode away. Boaz hiccupped – hiding behind the curtain of her hair. All eyes, including mine, turned to Eckhardt.

The Black Alchemist had grown rigid as a statue. An insectile whine pierced the silence as the iron railing bent in his grasp like a stick of barley sugar.

"That experiment was to be eradicated," he whispered. "I expressly ordered it. It's far too dangerous to keep alive."

Boaz looked stricken. "I-I couldn't... It's half Nephilim! It's impossible to k-kill without your Periapt S-Shard!"

Karel returned her pleading gaze with indifference. She turned to Muller, arms raised beseechingly, but he backed off as though she were carrying some terrible disease.

"You lied to us!" He said, "Boaz, how could you? The *Proto*?"

"I-I only thought there m-might be another way," she wept. "But it's useless... Only the S-Shard will do it!"

"You've ignored my orders for the last time, Boaz," Eckhardt straightened. His eyes blazed behind the dark panes of his glasses. "Muller, I need to borrow one of your creations."

Ignoring Boaz's protests, he seized her by the hair and began

dragging her across the balcony and down a flight of steps.

"Ah, no, please no!" she screamed, claspng fruitlessly at her scalp, but Eckhardt's grip was unyielding. "It wasn't my fault!"

I quickly shifted position, keeping low behind the camouflaging plants and crawled along the walkway to keep them in my view. The others were all gathered at the top of the stairs - Muller whimpering, claspng and wringing his hands, while Karel stood with arms folded, his expression as transparent as granite.

Right on the edge of the catwalk, Eckhardt stopped and swung Boaz up to eye-level as though she weighed no more than a doll. Her cries had become hysterical. "I'm loyal! Please! Have mercy!"

"Your own incompetence has sentenced you, Boaz," Eckhardt said. "You know better than to expect mercy from me."

"Give me a chance!" she sobbed, and screamed as he held her over the yawning edge. "Not this, please no!"

I strained to look, but a shape was already rising into view. A foul stench rose from the depths. A form was reaching and groping upwards with peristaltic thrusts of its grub-like body. It had no recognisable head, only a mouth - a mouth as wide and circular as a jet engine - that was fringed with flabby gills and the source of that atrocious smell. Its bloated trunk remained submerged in the fetid waters I'd passed earlier, almost twenty metres below. Slime cascaded off its corpse-grey flanks while rows of useless, spidery legs groped towards the two humans. A serpentine tongue lolled mere feet from where the Black Alchemist stood poised on the brink. Boaz writhed futilely, screaming herself hoarse.

Eckhardt let go.

For one awful moment, I could see Boaz's expression - the full knowledge of her fate making her eyes widen and stretching her mouth into an aspect of pure terror. But then she was falling, clutching at thin air.

She was still screaming as the monster claimed her, and sank back into its lair.

"I *will* be obeyed," Eckhardt rasped. "Now sort this mess out!"

Chapter 31

Now, aren't you glad you asked me to control those gag-reflexes?

The surviving members of the Cabal drew back as Eckhardt swept past them. I had to admire their composure. Even Muller only cast the occasional glance back where his colleague had fallen. Perhaps you couldn't serve as a member of Eckhardt's inner circle without developing some immunity to his methods.

Speaking of inner circles...

I frowned. Weren't there supposed to be six members of the Cabal? Eckhardt, Gunderson, Boaz, Karel, Muller...

Where was Luther Rouzic?

The thought preoccupied me as I waited in my passion-flower scented hiding place, until I was completely sure Eckhardt and his cronies were all gone. Luddick's dossier hadn't exactly been awash with information, but I would have recognised the person in the photograph from a mile away. I hadn't seen hide nor hair of Rouzic's skeletally-thin figure since entering the Strahov, and yet Luddick had insisted he was here.

Irritated, I shook my head. I couldn't afford to get sidetracked. Guns in hand, I stole further into the mesmeric greenery.

Hang in there, girl, Maggie was reassuring. Only one more pass to go and-THERE RIGHT AHEAD OF YOU!

The guard - nearly invisible behind a tangle of vines - went down without even knowing what killed him.

Speechless, I lowered the guns. I had no recollection of having

raised them.

Don't mention it, Maggie said.

Right. My instincts.

Atta girl, smiled my inner voice, and I had the phantom sensation of being patted on the back. *It's when you remember that you're a survivor that you're at your best.*

"Shoot first, ask questions later - is that our motto now?"

I knew he was there, and I knew he wasn't friendly, her voice hardened. *Don't confuse yourself or me with some trigger-happy infant.*

"Well..." awkwardly, I rolled the corpse onto its back, and spotted Maggie's justification. The bullet had entered squarely between his eyes, killing him instantly. In comparison to some of his colleagues, he'd been lucky. "I see your point."

Quite. I'm glad that we've clarified that we know what we're doing. Now find his security card so we can get out of this crazy place!

Retracing my steps turned out to be easier than I'd hoped. In no time, I was crossing my fingers (and everything else) as I swiped the final card in the exit lock.

The doors swung inwards, bathing me in damp, blissfully cool air. The walls of the corridor ahead were bare concrete, streaked with moisture. The temperature continued to plummet, until goosebumps rose on my arms and my breath came out in soft clouds of vapour. My internal compass was of little use, but I did get a sense of plunging deeper underground.

The corridor ended abruptly in a circular, hermetically-sealed chamber. There didn't appear to be anyone around. Alone and wary of a trap, I entered and jumped when the door swished closed behind me. The exit, however, remained stubbornly closed. I pressed the release, swiped all of my security cards and even banged on it with my fists.

"Oh, for god's sake, open up!" I cursed, and jumped back in sudden alarm.

My mysterious stalker grinned at me through the bullet-proof glass. "You really have made a mess of things, haven't you?"

There was an intercom patched into the door, but even its crackling

distortion couldn't hide his Massachusetts accent, or his somewhat exasperated tone. In shock, I realised this was the first time that I'd heard him speak. He looked almost as tired as I felt.

"Who for?" I demanded, glaring straight back. "The stalker who stole my Painting? What do *you* want with the Painting? Who *are* you?"

"Maybe I'll explain later, Ms Croft," he replied with a weary half-smile. My heart *tha*-thumped, and not only because he knew my name. "But for now I have to go and turn the power back on."

I turned away, brimming with three days-worth of frustration and unanswered questions. It took all of my effort to remain civil.

"Leaving me here, I take it?"

"You've caused enough problems over the last few days," he replied smoothly. "Safer for everyone if you stay in one place for a while. You'll be okay in there."

Without turning round, I reached into my backpack and held up the Shard. It gleamed.

"And this?"

"My Periapt Shard!" he gasped. "You-?"

"-Picked it up at the Louvre? Yes," I fixed him with a neolithic stare. "After *you* stole *my* Painting."

My satisfaction increased as he bit his lip, glancing hungrily from the Shard to me and back again. His hand clenched and unclenched, but then he ruined it by stepping back, shaking his head as if flicking off an irksome fly. I suddenly had a lousy premonition.

"All this can wait. I'll know where you'll be," he smiled. "Take a breather from damaging things why don'tcha?"

And with a wink, he strode off.

"Wait! Oh, no, you've got to be kidding!" I yelled and pressed against the door, staring incredulously at his retreating back. "You can't just walk away!"

Without breaking his stride, he flipped one of those jaunty salutes over his shoulder.

Then he was gone.

"Gah!" I lashed out and kicked the door frame - in hindsight, not the wisest move. It hurt my foot a lot more than it hurt the door.

Fuming, I sank down on the steel-panelled floor, with nothing in the world to do but wait. “Stupid, cowardly, American... of all the bloody cheek!”

Men, Maggie agreed.

Chapter 32

“You’re a damn fool, you know that?”

Light speared through the slats in the blind, crosshatching a yellow bar code across my bunk. Alexis frowned as I folded a shirt. There wasn’t much. Most of the guys acquired a few trinkets over the years - photographs, letters from home, that sort of junk. I preferred to travel light.

“Maybe.”

I tossed him my dress kepi, grinning when he caught it without flinching. I’d always looked ridiculous wearing it, or any kind of uniform for that matter. The Legion had been a safe harbour - somewhere for a stupid kid to run off to and gather his wits for a few years - nothing more.

Jesus Christ, but I was glad to be leaving.

“If this is about what happened in Rwanda-”

“You know it isn’t, ‘Lexi,” I said. “It’s all in the report if you want to read it... if they ever declassify the papers.”

The suitcase weighed almost nothing. Alexis blocked the door.

“Look,” he said, and his customary stoicism cracked just a little.

“The guys... well, they didn’t see what I saw. Be careful.”

I made the effort to smile. He was - correction, had *been* - a friend, and I owed him that much. “You think something’s going to leap out and tear me up in some dark alley?”

The old Alexis resurfaced and gave me a knowing look. “Don’t do

anything stupid, Trent. There's probably something out there with a grudge, and even you're not invincible."

I nodded, and strode out of the barracks on a windy October afternoon, and onto a new chapter in the comic book that was my life.

That had been six years ago.

I breathed in through my nose. The ammonia-bleach reek of the Strahov's lower levels had awoken the memory so strongly, I could almost see Alexis' face in front of me and hear his prophetic warning all over again. I'd lost count of the times we'd mopped the barrack floors, sluicing and scrubbing until our hands were blistered and raw. The smell would always take me back to Aubagne, but I hadn't expected to encounter it here.

Of all the people I'd served with during my five years with the Foreign Legion, Alexis had been one of the rare few to call me Trent. Or just plain Kurtis. Officers always barked '*Caporal Trent!*' The rest whispered behind my back - the nickname I hadn't asked for but couldn't get rid of.

Demon Hunter.

Maybe I was a damn fool, as Alexis had said, but I wasn't going to let that stop me.

I wasn't going to rest until Eckhardt was dead.

"Well, Lara," I muttered, cracking my knuckles. "Looks like you and I are on the same team. For now."

It might have been easier, however, if she had known that fact *before* turning off the main power grid. Not that I doubted her abilities - far from it. Alexis and the guys would never have left me alone if he knew how much she impressed me.

Lady Lara Croft, British aristocrat. Oh yes, I had said to myself, observing her over my newspaper that morning in Paris. A horsey little rich-girl, probably more interested in partying, polo and watching Wimbledon than getting down to gritty reality.

How wrong I was.

The thought made me smile, despite my present surroundings. The image of her standing there in the Louvre - disarmed and furious, sweaty and caked with muck from escaping Brother Obscura's resting

place - was not going to leave me for a long, long time.

And she had my second Shard! I'm not a pious man - surprisingly, given my background - but I still sent up a prayer to the Almighty for solving that little problem. She'd acted with far more savvy than I had.

No, her abilities were not in question - but her judgement had just added a whole pile of complications to my life.

The Strahov was huge. From my research, I knew that the final Shard was almost certainly in Eckhardt's personal care, and that meant gaining access to the deepest levels in the complex. The schematics I'd obtained were clear on one point - I wasn't going anywhere without restoring power. The main generator hub lay right below Dr. Muller's bio-research facility. I was close, and Lara was - almost certainly - not going to be wandering around to cause more mayhem till I got back.

Well, I could hope.

The doors ahead of me were unlocked, and creaked open at the slightest touch. So far, I'd only come across a handful of guards, but the fact only increased my caution. All six of the Cabal members were gathered together in one place - with the Sleeper, no less! The place should have been stiff with security, but it wasn't. For all I knew, my attempts to cover my tracks had been compromised, and Eckhardt was watching me on a CCTV monitor at this very moment.

Ambush? Concern. Fortitude.

Agreeing that it was worth the risk, I drew back into the shadows, sucked in a deep breath, and let *It* happen.

It takes a lot of concentration, and tends to freak people out on the rare times I've been forced to do *It* in company. I've only seen *It* being done a couple of times by others trained in the art, but I can understand why people find the process unnerving at first.

My eyes rolled back in their sockets, and my face became slack-jawed. The sight of my own body was always slightly disturbing (Christ, I needed a shave), but I'd gotten used to it by now. Disembodied, I turned and whirled through the solid wall like it was made of smoke.

A dark pall hung over my vision as I skimmed along white-tiled

corridors and down flights of poorly-lit staircases. My ethereal hearing caught echoes of noises - grunts and terrified panting, muffled moans and howls that no human throat should have been able to produce.

Ignoring the *Staff Only* sign, I plunged on through a dimly-lit reception area. The imprint of other people's fear slowed me down - far more of a barrier to my mind than the steel-reinforced doors or chain-link security barriers. The emotions draped the ether like strands of dense, clinging cobwebs. With a surge of effort, I roamed to the furthest reach of my tether - questing for danger but repulsed by the obscene pseudo-sensations dripping from every surface. I might as well have tried swimming through congealed sewage.

There! A form - moving back and forth with a rolling, mindless gait. It was grey to my sight, as though drained of all life's colour, and yet there was enough humanity left to its motion to make me hesitate.

I couldn't pause for long. A prickling behind my 'eyes' was warning enough that I was already pushing my luck.

Regretfully, I retraced my path. My body was waiting - pale and sweating. I sank into welcoming flesh and jolted as I took a gulp of 'real' air. *It* always did that, like taking a deep, deep dive underwater. Some of the adepts I'd trained with could stay under for hours. A few might have gotten as far as the generator room itself, maybe even tripped the power back on without ever needing to go down there in person.

No point in deluding myself - I was still a kid by comparison. Guess that was my own fault for walking out on my training.

Time to do things the old-fashioned way.

Cautiously, I crept down the hallway and followed the path my mind's eye had taken. The antiseptic stink grew stronger. In the reception area, rusty manacles lined one wall next to a few battered wooden chairs. Patches of the linoleum had melted, either from fire or acid. The few lights that were still working sputtered fitfully - probably loose connections, I told myself, trying to ignore the yawning, unnatural depth of the shadows that seemed to follow my every move. The aura of misery and degradation was even worse when viewed through my physical senses. I kept my gun loose - an

old Heckler and Koch USP that I'd customised in my spare time - but my ultimate defence lay with my father's untimely legacy, dangling from a strap at my hip.

It felt cool to the touch. No amount of body heat would change that, and no amount of blood would stain its bronzed surface. Its name, in Latin, only hinted at its potential for violence.

As always, it reacted to my inner musings - sliding up to my hand like a faithful dog nuzzling its master. My fingers clasped through its deceptively fragile structure, and tingled.

The contact brought the familiar comfort.

I was not alone.

The desk at reception stood empty. No one was around to challenge me as I pushed my way through the security barriers. I shivered, narrowing my eyes; such a mundane factor out of place hinted that the atmosphere couldn't just be put down to a bad case of nerves.

Heavily-barred doors stood at intervals down the corridor. The walls glistened with condensation from a burst pipe. The hiss of escaping steam was the only sound.

Almost.

I tensed. There was a shape ahead of me, half-hidden in the haze - a man in a guard's uniform, prone and whimpering some ten feet away.

It's not enough to react to a threat. Instincts can get you killed. What matters is how you *analyse* a threat. Which is why, instead of opening fire like a trigger-happy amateur, I cocked my head and listened even harder.

The move probably saved my life.

The guard gave a scream as a claw burst through his shoulder tendons and dragged his whole body out of view. I had a glimpse of a shape as it leapt, its shadow grisly against freshly-splattered blood on the wall, and yanked the hapless man into the mouth of a ventilation shaft.

I was stunned. Jesus, I'd never seen anything *that* fast.

The man's cries grew fainter, interrupted by a bestial hiss. With my gun drawn, I sidled up for a closer look and tripped on something fleshy and damp - the bloody stump of an arm. There was no sign of an owner.

“And I thought this was going to be one of my *easy* days,” I muttered, hearing the bump and scuffle move further down the vent. I wasn’t suicidal enough to risk facing a close-quarter enemy in a confined space. I’d learnt that particular lesson many years ago, and still had the scars to prove it.

On reflex, I rubbed the pale traces just above my cheekbone. Despite his misgivings about my heroics, Alexis had witnessed only a fraction of my skills that day in Rwanda. I had saved the squad, but from then on he and the rest of the boys had built a wall around their dealings with me. Humans hate having their world-view shaken up, especially if reality contradicts the notion that we’re at the top of the food chain. No one had wanted to trust their memories of the attack, and by default that meant not trusting me either.

It made my father’s final gesture all the more ironic.

★

A whispering alerted me to danger. I spun around, cursing my woolgathering, and listened.

I found him cowering in one of the cells. He flinched at my shadow and tried to hide under the bed - the only piece of furniture in the place.

“Don’t hurt me! Don’t hurt me!!”

“Hey, take it easy,” I knelt by the door, keeping one eye on the corridor while the man trembled and tried to squeeze further behind the tubular metal frame. He wore a bizarre straitjacket, encrusted with all manner of filth. His shaven head was covered with bruises, scratches and horribly familiar signs of torture. His arms were raised defensively, and he squinted at me through swollen eye-sockets.

“What’s going on down here?”

“Dying... we’re all... dying!” he fired off his words through chattering teeth. His accent was vaguely Slavic. “Proto’s on the loose! Black Angel’s... gonna kill us!”

“Get a grip!” I snapped, and held up my hand. “Just relax. I’m not gonna hurt you. Now tell me, what’s gonna kill us?”

“The Proto, it... got free!” he said, trembling. “We got fed to... it, but it ate... the guards when... the.... Power got shut down.”

"What the hell's the Proto?" I asked, completely nonplussed.

"The Screamer! The... Black Angel!"

So much for answers. "Look, I don't give a damn about 'black angels' and 'screamers'. Just tell me, what are you doing down here?"

But the man merely broke down into fresh sobs. "I didn't sign on for this!" He wailed. "Not devils and... shadows.... I'm just.... a truck driver!"

"What, you *drove* here?"

"Four days on... the road... from Turkey," he said, his head shaking from side to side. "Long way. Long... way."

"What did you bring here?" I pressed. At the mention of Turkey, dread had reached in and squeezed my gut. "Listen to me! What-were-you-carrying?"

"Death in five tons of... stone," the man moaned. "The Sleeper... Drove here. Lost men but drove here... Then they... grabbed us. She locked...us in here with her hungry pet! The Screamer... The Proto!"

He lapsed into silence, rocking back and forth. It was pointless to push him any further. As a prisoner, he was at the bottom of the pile for keeping up to date on current events, but his babbling had tipped me off to my most pressing concern - that whatever this Proto was, it was between me and my objective.

As if I didn't have enough to deal with already.

I nodded. "Stay in here. Keep the door locked."

Even as I said it I knew it was probably a wasted effort. But the man amazed me by shuffling over to the door. For a moment he actually looked up and seemed to notice my face. "If you... see the others, kill... them. Don't let... Screamer get... them first."

I pursed my lips and slid the bolt closed. For a moment, I was tempted to end his misery right there. A bullet between the eyes might be the kindest gesture. But he kept on staring through the open hatch, right at me, as if drawing strength from my image. It was a thing the adepts said happened occasionally, when ordinary folk came close to us.

Swallowing, I slammed the hatch closed and turned away. The last thing I needed was a guardian angel complex. These poor bastards didn't need a symbol - they needed action.

Was it possible Eckhardt had already awoken the Sleeper? The very thought made me reach for the metal at my side, but though it thrummed gently at my touch, it did not react with all the fury and flame I knew the Sleeper's presence would have provoked. *Something else* had grabbed that guard.

The Proto. The Screamer.

Black Angel.

Get a grip, Kurtis, I grumbled. After Rwanda, a rogue man-eating monster wouldn't be enough to even make me raise a sweat.

Yeah.

And maybe if I kept repeating it, I'd start to believe it too.

Chapter 33

It wasn't hard to find my way around. The trail of victims gave it away.

Down echoing corridors and past rows of cells, around every corner and against every wall. I hesitated even to call them bodies. An arm or puddle of slick gore, a gnawed and limbless trunk next to coagulating splash-marks, where arteries had been slashed and allowed to spew like fire hoses across walls and ceilings. Other, far worse sights made me grateful for my empty stomach. Unusual I may be, but I'm still human in that regard. Even the ever-present stench of antiseptic couldn't mask that amount of carnage.

Perhaps even worse than the bodies, however, were the things sat propped against the walls, or else shambled down the halls. Many simply stood without point or purpose, staring at nothing. They had the form of men, but experience had taught me the hard truth about appearances. The first creature refused to respond to questions, a shaken shoulder, or even a slap to the face; it continued gazing down the hall, mouth open and drooling, with eyes as empty as broken windows.

Whatever they had been, they could no longer be truly classed as men. They all wore the same dirty straitjackets as the truck driver. All had the same shaved heads and marks of physical brutality. A few sported rusty steel plates or had wiring jury-rigged into their scalps. I even found one of them sitting, its legs splayed like a toddler's, while his hands rubbed endless circles into the spilled gore.

I made sure they died quickly, just as the driver had asked.

It was easy to see now why my intrusion hadn't exactly brought the guards running. The Strahov had bigger problems to worry about.

Unease. Resolve.

The endless corridors and cells had finally come to an end. I leaned against a pillar, scanning the wide-open space that must have once have been a dining hall. Utilitarian tables and chairs lay in heaps, mangled out of recognition. A live electrical cable dangled from the ceiling, hissing and spitting like an angry viper. Most of the floor was awash with debris and bodily fluids darkened to black under the fluorescent bulbs. The vomit-inducing stench of processed food almost triumphed over the reek of death.

I hadn't the stomach to investigate behind the serving area - which, given my background, is saying something. Instead, I proceeded to the end of the hall, eventually reaching a T-junction. More groans issued from behind closed doors. I hoped the inhabitants hadn't realised the locks weren't working.

One door, however, stood ajar. Green light traced across the floor, accompanied by the hum of a computer fan. Cautiously, I risked a quick glance at the interior.

I started breathing again several lifetimes later.

A snarling set of jaws yawned at my eye-level, as though ready to pounce. It took several moments to realise that the thing was well and truly dead - suspended in the centre of the room by a bizarre apparatus. Cautiously, I lowered my gun and pushed my way inside, fighting revulsion with every step. It took all of my military discipline to focus on the factual details of the room.

A man in a lab coat lay like a discarded toy against a computer workstation. His white hair and goatee were immaculate, in contrast to the dreadful wounds that disfigured his torso. He'd died with one arm wrapped around his stomach, vainly trying to keep his intestines where nature intended.

The rest of the room had been divided up by folding Perspex screens. Computers - most of them tripped by the power cut - glowed softly on stand-by mode and were the source of the greenish light. Insulated cables snaked across the floor and draped across a crazy

gazebo-structure that took up most of the room's centre.

Hanging in the gazebo, like a slaughtered pig, was the most bizarre creature I'd ever set eyes upon

"What in the hell..."

Six feet long from snout to tail, its anatomy seemed to mix the worst features of a baboon and a prehistoric warthog. Greasy, greyish skin, with muscles exposed and held together with pus-covered bandages. Twisted, unnatural shapes of bone pierced the flesh, barely following the lines of the underlying skeleton. Its simian hands had sharpened talons instead of nails, and a lilac-coloured tongue drooped from between its wolfish jaws. Even the smell of it was unnatural - blending formaldehyde and marsh gas with the unbearable putrefaction of rotten fruit.

That wasn't the worse thing. Far more disturbing was the fact that the corpse had obviously been there for quite some time.

Something *else* had to have killed all those men, and it was still on the loose.

Data. Quickly.

Holstering my gun, I hustled over to the nearest workbench and leafed through the piles of printouts. Most were predictably observations on the thing's physiology - heart rate, blood pressure, that sort of crap. Part of me hoped that my instinctual reaction had been wrong, and the freak was only a random mutation.

My hand snatched at a report as it slipped from the pile. I was shaking as I read the title.

"Stage FOUR: Primary dissection of Proto-Nephilim, a Report. Author - Dr. K. Boaz"

"My God," I glanced back at the carcass, and my chest tightened. "They've actually created a Nephilim hybrid... Am I too late?"

The metal at my hip grew warm, reacting to the surge of emotion. I suddenly wanted to run, to get myself as far as possible from the stink and the gore and the death. With one hand I screwed up the report and flung it away, as though by doing so I might gain some distance from the reality dangling right in front of me. The knowledge, and the responsibility, was too much.

If I didn't stop this thing, here and now, then my father and all his

followers would have died for nothing.

Courage, came the whisper.

It wasn't a word, but a memory to nudge aside my fear. I clasped the metal disk until my hand was positively thrumming. *It* knew that I wasn't afraid of Eckhardt's creations - only of failure.

In only a few moments, I was in control once more - remembering my father's teachings. Three deep breaths and the recitation.

Relax.

Expel fear.

Reject doubt.

"Lux Veritatis mecum." I murmured, and felt strength return to me.

I would see the Black Alchemist dead, no matter what monsters lay between us.

Then the screaming began.

Chapter 34

In seconds, I was back in the corridor.

The howls grew in volume. There was a crash of breaking glass as a swing-lamp shattered an observation window ahead of me. I brought my gun up just as a chubby man scrambled through the hole, ignoring the cuts to his hands and body.

“It’s here! It’s HEREEEEEE! HEEEEEEELP!!!”

Too terrified to care, he bumped off the wall and spun off-balance. But then I saw the shape appearing behind him, snarling as it crawled free of the window.

I took aim.

“GET DOWN!” I yelled, and squeezed the trigger.

The bullets didn’t even slow it down. All I could see was a rangy silhouette and two fiercely glowing eyes that narrowed as the thing let out a bellow that shook my eardrums. I kept my feet planted, pouring shot after shot into the creature, as it leapt and snatched a hold of the scientist’s legs. The man shrieked and went down hard.

Hissing, the shape withdrew further into the shadows, hauling the sobbing man with it. My ears rang with every burst, but I might as well have been shooting blanks. A bulb sputtered and exploded overhead, giving me a glimpse of what held him.

Evidently that carcass back in the lab had a bigger, uglier brother.

The gun clicked empty. In the sudden interlude, the creature fixed me with those headlamp-glowing eyes and roared. Its prey gibbered and twisted in its grip like a beached fish.

“Help me! HELP ME!”

His screams intensified, barely drowning out the sounds of splintering bone and tearing muscle. The creature retreated from my advance, but was apparently unwilling to give up its prize. Its grotesque head swung left, right. Cursing, I slid another round into the gun just as the creature took a flying leap back through the shattered window.

I dove after it, reaching for my hip. The man clawed at tables, chairs - anything to stall his captor's progress - and howled in fresh agony as the beast's talons sank deeper into his flesh, wrenching him free. Judging by the scientific instruments and charts, the room had once been just another laboratory.

Abomination! Kill!

I ducked a fallen pipe and bellowed, “*Lux Veritatis!*”

The creature roared and leapt aside - narrowly missing the comet of searing fire loosed from my grip. My energies thrummed like an invisible rope between us, and I howled anew as I sent my golden companion whirling back to take the beast's head from its shoulders.

Impossibly, it saw death coming and ducked. The scientist was dropped like a sack of potatoes; I felt the light swerve at the last instant to avoid his heart.

With that microsecond's distraction, the beast jumped. It punched through a ceiling vent like it was made of tissue paper and scrambled out of reach. I roared, not willing to accept defeat, but in moments the creature's whip-like tail had disappeared up the shaft and vanished. My bullets traced a path across the ceiling, but it was too late.

“Shit!” I snarled, rushing to the dying man's side. Light from my tame star circled us warily, as I quickly assessed his wounds.

“D-Don't,” he coughed, blinking. “It's too l-late for that.”

“What the hell was that thing?” I demanded. Blood quickly soaked my hands as I applied pressure to the ruin of his thigh. The demon's claws must have severed an artery.

“Proto... I th-thought I was safe in here,” the man gasped, clutching at my sleeve as I scanned for something to use as a tourniquet. “Don't bother, I said! I'm dying.”

"How can I kill it?"

His head shook, "Boaz was right... only a Shard c-can destroy it. But it's too late! Everyone's dead and w-we don't have a Shard!"

"One like this, you mean?"

The man's eyes widened as I withdrew the Periapt Shard from my pocket. Its pull was to perception what black holes are to gravity, and I quickly slipped it back, hiding it from view. The room seemed to chill several degrees in its absence, although my companion continued to stand sentinel. The dying man's eyes followed its circling movements, and a hungry look overcame the pain on his face.

His hands gripped my shirt with unexpected strength, "Kill it... You must kill it b-before it gets to the upper levels. You c-can't let it get loose. Understand? We f-failed. You can't l-let it get out alive!"

Less than a minute later, I solemnly closed his eyes.

Heat and light returned to my hand.

"Chirugai?" I whispered.

I know, it replied with the words that were not words.

"Any ideas, old friend?"

The glow faded, revealing a golden disk fitted to my palm. Curved blades retracted, quiescent.

Faith.

Well, it was better than nothing. I knew there was only one solution, but the thought stuck in my throat, no matter how hard I swallowed. After Rwanda, I'd vowed never to do anything this crazy again, but I saw no alternative.

The beast was aware of me now. It would not risk another open battle. I was going to have to follow the creature into its own territory. Only there did I stand a chance of killing it.

"Stay with me, okay?"

Affirmation.

Grunting with effort, I managed to drag a steel autopsy table over to use as a stepladder to clamber into the vent. The table's half-dissected occupant remained reassuringly dead as I hauled myself up into the darkness. You'd think I'd be so used to the stench that I wouldn't notice one more corpse.

Yeah, right.

My sweat felt cold on my forehead as I pushed onwards. There was no movement of air, and wouldn't be until I got the power back on. Breathing slowly, I forced images of talons swiping out of nowhere to claw my face off firmly to the back of my mind. Even as a child, I was cursed with too much imagination. The Legion had long despaired of beating the habit out of me. Perversely, my father had actually praised my 'gift' - always maintaining that a good imagination was invaluable for scrying. The flip side - especially when crawling along dark passageways looking for bogeymen - wasn't so great.

I'm not exactly a big guy, but I'm no feather-weight either. The vent was less than three feet square. Brushed steel bumped and *thamhp*ed as I shuffled down on all fours, my breathing sounding horribly close.

All I had to guide me were my instincts (strong), the beast's unique, vomit-inducing stink (stronger), and the glow from the metal disk clutched in my outstretched fist. The light waxed and waned like a beacon in the darkness - growing in luminance and thrumming at each new junction when it sensed the direction taken by my quarry.

★

At long last, a light pierced the shaft ahead of me. Ready for anything, I approached the opening and peered out.

It wasn't quite what I'd expected.

"Guess this was home sweet home," I murmured.

A vision from the Industrial Age - as Jules Verne or H. G. Wells might have envisioned it - arched away from me as a vast, enclosed sphere, like Cerebro's evil twin (hey, I'm a Marvel fan - get over it DC). Armour plating covered the walls in a rusty, riveted patchwork, and a sturdy gantry encircled the circumference. A passenger jet could have fitted in the chamber with room to spare.

Warily, I emerged from the cramped vent - grateful for the chance to stretch my legs. Dust pattered down in a soft rain, making my eyes water. The dust made a faint corona around each of the massive arc lights that were spaced at intervals around the perimeter. I could taste it with every breath, and feel it as a raw tingle at the back of my throat. Even my footsteps echoed with metallic overtones.

The room was impressive all by itself, but my eye was irresistibly drawn to the thing hanging at its centre - a reinforced metal box, maybe ten feet square - held immobile and isolated by dozens of steel cables from both above and below. A hermetic door, nearly six inches thick and the only apparent entry or exit to the thing, hung pathetically off its hinges. Something had burst its way out with astonishing violence, and I didn't need to be a rocket scientist to come up with a likely suspect.

"So this is where they kept the Proto, till they lost power," I sighed, "Clever girl, Lara - you let the genie out the bottle."

Caution.

I nodded, and gave the disk at my hip a gentle squeeze.

My steps took me counterclockwise along the gantry, to a small but heavily-reinforced window looking into what was clearly a control room. The safety glass had been reduced to a frozen spider-web of cracks where a man-sized object had struck with punishing force. One glance at the interior made me wish I hadn't bothered, but I quickly spotted that the exit door had also been breached.

There was zero point in trying to lure the beast back in here. I wondered how it had originally been contained, and how many people had died in the process. There was no other direction that the creature could have taken, and so I pressed on, stepping carefully through the spilled gore. Evisceration is always slippery. The smell was appalling, but was soon replaced by the familiar reek of bleach as I emerged into an empty corridor.

Bloody footprints cantered away from me, bouncing briefly off the wall as they turned a corner and disappeared.

Following such an obvious trail would finish this game of cat-and-mouse in record time, except that I would probably be the one cast as the mouse. My father hadn't been a hunter in the traditional sense, but he had passed on his predatory instincts to me along with a decent amount of cold logic.

I wasn't going to get anywhere further by chasing this thing. The Proto was an active hunter, unafraid to ambush grown men and drag them kicking and screaming across a room. And the one thing you didn't do when tracking a predator was to back it into a corner - not

unless you were absolutely, totally confident that you could take it down. Unfortunately, I didn't have an army of spear-carriers ready to hold the beast at bay while I hacked its head off, and my cloth shirt and fatigues wouldn't do squat against my enemy's weapons. Even the Chirugai could only do so much; its attacks were surgical tools compared to the forklift truck I'd need to hold the creature off if it decided to go on the offensive.

Duh, Kurtis; if I wanted to kill this thing, I'd have to use my brain. Time for another reconnaissance.

There was an alcove halfway down the hall. I hunkered down as far out of sight as possible, keeping my back pressed to the tiles, and concentrated. It took a few moments longer than usual to work up the proper focus, but after gritting my teeth with effort, I flung my awareness after the trail of glistening prints.

To my mind's eye, the blood stood out even more sharply than the surrounding walls - glowing like neon down the ever darkening passageways. Bodily fluids - especially those so intimately required to keep us alive - are rich sources of energy. Ask any vampire you like. If there's strong emotion involved, then that gets imprinted, too - kinda like topping off an engine with nitrous oxide. *This* blood had been forcibly expelled during an act of extreme violence, which made its signal even more charged-up than normal. I shuddered to think what scrying the beast's entire rampage would have done to my sanity. Those adepts I talked about don't just exercise their mental muscles for reconnaissance; they also have damn strong defences to keep what they see from turning them into gibbering maniacs.

The trail ran out, and I hovered at a junction. One corridor ended in nothing but pipes and a circuit-breaker box, while the other sloped downwards and had a pair of double doors that were almost, but not quite, closed. When I moved to enter the room, the tension in my head grew almost unbearable. Sucking in a deep breath, I tried again, only to run into that same gelatinous barrier. My attempts to breach it left me suffocating and disorientated. Whatever was in there was actively keeping *me* out.

In a last-ditch attempt, I hurled every scrap of energy I had into a needle-fine probe - hoping to catch a faint glimpse of what was

resisting me. But I misjudged and the probe shattered like glass. My mind was flung back and re-entered flesh with artery-bursting force. I doubled over, stifling a grunt as pain exploded behind my eyeballs. Fire danced before my eyes and hot wetness trickled from the burst vessels in my nose. Gods, that *hurt*.

The ab-voice in my head chided, *Foolish. Very foolish.*

"What are you, my companion or my father?" I hissed, and raked fingers through my hair as though I could brush aside my fatigue. The pain was lessening slowly, although I'd have killed for a Tylenol or three. "I had to check. And there *is* something down there. The risk was worth it."

The Chirugai fell silent, but it was right. The act of scrying could be more demanding than the toughest physical workout. I'd been pushing myself hard for the past few weeks, and my endurance was approaching its lowest ebb. Attempting a difficult scrying - especially trying to circumvent that damn barrier - was a stubborn and moronic thing to have done in my present condition. If my probe had been any stronger, I'd have risked a stroke or worse from the backlash.

Your father is dead. You must stay alive long enough to fulfil your quest. Avenge him. Avenge us all.

I blinked. Only on very rare occasions did the Chirugai condescend to communicate with complete sentences. My fingers caressed the metal, and the thrill of heat was like a friendly hand pulling me to my feet.

Nothing would beat eyeballing the thing in person.

With caution, I approached the double doors - my boots making almost no noise on the polished floor. The sign and the faint whiff of formaldehyde confirmed that I'd reached the morgue.

I froze. The light spilling from the narrow opening had darkened; something was moving around in there.

The shuffling stopped right on the other side of the door. My breathing grew heavy, and the weight of my pistol seemed to increase ten-fold. I tried not to think of horror movies with knife-wielding murderers as I pressed my ear against the door, concentrating. The snuffling, huffing noise on the other side grew closer, deepening to a growl.

I kicked the door in.

As tactics go, it was a pretty safe bet. I met a heavy mass which let out a scream but staggered backwards - thrown off-balance as I shouldered my way inside. But then it regained its footing, and bore down on me with a swipe of scythe-like arms and a hiss on loan from a king cobra.

Fortunately, I know how to fall. As I rolled, I loosed the Chirugai in a flurry of burning light and kicked at the thing's ankles. Talons longer than my arm impaled the ground either side of my head, and a face that was barely a face anymore thrust itself into mine. I had a vision of half-melted, frothing holes in place of eyes, and long spurs of bone protruding from a heavily bandaged jaw.

Nobody could have missed a target at that range. My gun fired once, twice - five times - before clicking empty. Every shot pierced the creature's skull and plastered globules of brain matter across the ceiling.

The creature shook its head as though dislodging a mosquito and screamed at me. I'd only made it madder.

"Jesus!" I ducked, barely missing its fangs, and aimed a kick between its legs. There, at least, I got results. The talons came free as the thing leapt away, its straight-jacketed arms flailing while it howled.

Brains are one thing - testicles are another.

On my feet, I backed out of immediate range. The room was fairly typical of morgues I'd seen, with the usual gurneys and refrigeration units occupying most of one wall. However, the upright specimen tanks - each twice the height and girth of a man and glowing with a sickly greenish light - were definitely not standard issue. The light threw ghastly shadows across my attacker, whose anguished groans had metamorphosed to a hiss of hatred.

Its empty eye sockets focused on me.

Dropping the gun, I dived to avoid another of those widow-maker swipes, and caught the beast smack in the solar plexus. I timed my kick almost perfectly. The thing snarled and jabbed straight down, narrowly missing my own precious equipment, but amazingly did not fall. The thing had to have the core muscles of a rhinoceros.

It dawned on me that the beast's claw was now firmly lodged in the

floor - and had pinned my trousers in the process.

As if realising its talon was stuck, the beast turned its rotting face back to mine and brought its other claw up for a killing blow. It screamed, triumphant. I closed my eyes - the sight of my own intestines not being high on my list of priorities - and prepared to die.

At which point the Chirugai reappeared.

The screams were abruptly cut off. I risked a glance in time to see the creature sag like a dropped puppet - its life suddenly as absent as its head. Preservation instincts kicked in and rolled my body aside as the corpse tumbled to the ground. I scrambled to my feet, just as the Chirugai sailed back to me, steaming as it shed its coating of blood.

"Damn..."

Calm. Danger, still.

My heart was beating double-time as I scanned the room, alert for more of the creature's buddies. The corpse's crusted bandages could not entirely hide the fact that he had once been human; spurs of bone and claws had been grafted onto or burst through his limbs and skull, and the exposed skin was the colour of curdled milk. Veins stood out like worms across the ruin of his face and body.

Jesus, what had Eckhardt been *doing* down here?

A prickling of the senses told me I was being watched.

I lifted my gaze, ignoring the benevolent glow of the Chirugai. The specimen tanks by the far wall were all occupied with variations on the dead creature's theme, and threw ghoulish, rippling lights across the room. I squinted, trying to make sense of the tangle of limbs and spines floating serenely in preserving fluids.

In the shadows, distorted by the curve of the glass, was a lean and hungry shape, topped with two glowing red eyes.

Its growl was my only warning before it leapt.

Chapter 35

You know that moment people talk about, when life is supposed to flash before your eyes just before it gets snuffed out by a horrible death? Those people must have been referring to car accidents or lightning strikes, because the attack didn't leave me the necessary nanoseconds to reminisce.

The Proto struck with the force of a hit-and-run Jeep.

I was kicked off-balance and slipped on the bloody floor. The creature's sheer momentum was the only thing that saved me. Through the throbbing pain, I heard it sail right over me and blow the doors wide open. Its claws clattered on the tiles, while it huffed and snarled like a wild boar.

Furiously, I rallied my defences - wincing at the dinner-plate sized dent where my ribs should have been. The creature had struck me with the heavy flat of its talons; my second miracle, otherwise I'd have been sliced open like a ripe melon. Pistol out, I released the Chirugai and pelted after my quarry.

It had recovered from its skid and stood crouched in the hallway, tossing its head and pawing the ground. Its claws gouged foot-long rents in the linoleum. Even from here, the beast's spiny grey hide stank of mildew and rot.

I felt the Chirugai blurring the air behind me as it hovered protectively. The beast sensed it too, peeling back its lips to bare nightmare fangs. It took a step back, then another.

In a flurry of thought, the Chirugai met the beast's dive head-on. I

flung myself aside, avoiding a fatal swipe, and traced a line of bullets along its exposed belly. Impossibly, the beast twisted *in mid-air*. It landed on all fours, hissing and spitting, and spun to face me across the corridor. Sludge-like blood oozed from a mortal wound across its left eye, where the Chirugai had almost split its skull in two. Buzzing like a hornet, the Chirugai reached the end of the hall and reversed direction.

The Proto sized me up, its sides heaving but impossibly free of gunshot wounds. Even as I watched, its cleaved head began to knit itself back together. With a wet *shlup*, the blood clotted and a fresh eye regrew in the ruined socket.

“Okay, that’s just not *fair*,” I yelled.

The beast faced me and bellowed in part-challenge, part-frustration. For a crazy second, I saw intelligence glittering in its gaze. It *knew* that here was a genuine threat - something far more deadly than a battalion of Strahov guards.

Maybe Alexis was right about me all along.

I drew a deep breath, and roared straight back.

Whether it was my butch display, or the Chirugai plummeting back down the hallway, the beast did what I least expected.

It fled.

“Dammit!”

Snatching my companion mid-killing streak, I dashed after the beast’s retreating shadow. The Chirugai burned angrily in my fist - its desire for blood almost overpowering the will of its master. But I needed it with me, and refused to let go.

Let me loose! Let me kill!

“Not yet!”

We rounded a corner, taking the down-steps three at a time. Every breath stung from my cracked ribs, but I ignored them.

The stairs abruptly ended, and I entered a chamber almost hidden under a pall of smoke and fumes. It was impossible to tell the room’s dimensions, but fuzzy lights from various control panels winked through the twilight haze. The smell of diesel was strong enough to be a demon in its own right; my eyes wouldn’t stop watering.

For a moment I couldn’t believe my luck; surely I hadn’t come so

far?

The generator room.

Before I could congratulate myself, a shape dropped out of the fog right in front of me. I hit the deck just in time to avoid the slashing teeth and rank breath. The Chirugai, still clutched tightly in my left hand, grew hotter and shone like a miniature sun.

The Proto turned, hissing at the intrusive light. Its lurid eyes bored into mine, brimming with hostility. I swore, realising too late that I'd gotten myself trapped in the Proto's own lair. It hadn't fled - it had strategically withdrawn, luring me in like a first-week recruit.

But then I grinned. Its trap was only as good as its ambush - and I'd survived the critical surprise attack.

Baring my teeth, I crouched and raised the Chirugai aloft.

"No more running," I said quietly, "It's just you and me, Ugly."

The beast screamed - a sound as primal as the darkness before humans tamed fire to hold the nightmares at bay. This close, there was no need to scry to feel the beast's aura. It was so strong that it warped the ether around it for several feet - appearing to my heightened senses as a cloud of churning, noxious corruption. The only thing holding the creature back was the light clenched in my fist. My presence forced the beast's instincts down contradicting paths - the hunger for living blood versus reluctance to approach that deadly radiance.

Confusion fought with fury in the Proto's swaying stance. It gnashed its teeth, whining like a dog, and began circling me. I matched it step for step, increasing its frustration as it sought an opening and found none.

The malformed creature was clearly not a true Nephilim, but there was enough of the Fallen there to taint the beast with more than mere physical strength. A portion of their ancient malevolence towards humanity had also been instilled within the Proto's twisted flesh and bones. Coupled to its uncanny regenerative abilities, it was something my training had stressed would mark the Nephilim out no matter how they chose to disguise themselves.

I prayed the Nephilim's weaknesses had been captured as well.

My free hand strayed to my pocket. The creature reacted with a

sideways feint, but I was already bringing my hand up as it charged.

The Chirugai exploded. I had the impression of overpowering light - a radiance so strong that it took on physical force. Pain erupted in my shoulder as I felt the beast's ravaging body forcing me down. But the Proto was shrieking, its attack fouled and blinded by the Chirugai's incandescence.

And I sank the Periapt Shard up to the hilt into the beast's misshapen skull.

It yelped - a dog-like bark of shock and pain. I rolled out of reach as its body contorted in agony. The light of the Chirugai softened and embraced me, and we both stood clear to watch the beast endure its death-throes.

They did not last long.

In the ensuing silence, my hand found the hilt and tugged the Shard from dead flesh. There was very little blood, but I wiped the blade clean anyway.

Satisfaction.

Like a freshening breeze, the pressure in my mind lifted. The ether cleared - all trace of the creature's diabolic presence vanishing like smoke on the wind. Even the murk in the room seemed to grow thinner before my eyes - enough for me to quickly establish my way around the generator controls.

It took only a few minutes' work. Pursing my lips, I listened to the machinery as it hummed back to life. The indicator lights all registered in the green.

I'd done it.

"I've gotta ask for a raise," I murmured. It felt good to smile, and I stroked the gleaming metal disk restored to its rightful place at my hip. "That's my demon quota for today, don't you think?"

Affection. Seriousness.

"Yeah... I know. The work ain't over yet." I said, and stretched out my cramped muscles. My greater purpose was still unfinished. Eckhardt still lived, and so did the Nephilim as the nightmare-yet-unborn. While the Proto's presence was already fading, my Sight perceived the Black Alchemist's influence still saturating the Strahov like a diffuse smog. Both were spewers of pollution and death, but the

Proto had just been another bestial animal to be put down.

Bringing down Eckhardt was a far deadlier prospect. His skills and Nephilim-inspired gifts put him an order of magnitude more dangerous than anything I'd taken on before. The Lux Veritatis' notes indicated that he enjoyed the same invulnerability to mortal weapons as the Proto had so aptly demonstrated; not to mention the rest of the damned Cabal and their Agency-equipped lackeys. Just getting *to* Eckhardt was going to be a challenge, and if I didn't have all three of the Shards by the time I faced him, my run of good fortune would certainly come to an abrupt and messy end.

Collaboration? The ab-voice carried a trace of hopefulness.

I chuckled, feeling my own spirits rise a little. "Yeah, I know. It's gotta be worth a try. She's probably wondering what's keeping me..."

Chapter 36

“Where the bloody hell is he?”

You’ve asked that question three times in the last ten minutes. Be patient.

Pace, turn. “What makes you so confident?”

I’m your instincts. I trust him to keep his word. He’ll be back just as soon as he can.

“Humph. He’d better be.” Turn, pace.

Dear Lara, is that concern I detect in your voice?

“He’s got my Painting! If he’s lost it or gotten himself killed I’ll... I’ll...”

Maggie sighed, tranquil as a Buddhist monk. *One day you’ll admit the obvious to yourself. Relax! He’ll be here soon.*

“How do you know?”

Because I can hear someone coming.

Freeze.

There was movement through the glass. Stale air whooshed out as the doors slid apart. A gun preceded its owner through the opening, scanning the interior.

He looked everywhere except above the door.

I had to credit him; my stalker had some impressive reflexes. He sensed my ambush and turned, gun raised, but I was quicker. My kick sent his pistol flying, while I levelled my own gun to within an inch of his forehead.

His expression gave way to a resigned calm, just as a shape lurched

in the darkness beyond the door.

There was an ear-splitting explosion.

The stranger's eyes snapped open, and widened as a disfigured *thing* in a straitjacket toppled to the ground behind him - gargling as it died. My eyebrow rose at the filth-encrusted hands, and rusty additions to its skull. Trust the American to have all the fun.

"Huh. Thanks. I thought I'd got them all."

"Glad you came back to save me, stranger," I said, not bothering to hide my sarcasm.

"Name's Kurtis." Amazingly, he offered his hand.

"Lara," I returned his smile and, accepting the handshake, slammed him against the far wall. "And *this* is business."

He grunted but wisely held still - no doubt aware of the gun still levelled at his head - and stayed that way while I rummaged through his pockets.

"I owe you one," he said, sounding sheepish.

"You owe me a Painting," I snapped, trying to ignore the undeniable intimacy. The bronze disk dangling from his hip-strap was hurriedly tossed out of reach.

"Sorry... that went AWOL at the Louvre."

"What?" My hand froze mid-search.

"I don't have it," he sighed. "It was missing when I woke up."

No Lara, you're not allowed to shoot him yet.

I exhaled through my nose, aware of Maggie's frantic efforts to keep my temper under control. Had all of my effort been for nothing? If this cocky American had sabotaged my hunt for Werner's killer, he would be leaving the Strahov with his balls in a paper bag - if he was lucky.

Anger glittered in my voice like flecks of metal on the edge of a knife, "Do you know where it is now?"

His head turned a fraction, enough to show a raised eyebrow. "My guess? The Cabal. They already have three Obscura Paintings, and they've been hunting yours for a long time."

"How could you *possibly* know that?"

"I know."

"How helpful..." I muttered, but a note of excitement rippled

through my belly. The implications if Eckhardt already had *four* Paintings... I shook my head, trying to digest the information. "So, what brings you here from Paris?" I queried, nonchalant.

"Eckhardt!" Kurtis growled. His hands balled into fists. "We have business only one of us is going to walk away from."

Ah. *That* kind of business. Bizarrely, I found some of my anger beginning to simmer down. There was more to this man than mere arrogance and paranoia; the enmity in his words was the sort only gained through intimate - and devastating - trauma.

Perhaps I had an ally against Eckhardt, instead of just another obstacle.

The corner of his eye met mine. "You?"

My hand dropped, releasing him, but I kept the gun steady. Despite Maggie's glowing enthusiasm, I preferred to err on the side of caution. "Personal reasons."

He turned, regarding me. *A lone wolf*, Maggie noted, and I had to admit the analogy was pretty strong. There was an indefinable air of competence about him, of alertness and intelligence that weighed up his environment in every detail. His clothes showed recent bloodstains and he seemed to favour his side a little, as though breathing was uncomfortable. There was a fresh cut above his right eye - a companion to an old scar on his cheek. His stubble was a little rougher, his hair even more unkempt, than the last time I'd seen him. There were dark rings beneath his eyes. What the devil had he been up to down there?

Despite having my gun levelled at his heart, he managed a smile. "You know what Eckhardt is trying to do." It wasn't a question. "If he can get all five Obscura Paintings, he'll revive the Sleeper, rebreed the Nephilim race. He's been collecting ingredients for months now."

"Ingredients?"

"Alchemically transmuted elements from his murder victims' bodies. He needs them to reassemble the Sanglyph once he has all the pieces."

"I've seen him at work as the Monstrum," I pushed unwanted memories aside. "With that glove..."

Kurtis nodded. "He made it himself. Spent years looting reliquaries

and crypts all over Europe, mostly for shrouds from dead saints. The glove'll keep him safe from the Sanglyph's power... *if* he ever manages to reconstruct it."

The question that had been plaguing me ever since Paris reared its head. "And what exactly does the Sanglyph *do*?"

He hesitated, and his eyes flickered to the disk, laying where I had thrown it. In total silence, it began to glow with gentle light, and slowly rose until level with my face.

"The opposite of this," he whispered.

I rallied my composure, not allowing my unease to show as the disk spun lazily, circling first his body then the space between us. Razor-sharpness glittered along its bladed edge.

"The energy of life," his voice held me, bewitching and subtle. "To the Chinese it's *chi*. The Algonquian called it *manitou*. Lucas pinched the idea and called it the Force. It's the energy separating living things from inanimate matter... and Eckhardt wants control over it. He'll capture and channel the life-sources from dozens, maybe hundreds of beings to awaken the Sleeper. That's why he needs the glove to shield himself. If you or I touched the Sanglyph with our bare skin, our energy would be instantly absorbed-" he paused, letting the significance sink in. "-we'd be dead before we even realised it."

So that's it, I thought. The gun in my hand did not waver. Despite my misgivings, I found that I wasn't intimidated. Golden warmth radiated from the disk, immersing me with feelings of security and calm. It made me think of log fires and steaming baths after a long, cold slog through a blizzard.

He could kill me with a thought, I realised with a jolt. *Even my reflexes aren't good enough against this. I'd never get a chance to pull the trigger.*

He's purposefully withholding the advantage. He's showing that he trusts me.

"The last Painting," I said, my mouth tasting dry. "It's here, isn't it?"

"Yes, in the Vault of Trophies, right beneath us," Kurtis replied, his eyes not leaving mine. His words rang as though struck by a blacksmith's hammer. "The Paintings. *Must*. Be. Destroyed. To do that... I'll need the Shard you picked up from the Louvre."

The blade seemed to absorb my body heat as I withdrew it from my pack - a tooth of gleaming black ice with an angelic pommel. I didn't miss the way Kurtis' pupils dilated at the sight; it was a sign well-known to ancient Chinese jade merchants and meant a customer was hooked. "There should be three Periapt Shards... Right?"

To my surprise, he pulled an identical blade from one of his many pockets - the ones I could have sworn I'd searched so thoroughly. He noticed my expression and smirked. Git.

"Right. Eckhardt has the last one. If all three Shards are united they can destroy him permanently... So he keeps it nice and safe."

"United how, exactly?"

"He must be stabbed with all three Shards. Eckhardt's blessed - or cursed - with some of the Nephilim's immortality." He hefted the blade, leaving me in no doubt that he was ex-military of some sort. "The Shards disrupt that power - make him mortal and vulnerable."

He offered me the Shard, hilt first; a clear entreaty. I suddenly felt trapped between fire and ice, between the disk's circling flame and the chill blade in my hand.

It had been so long since I'd put my faith in anyone. Putai and Salieah had rescued me from physical death, and Horus' influence had begun the healing process within my spirit. But I realised now that I'd only really begun to recover since Werner had invited me to Paris. Again, the memory of him lying in my arms rose up, fresh and urgent. My two years of living as a recluse had not bridged the rift between us. I wanted to avenge his death, but there was no guarantee that doing so would make me whole again.

Put frankly, the prospect of trusting another person the way I had trusted Werner scared me.

But then the possibility of Eckhardt's defeat suddenly loomed larger than my fear. I was closer than I'd dared hope. Only one Painting and one Shard to find, and the Monstrum would fall - forever.

Reluctantly, I had to admit that Maggie was right. I felt the wings of her strength enfold me, straightening my back and squaring my shoulders. Despite all my bravura, and the 'more-solitary-than-thou' attitude that had been my paradigm since I was sixteen, I suddenly felt an overpowering need to reciprocate Kurtis's gesture. Horus

would probably have called it a leap of faith, but Maggie's presence assured me that Kurtis *was* worthy of my trust.

I'd reconcile the irony later.

"And you..." I said, testing the new waters of my confidence. "What's *your* stake in killing Eckhardt?"

Kurtis was silent for a long time. "Do you know where the Shards come from?" He smiled when I failed to answer. "No, I wouldn't expect so. Very few people do. They're ancient weapons of the Lux Veritatis. Two of them were entrusted to my father."

"He's part of the Order?"

"We both *were*," Kurtis said, turning away from me. The tension in his shoulders tightened, giving me a glimpse into a pit of emotion deeper and more dangerous than I could have suspected. He was peaceful only in the same way Yellowstone Park is peaceful; calm on the surface, but boiling with the fires of Hell just beneath. In a blank voice, he continued, "Eckhardt murdered him to stop the Shards passing into my hands. He failed."

And I thought we had a personal stake in this, Maggie murmured.

I kept my voice deliberately neutral. "So Eckhardt went after your father, and you want revenge?"

He rounded on me. For a nanosecond, I saw the volcano unrestrained. "Justice!"

The disk seared past my shoulder, into his outstretched hand. His breathing steadied as the blades retracted, and the fires vanished once again. His self-control was, if possible, even more terrifying.

Maggie and I took a long, deep breath.

"We should work together," I said, and tossed him my Shard. My gun was returned to its holster. He caught the Shard automatically, and surprise replaced the fury in his eyes.

"You're... trusting me?"

I tried not to smile.

"We can divide the forces against us if we spilt up," I fished out the Engraving, smoothing out the creases. "You need the third Shard, so you should go after that. I'll find the last Painting. We can rendezvous and use the Shards to destroy it."

Warily, he stepped closer and frowned at the parchment. I didn't

miss the hint of doubt, even suspicion, created by my offer of alliance. It wasn't difficult to see that he, too, had difficulty with the concept of trust. He smelt like the lion enclosure at London Zoo - hot, sweaty and curiously attractive.

Work now, play later, Maggie reminded me; but her mental aspect was grinning her fool head off.

"Eckhardt guards the Shard in his old alchemy lab, in the lower regions." Kurtis muttered, mercifully oblivious of my inner companion. "I can find my way there if you go after the Painting, but the Vault's probably not as accessible now as the map shows. Eckhardt's been trying to find a way inside for a long time, but..."

Oh please... Maggie sniffed. *A fifteenth-century underground vault? I could get in with both hands tied behind my back.*

"Hmm, the entrance is underwater," I tsked. Kurtis' brow furrowed, and I tilted his chin up to meet my eye and inject some of my confidence. "No problem."

"You've experience with this sort of thing?"

My mouth opened, but I quickly shut it again. "Plenty. Let's go."

"If you say so," he said, but grinned as he stepped aside. "After you... M'lady."

For a moment, we traded a Look. It was worth the capital letter. Despite myself, I found my own mouth twitching to match his smile.

And to think, Maggie said, *that not so long ago you were all for killing him on sight.*

He's growing on me... a little, I replied, amused to feel a little extra swagger in my step. *Besides*, I added, *I can always change my mind later.*

Yeah.

Maybe if I kept repeating it, I'd start to believe it too.

Chapter 37

He was not a man who ever did anything to extremes. His manner was always quiet, his dress conservative, and his voice carefully neutral whether dictating tax figures or body counts.

Nevertheless, a slight frown creased his lips as Joachim Karel paused the playback, freezing the screen on the two figures as they held their conversation in the airlock.

“How did she get the Engraving, and the map?” he murmured to the man at his side.

“It doesn’t matter,” Eckhardt croaked. The security camera room was darkened, so only the glow from the screens illuminated the harsh lines of his face and the scowl that flashed in his maddened eyes. “We’ve lost too many men trying to open that damned Vault. Perhaps her... special talents will help us get what we need. Her resourcefulness is impressive for a mortal.”

“You don’t think there’s a danger she could destroy the last Painting?” Karel may as well have been asking for a weather forecast.

“We won’t allow her the opportunity,” Eckhardt said, stroking his chin. As always, Karel tasted the greasy taint of hot metal and felt the faintest stirring of static electricity he always did in the presence of his master’s power. “The male will be coming this way soon. Make the preparations.”

Karel’s gloved fingers glided over the keyboard. His preference to never touch anything with bare skin was, within the Cabal, such a minor affectation that it didn’t even deserve comment amongst his

peers.

"It may be wiser to confine the Lux Veritatis rather than kill him," he said, not raising his eyes from the screen. "If she fails to retrieve the Painting, he may succeed in her place."

Eckhardt's eyes narrowed. "The whelp is nothing; a boy with barely a fraction of his father's skills. His desire for revenge is nobility disguising weakness, nothing more. He poses no danger to us."

Karel inclined his head. "That may be so. However, speaking as your adviser, I would urge caution. Despite the risks, there is a good probability of the woman succeeding and, if she does, she may prove more difficult to destroy than other mortals. There is an obvious connection between her and the Lux Veritatis; we could use that against her should she become... uncooperative."

The Black Alchemist's shadow seemed to grow darker, and he chuckled. "Subtle, as always. Very well. Order Gunderson to bring him to me alive. Have you had any word from Luther yet?"

The question carried a hint of concern imperceptible to the untrained, but Karel had been working with Eckhardt for over twenty years.

"He's still having difficulty calculating the location. Even when translated, the Lux Veritatis' scrolls were written in coded prose. Most of the original reference points have been lost."

A substantial number of them having been obliterated during your decades-long pogrom, he added silently to himself. *If only you'd restrained your hatred to understand how much more useful the Lux Veritatis would be alive than dead!*

His outer appearance, however, gave no hint of his treacherous musings. There were some things best kept to one's self around the Black Alchemist, and criticism of his methods was one of them.

Eckhardt grimaced, wearing the expression as another man might have worn a sword - its very presence boding ill for anyone who crossed him. "Very well. You will go and organise the final stages for my return."

Karel's fingers suddenly froze. "You wish me to begin the Awakening ritual, now?"

"I'm ordering you," Eckhardt said, his voice dangerously soft as he

beheld his second-in-command. "No more delays. You know what you have to do."

Karel's jaw tightened. His hesitation might have been mistaken for anxiety - an all-too common trait in anyone who spent even brief periods in his master's company - but after a moment's pause, he logged out of the security feed and pushed his chair back. He was halfway out of the doorway when he heard the Monstrum whisper gleefully to himself.

"The fifth Obscura Painting is mine already!"

Chapter 38

Four Paintings down, one to go. Four down, one to go. Four down, one to go.

The mantra repeated itself in time to my jogging steps, mirroring the beating of my heart. I wouldn't lie to myself: When Werner had told me there were *five* Obscura Paintings, the idea had settled on me like the weight of the celestial sphere on Atlas' shoulders. When the old archaeologist's request had suddenly metamorphosed into a manhunt, it had seemed an even more impossible burden for me to carry to fruition. I'm no shirker when it comes to a challenge, but isolated from my usual resources, and hamstrung by the need for secrecy, I had resorted to a day-by-day strategy in order to cope. The search for five Paintings might have stretched to months, or even years - assuming that the authorities didn't catch me first.

Kurtis' words had changed all that. For the first time since Werner's death, a light had appeared in the darkness ahead of me - reachable, not by clawing for every handhold, but by trusting that if I leapt into the unknown, my daring would let me seize my objective with both hands. With one great effort - a single thrust inside my enemies' stronghold - Eckhardt and the Nephilim would fall, and a dear friend of mine would finally be avenged.

The very idea was enough to make butterflies throw a party in my stomach.

The corridor grew chillier and damper with every step as I hurried along. Kurtis had headed off in the opposite direction after we

separated at the airlock. I'd had to resist the part of me that wanted to go with him, and ignore the half-hearted reasoning that we could watch each other's backs more effectively if we were together. Maggie might sulk at the idea, but even she knew - as Kurtis and I did - that the only thing that mattered now was taking down the Black Alchemist as quickly as possible. For that, we each had to do our jobs - alone.

My reluctance was not wholly down to my subconscious' yearning; there was also the lingering question of trust. Spiritually-awakened I might be, but I'd also be a fool to think that just because Kurtis and I had shared a mutual understanding and mission, we could count on each other to the nth degree. My natural cynical streak hadn't gone away, and might still make the difference between success and an ignominious death.

A shadow fell across the far wall, vindicating that very philosophy. The Strahov lackey - whoever he was - spotted me and opened fire as I automatically dove to the side. A puddle broke my fall, and chips of concrete rained from the wall behind me, but my preservation instincts belatedly kicked in and returned fire with the Viper. The gunman jerked but fell noiselessly, and was already dead by the time I reached him.

They're getting sneakier, Maggie said, as I picked his uniformed body clean of anything useful. *Even I almost missed him.*

"D-don't kick yourself," I chattered. A creeping mist left dewdrops in my hair, and my breaths came out in pearly clouds. "We should be getting close. Look - 'Aquatic Research Lab'. That's where the entrance is s-supposed to be."

The sign was stencilled on the wall in bright yellow letters. The airlock door beside it hung slightly ajar, and tendrils of damp air wafted through the gap. It took most of my strength to prise the portal open enough to slip through, and I stood, shivering, in the lab itself.

As the entrance to an ancient Lux Veritatis stronghold, it wasn't terribly promising. Stark, utilitarian and utterly modern concrete and steel had been crafted into a chamber that had to be seven or eight storeys high. It reminded me of an old Soviet submarine dock, but

with none of the latter's touristy charm. Narrow walkways divided the room into bottomless tanks of water, each with its own warning signs and flashing orange beacons. Lines of observation windows on the upper levels were frosted with moisture. I listened intently, but heard nothing above the sighing whispers and dripping of water. Reports from my nose dredged up memories of the showers at school camp; sour, mildewy scents mixing with cleaning fluids and, strangely, long-dead fish and iodine. Where Muller's Biodome had been extravagant to the point of causing hallucinations, the A.R.L resembled nothing so much as a run-down public aquarium. It was decidedly chilly to boot.

"The entrance must be around h-here *somewhere*," I said, prowling down to the water's edge for a better look.

Hmm, Maggie sounded tense, and automatically flicked my straggling hair out of my eyes.

The surface rippled, darkening so quickly I barely had a second's warning. I leapt back just in time, drenched in spray. Ebony-black pincers longer than my arm snapped closed where my body had been, before the thing crashed back into the depths.

"Whoa!"

Panting, I picked myself up and watched the creature circle to the far side of the tank. Its squid-like body was banded with black and yellow stripes - neatly matching the DANGER signs placed around its tank - and had enough length and girth to shame a bull saltwater crocodile. I felt the colour slowly return to my cheeks, and then abruptly drain away again when I noticed a large gate set into the floor of the tank.

I doubled-checked the map against the room's dimensions, and had to resist the urge to scrunch it into a ball and toss it to the waiting monster.

I'd found the entrance to the Vault of Trophies alright, and Eckhardt's guard fish was on duty right on top of it.

There was no point wallowing in negativity. I'm an archaeologist, not a cake decorator. It's part of my job description to tackle life-or-death obstacles in pursuit of my goal (meaning no offence to cake decorators - I'm sure getting that last sugared rose into place before

an angry mother-of-the-bride arrives is just as stressful).

You're losing it, Maggie chided. Open gate first, crack nervous witticisms later.

"Alright, alright," I said, scanning the room for inspiration. The fishy stench was so strong that my eyes were stinging.

Could I shoot the monster and have done with it? Probably not. Contrary to popular belief, bullets don't travel well through water. Even a healthy calibre such as my Viper would only get a couple of feet beneath the surface before the bullet lost momentum and disintegrated. Unless I found a harpoon gun, the creature was safe.

What about an electric shock? Although it was feasible that I might find a convenient length of cable to dangle in the tank, the walkways were so conductive - and the ambient humidity so high - that I'd risk frying myself in the process. I like my body raw, not extra crispy.

"Come on, Lara, think!"

Unbidden, I felt Maggie slowing down my breathing. It was a trick that could usually be relied upon to clear my thoughts, but the invasive smell was just too powerful to ignore. Maggie's earlier comments about human instinctual responses had been right about that, at least; we're programmed to feel repulsed by that which has the potential to cause us harm. Evolution tends to favour those who can recognise spoiled foods over those who can't. My ancestors must have had some pretty sensitive noses, if my stomach's reactions were anything to go by. As I explored the upper portions of the chamber, the odours grew so strong that I swooned. Eventually, I found the source tucked away in a side room - a butcher's table and bins literally crawling with putrefying off-cuts too mangled to be identified.

"Looks like breakfast," I muttered, pinching my nose. All of a sudden, an idea formed.

Hmm, not bad, Maggie said as I ran through the details. The butterflies in my stomach fluttered more violently. It's certainly a better idea than the others. What are you waiting for?

My plan would need careful timing. In a convenient locker room, I quickly stripped down and donned the gear belonging to the Strahov's employees, that would improve my chances of surviving

entry into the Vault. On went 3mm neoprene shorties (the spray had been cool but not icy), and an ankle strap to keep Rennes' knife within easy reach. Having zipped into my wet suit, I folded my clothing and dry goods into the bottom of my pack. A couple of water-proof torches, a backup pack of chemical flares, flippers and an aqualung were added to my arsenal. As a final thought, I made sure my guns were well-protected in plastic sheaths within their holsters. Having sodden weapons when I eventually discovered dry land would be as bad as having no weapons at all.

At last I stood, shivering and goose-pimplly, on the edge of the tank. The squiddy-monster circled warily, waiting for me to step within range. Beside me sat a heavy bucket lugged all the way from the reeking offal bins.

Hope that thing's hungry, Maggie said.

I slipped into my flippers, snapped on a pair of goggles, adjusted my mouthpiece to the 'on' position, and without further ado tipped the entire bucket into the water.

A cloud of pinkish-red blood began spreading like a tumour through the crystal-clear waters. Fist-sized hunks of meat bobbed and began sinking. The monster's 'head' twitched round almost comically, and like a torpedo, it sped towards me and circled the cloud of chum, gnashing its long pincers.

It was the moment I'd been waiting for. Before I could talk myself out of it, I had clamped the mouthpiece between my teeth and dived in, taking care to choose a spot well away from the floating offal.

My plan worked better than I'd dared hope. Squinting through the bubbles, I saw that the monster was totally occupied by the bait. My shivering vanished as I swam down, relishing the warmth of working muscles.

The gate was held closed by a simple wheel-lock - exactly the same as those used aboard ships and submarines. The wheel was almost a metre in diameter, but after several agonising seconds of tugging and pulling, the mechanism yielded. A blanket of trapped air billowed out, engulfing me in bubbles.

After a glance back to make sure the guard fish was still occupied, I kicked my way down into the gaping darkness. My torch shone off

layers of shale and spilite basalts as I headed deeper and deeper. A spiteful ache began stabbing at my brain as the pressure mounted, but then my ears popped and the discomfort vanished.

Tick-tock, my air-supply beeped.

The clock was running.

Chapter 39

The Cabal had been here before me.

Stout wooden props supported the tunnel. Plastic ties in day-glow orange were knotted around the beams, and marked out a pathway like a trail of waterproof breadcrumbs.

At about six metres down, the tunnel levelled off. Roughly-hewn bedrock gave way to architecture - most of it imported limestone significantly paler than the native rock. A flicker of movement startled me, but it was only a forlorn-looking trout darting down a passageway. Motes of debris sparkled in the light from my torch, but otherwise the tunnels were blacker than the Monstrum's heart. The steady exhalation of my bubbles was the only sound.

Cave diving of any kind is not for the faint-hearted. Not knowing how far I'd have to swim, I'd made sure that my air was mixed for a prolonged dive. Having too much oxygen in the ratio was as potentially deadly as too little. My training in buoyancy control quickly came back to me, and helped me to avoid kicking up clouds of vision-destroying silt - a hazard I've had to deal with far too often whilst diving in enclosed spaces. Fortunately, the passageways were largely free of the wretched stuff.

As I swam on, I became aware of a gentle current. That - coupled to the presence of fish - hinted of an exit, perhaps flowing to the Vltava River. Or it could be a syphon, where the river or one of its tributaries had found a way underground from the surface. Either way, I'd have been a fool to rely on the current for navigation.

Half an hour went by, then an hour, and there was still no end to the passageways. Several of them had been rendered impassable by cave-ins, while others - once followed for ten minutes - led me straight back to a hallway I'd already explored. The Lux Veritatis had been devilishly clever. A maze was a good deterrent to thieves at the best of times, but building one underwater was downright diabolical.

I began to see why Eckhardt was having problems gaining access to the Vault; he was still *looking* for it.

My tank's air supply dipped to two-thirds, then a half.

Any diver with an ounce of sense would have turned back at that point. By rights, I had reached the safe limits of my exploration. My teeth left marks in the mouthpiece where I chewed down. For all I knew, the Vault was just around the next corner! It seemed criminal to give up now, but if I wanted to live long enough to make another attempt there was no choice.

I kicked to turn around, swallowing impotent rage, when movement caught my eye.

Bubbles glittered in the torchlight like a million pearls as I breathed out. They pinwheeled and floated away, not towards the ceiling, but in the direction I'd just come from.

Curious, I followed with lazy sweeps of my flippers. Each time I exhaled, a new cloud of silvery beads would drift off down the passageway - drawn by a current too faint for me to otherwise detect.

About five metres along the tunnel, the bubbles took an abrupt left turn. My excitement swiftly mounted as I watched them scurry *through* the wall - disappearing through the cracks between each carved stone.

I brushed a hand across the wall, dislodging flakes of crumbling mortar. These passageways were *old*.

They were also, as it turned out, quite easy to break through given a few good kicks.

With great care, I wriggled through the newly-created opening, taking care not to snag my equipment. Clouds of stirred-up debris faded swiftly. A wall of darkness engulfed my vision in every direction - too vast for my puny torch to penetrate more than a few metres.

Warily, I circled the chamber's perimeter and discovered several

things in quick succession.

Firstly, that the room I'd entered had been crafted by master sculptors of the kind rarely seen outside of a museum.

Secondly, I'd found the key to opening the Vault.

Thirdly, that placing life-sized statues of fully-armoured Lux Veritatis knights where a torch-wielding archaeologist might chance upon them in the dark is guaranteed to make said archaeologist swear and nearly drop her mouthpiece in shock.

The statues loomed in a circle, facing each other like the numbers on a clock face. There were eight of them, all carved from the finest Carrara marble, holding their swords in a salute to their opposite partner. A closer inspection revealed that each statue had a name plaque at its feet; Limoux, Vasiley, Montsegur, Guilhelm, and others, similarly French or Germanic in origin. Briefly, I wondered if Vasiley's family tree extended into the modern age, and if Mathias the art dealer had had any connection to this place.

I pushed my musings aside and finished my assessment of the chamber. Amongst all of the Renaissance-grandeur, one feature looked out of place; behind each statue was a chain, stretching from floor to ceiling. Whether by magic or miracle, the iron gleamed as though it had been forged yesterday, without a trace of rust.

Tick-tock. My time was running out depressingly fast.

Each knight is standing in his own channel, Maggie noted, as I felt her rise to the forefront of my mind. The statues were designed to slide back and forth from the circle's centre point. The chains are the interface, but you still need to know which knights to move, the order to move them, which ones to leave alone...

There! I interrupted. The torch's narrow beam had fallen onto the chamber's far wall, where a scene was wrought in Bas Relief. Two knights stood partnered in a classic *en-garde* position, their swords raised and crossed at the tips. The knight on the left was crowned with a large Roman numeral 'L', whilst his partner was named 'V'. There was an inscription between them, and the letters had been overlaid with shining gold.

FRATRIBUS COLLATES IANUAE PATENT

The brothers reunited see the gates thrown open, Maggie translated.

My air alarm beeped. Five minutes.

I tried not to panic as I swam another circuit of the statues. L and V? Was it a reference to the Lux Veritatis, or the knights themselves? Only two of the knights had names beginning with either L or V.

More in the hope than the expectation, I dove at Limoux's chain and hauled down with all my strength.

To my delight, the statue of Limoux began grinding along its channel, towards the circle's centre. A few moments later, Vasiley's statue joined him. The tips of their swords crossed, touching each other.

In total silence, the swords began sparkling with blue light. In less than five seconds, they had grown too bright to be seen - casting a pink glow through my eyelids even with my hand raised as a shield. I would have sworn that nothing, short of ground zero at an H-bomb testing site, could have shone so brightly.

The explosion proved me wrong.

I felt the tremors and darted to the side, avoiding the thump and grumble of huge chunks of masonry tumbling through the water. For a terrifying instant, I thought I'd been blinded. Then the purple-scarlet blotches began to fade, and I could just make out the feeble glow of my torch. After the photonic holocaust, the beam seemed as dim as a lit cigarette. Nevertheless, it was enough to show me a newly-blasted hole in the roof.

With nineteen seconds of air remaining, I broke the water's surface. Relief vied with joy as I pulled off mouthpiece and goggles. My torch sputtered and died, as though realising that its task was over, but in no time I had hauled myself out onto dry land and snapped a couple of emergency flares to keep me going.

By their wan yellow light, I stripped out of the wet suit and pulled on my normal clothes. I wolfed down a couple of high-energy bars (swimming always leaves me famished), while taking a quick stock of my gear and supplies. It felt good to have weapons holstered at my side again. Before I moved on, I refilled my water bottle from the Vault, tossing in a couple of purification tablets for good measure.

I tried not to dwell on the fact that, unless there was another way out, I was now trapped in the Vault.

“One problem at a time,” I reminded myself. “There’s still a Painting to find first.”

Atta girl, Maggie said. You might try heading for that light over there.

“What light? Wait... how can you see anything? It’s pitch black in here.”

Because I devote more energy to examining the minutiae of your sensory data than you do, she replied reasonably. While you’re busy wondering if Kurtis has found the third Shard yet, I’m triple-checking what your senses are trying to tell you. There’s a lot more information around than you normally take time to analyse, she added, a trifle peevish.

“I’m not thinking about Kurtis,” I lied.

Why are you bothering to hide it? Really, Lara... this is getting tiresome.

“Fine,” I snapped. “I hope he’s alright. There’s little point in me finding the last Painting if he can’t get hold of the Shard to destroy it.”

And...?

It was my turn to sigh. “I just hope he’s alright,” I repeated, stroking the pendant around my neck.

There was indeed a light coming from ahead, but in the stifling darkness I relied more on the flares to guide my way. The cavern floor was uneven and rocky, with treacherous potholes lurking in every dip and shadow. A misstep would mean a twisted ankle at best, and a fall into a bottomless chasm at worst. The air smelt faintly sulphurous, like old parchment.

A few steps later, as I rounded a corner in the cavern, I discovered why.

“Kurtis...” I breathed. “If you could only see this...”

In wonderment, my steps led me through the arched doorway. My expectations had placed the emphasis firmly on the ‘vault’ part of ‘Vault of Trophies’, but nothing about the place obeyed such pedestrian notions.

There was an apple wood fire crackling cheerfully in its grate at the far end of the room, filling the air with subtle-sweet fragrance. The

moth's-wing flutter of candlelight from a dozen candelabras felt welcoming after the long darkness. Gargoyles with angelic faces peered down at me from atop rafters and buttresses of age-blackened oak, on a scene seemingly plucked from a fourteenth-century castle.

Books were everywhere, arranged on mahogany shelves that reached almost to the ceiling, from grand tomes bound in flaking scarlet or green leather, to tiny volumes wrapped in layers of Chinese silk. There were piles of scrolls, all neatly tied with faded purple ribbons, next to stacks of loose parchment weighted down with obscure brass instruments; the dust-dry papery smell sent tingles down my spine, making me itch to explore the secrets they contained.

But the Vault wasn't just a repository of knowledge. Tattered war-banners hung from the ceiling, overshadowing the weaponry displayed wherever there was a spare inch of wall. Maces and morning-stars, longswords and battle axes hung alongside enamelled shields bearing the Lux Veritatis crest. The candlelight gleamed along the killing edges, and sparkled off polished suits of armour standing guard at the end of each shelf. Each knight wore a surcoat of royal crimson trimmed with ermine, with the symbol of the Lux Veritatis stitched across the breast in gilt thread. Their gauntleted hands were crossed upon the pommels of longswords of *flambard* design - each one a work of the blacksmith's art. The jewels from a single hilt could have ransomed Richard the Lionheart, Saladin, Charlemagne or all three put together.

That tapestry, Maggie murmured, the one opposite the fireplace - it's identical to the painting Carvier had in her office. The crucified man, the hood, the castle in the background... every detail is the same.

"Carvier was good at her job," I said softly. "Why else would the great Werner Von Croy ask for her help in researching the Obscura Paintings?"

He always chose the best of everything. Now, let's wrap up this mission and find the last Painting. I know it's cosy in here, but Kurtis is probably getting bored waiting for us.

I nodded.

The last feature of note in the room awaited my inspection - an oak

table, long enough to seat eight fully-armoured knights. I tip-toed closer, peering around the single high-backed chair, and drew back hastily at the sight of its occupant.

The man had been dead a long time. Only his bones remained - the jaw hanging slackly and head turned aside, as though he had just nodded off to sleep one night and never awakened. The remains of velvet robes, heavily embroidered, clung to his withered frame, and a golden crucifix peeped from around his neck.

Cautiously, I holstered my gun.

"It looks like he died in the middle of his studies," I said, rummaging through the objects laid out before him; a pewter goblet and stacks of books, a half-burned candle and the rusted remains of a sword. The man's hand rested upon an open book whose pages crawled with sketches, annotated in Latin; *De Nephili Corporis Fabrica*, I read, swallowing distaste at the outlandish subject matter.

Now there's an artist who enjoyed mixing work and pleasure, Maggie said. *What do you think he was - an opium addict or just plain crazy?*

"I'm hoping it's the former," I replied, dragging my gaze away from the images. "Those... things... aren't creatures I want to encounter in real life."

Indeed, they are rather- stop! Go back. The pages are raised slightly in the middle, can't you see?

She was right. My eyes couldn't tell, but my fingers could. Beneath the layers of crackling, tissue-thin parchment was an object, hard and unyielding.

My heart thumped faster as I drew out my knife, and used the tip to slide the pages apart.

There, under the layers of ancient camouflage, nestled in a custom-cut recess like a priceless jewel, lay the fifth and final Obscura Painting.

Chapter 40

My hands were shaking.

It would have taken thieves days to go through this room - never knowing that what they sought lay right under their noses. The skeleton's eye sockets flickered in the firelight, as though the man was winking at me from across the centuries.

With great care, I levered the Painting out and blew to remove the dust. The scene had been painted in oils, with the figure of Death leaning over the shoulder of an unsuspecting blond man clad in scarlet. Like its companion from the Louvre, it was painted on a wooden base with an ornately-carved frame, and fitted easily into my palm.

I felt a pang of empathy for poor Boromir: It was indeed a strange fate that so much could depend on so small a thing.

Congratulations! It's ours. Now... a small matter of escaping this place?

Sighing, I zipped up my pack with the Painting tucked inside. "I'm open to ideas, Maggie."

I was on the verge of giving up waiting when the suggestion came: *Well... how long can you hold your breath?*

Cursing, I paced over and leaned against the fireplace, staring into the flames. The homely crackling would have soothed me under any other circumstances.

Well, we did find the Painting, Maggie ventured. Let's not be too down-hearted.

“Maggie, unless you know a way of turning that Painting into an aqualung, it’s not going to do us much good,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “Come on, Lara... You’ve got yourself out of impossible situations before.”

To be sure. It’s good to hear you haven’t forgotten that fact. I had the dizzying sensation of being slapped in the face. *So, now that you’ve finished moping, you can pay attention to the fireplace.*

“What the- Fireplace? What about it?” I asked sharply, resenting the phantom pain across my cheek. “It’s lit, but so are the candles... Maggie, this *always* happens to us. You already know my theory about lighting fixtures inside previously undiscovered tombs. I’ve explained it in some detail.”

Then have you also noticed that there are no logs on the fire?

I drew back.

The flames danced in thin air, with nothing physically in the grate for them to feed from. The heat felt real enough, though.

“Magic,” I curled my lip. “That’s *cheating*.”

Magic, science... eventually they all boil down to the same thing. We’ve already seen that the Lux Veritatis have some supernatural knowledge, insomuch as they employ reanimation curses. Crafting ever-lasting flames can’t be much harder than that. And speaking of guardians, I’m a little surprised our friend at the table hasn’t woken up for a chat-

“Just a minute, Maggie,” I interrupted, crouching down by the grate. “There’s something here I can’t make out. Can you see anything?”

My eyes started watering as my subconscious took control. She had been correct in pointing out the deficit between data gathered by my senses and my overall perception. Even when we open our eyes and ‘see’, there is still a frightening amount of information that we miss. That’s what gives optical illusions their power, and why I no longer took anything my eyes told me for granted. They’re too easily deceived by what we *expect* to be in front of us.

The log-less fireplace was a perfect example.

You’re right. There’s a passageway behind the grate. Quite a long one too. An emergency exit?

“Thsssss.”

In an instant I turned, guns drawn. A whisper, like the hiss of escaping steam, came from the skeletal scholar. "Thssss!"

Its fingers clenched, scratching at the place where the Painting had once lain, and its fleshless skull turned in my direction.

"Thsssssss!"

Movement in the corner of my eye resolved itself as the suits of armour lifted their swords, gleaming blood-red in the firelight. Eyeless helms focused on me from every corner of the room. Like men rousing themselves after a long sleep, the Vault's armoured guardians stepped down from their racks and advanced.

Um... sorry about that. Me and my big mouth, huh?

"Not now, Maggie," I sighted on a pair of gauntleted kneecaps, my heart rate rising. The bullets tore through the steel plate with bursts like thunder, but did not slow his progress. His cohorts circled towards me, flanking me with glittering steel. "If you can't help me out, then keep quiet!"

I leapt onto the table as a guardian swung his greatsword - the blade singing as it just missed my belly. I kicked, and sent his helmet flying into the nearest wall with a ringing *clang!* With a dancer's sure-footedness, I tap-danced down the table, avoiding the scholar's grasping claws.

Another sword scythed towards my legs, and empty helmets glared as their owners crowded in to finish me off.

"Shit!" I holstered my guns, knowing they were useless, and took a standing leap onto the nearest bookcase. Dust and paper slithered and slid as I hauled myself to the top, and made a grab at one of the display halberds.

It was heavier than I'd expected - six feet of mature oak, topped with a hooked steel axe used for dragging hapless men from battlements and slicing them open from groin to jaw. Twisting under my load, I dropped awkwardly to the ground but kept my footing.

"Come on, just try it!" I snarled, swinging my new friend in wide arcs. There was no need to worry about technique. The blade decapitated two guardians and toppled three more on its first swing. Another sent a whole suit of gilded armour crashing into the far wall - as noisy as a crate of horseshoes being hit by a train.

I levelled my weapon, panting in triumph. Armour lay where it had fallen, transformed from animated automata to scattered museum pieces. I felt myself grin, fierce in victory, until I heard the dry hiss once more.

The scholar had risen and stood with his back to the fireplace - a ghastly silhouette with eyes that bored straight into mine while the flames rose higher and higher. A bony finger pointed in my direction, and beckoned.

"Thssssssss!"

From every corner of the room, pieces of armour skittered and rolled; gauntlets and vambraces, breastplates and gorgets. The shattered remains of my halberd's victims swarmed together like a reverse explosion, and each fragment reassembled with its neighbours with terrifying speed.

In less time than it takes to say '*the Lux Veritatis never play fair*', twelve newly-completed sets of 14th century armour clanked to attention and turned their sightless faces towards me. They drew their swords in perfect unison, and the blades shone like the glint in Death's eye.

"Bloody *hell*," I whispered, and raised the halberd defensively. At this rate, it wouldn't take long for me to expire from exhaustion, while my enemies presumably had several lifetimes' worth of resurrections to spare. "We're supposed to be on the same side, dammit!"

The guardians' skeletal master regarded me steadily, and I swallowed - aware that my only hope of escape lay through him.

My hands tightened around the halberd's shaft. Whether I survived or not, this was going to hurt.

"Buggeration," I muttered, and swung the blade in a wide arc. It smashed through the scholar's ribcage, and cleanly sliced through the rope hanging beside the fireplace.

The scholar shrieked - a sound no living human could reproduce without rusty nails and a blackboard - as the tapestry sagged and collapsed on top of him. A trailing edge caught and toppled a candelabrum - setting a flame that raced across the fabric and began devouring everything in sight. Parchment crisped and spat, and there

were crashes as weapons parted company with the walls. In seconds, rolling heat and smoke had engulfed most of the room, cutting me off from the guardians who were echoing their master's unearthly cries.

I barely heard them above the sound of my own screaming, as fire engulfed me in its blistering arms.

I'd timed my leap carefully, breaking into a forward roll just in front of the grate. The flames swept over me, lashing whips of heat. Before the pain even registered I was falling clear on the other side, and not letting my momentum fail even for an instant.

Tears were pouring down my cheeks, even though I did not cry out. I was too busy gritting my teeth and rolling to extinguish the flames licking through my clothing. The stink of scorched hair filled my nostrils as I trailed wisps of smoke.

Furiously, I struck off from the ruin of the fireplace, heading deeper into the darkness. From behind me came anguished howls and hissing, and a flash of metal whizzed by my elbow.

This time I really did scream. Beyond the wash of hot blood and pain, I felt Maggie rise and force my legs to keep me moving. My heart pounded so hard I thought my chest would burst.

I rounded a corner. The firelight was cut off, leaving me in darkness so complete it made no difference whether my eyes were open or closed. After another minute of crawling, I judged that whatever was behind me had given up the chase. There was no sound other than my own ragged breathing.

By the light of a flare (my third from last), I checked my injuries. Blood shone blackly in the greenish chemical glow, but the scratch wasn't as bad as I'd feared. Most of the pain came from where a hand-sized throwing axe had torn away the bandage covering Topiary-Man's earlier handiwork.

I had blisters on my upper arms and thighs. The rest of me had been tucked out of harm's way when I dived through the fire. Burns are horrible injuries; even small ones hurt out of all proportion. The best I could do in my present circumstances was to slather antiseptic cream onto the worst patches of skin. It smarted worse than rubbing lemon juice into a paper cut, but I bit my tongue and kept at it until the tube was empty. My dwindling first aid supplies yielded up a

single bandage which I wrapped around the gash on my arm, tying the knot with my teeth.

"Ahh..." I whispered, closing my eyes as I let the last of my painkillers take effect. "Good girl."

Don't you dare fall asleep on me, Maggie warned. Come on. I can hear water close by. Maybe it's a way out.

"Wasn't going to sleep," I said, grumbling under my breath. But she had a point. My head throbbed, although I couldn't remember hitting it. I was exhausted; my three days on the run without decent sleep were starting to make themselves felt after all the excitement. A worrying thought gripped me. "You will let me know if I start showing signs of concussion, won't you?"

Absolutely, she assured me.

I gave a reassured nod and lifted the flare, feeling my way along the passageway with my free hand.

I couldn't afford to give in now.

The tunnel narrowed. The silence pressed in, and for an awful second my memories overwhelmed me with claustrophobia. It had been like this beneath the Pyramid, though without the benefit of flares to guide my way. At least they would give me the benefit of seeing where I might end up dying.

Three cheers for positive thinking.

Several long, slow breaths helped me push those fears aside. Two years ago, I'd emerged from the ruins and been reborn, under the gaze of watchful eyes both young and ancient beyond imagining. Thinking of Putai and Salieah gave me strength, and my thoughts turned to the pendant I wore. I'd promised to return it one day, and that promise also lent me the willpower to press on.

And I had the final Painting. Together, Kurtis and I held Eckhardt's demise in our hands.

My hand splashed into cold water. I drew back, startled, and raised the flare - bringing my attention back from its wanderings. The tunnel ended in a mirror-dark pool. It was so deep that my light did not touch the bottom, and so clear that I could count the glints of quartz buried in the walls.

My thoughts inevitably turned back to my aqualung and wet suit,

but they had gone far beyond my reach.

There was no turning back. My only chance lay ahead, one way or another.

“Horus...” I squeezed Salieah’s pendant tightly. “If you’re listening... I have a promise to keep. You wouldn’t want me to break it now, would you?”

And cracking a fresh flare, I dived in.

The cold was absolute and obliterating.

I would have screamed, but for the determination that kept my mouth clamped firmly closed. If you’ve never gone skinny-dipping above the Arctic circle, then you’ve no idea how agonising such immersion can be. My pulse rate shot up to over two hundreds beats a minute, demanding that my lungs be refilled. A thousand knives assaulted my skin, striking through to my major organs. The shock was so intense that I lost all sense of where I was.

But Maggie didn’t.

Come on, legs, let’s get moving! She barked, and through the shambles of awareness, I felt my feet jerk in obedience. *That’s it, down we go... Lift that flare up! There, head left! Come on, calves, what are you complaining about? It’s only water! That’s it, keep swimming. You’re doing well, don’t stop now! There’s an opening to your right... Harder!*

My body obeyed her without question. Had I been able to think straight, I would have wondered why she sounded so like my old P.E teacher. The cold passed the point of pain, leaving only the dull warmth of imminent hypothermia. But Maggie’s constant instructions bypassed everything with an electrifying willpower.

The flare’s yellow light seemed to fade, leaving only grey. I was losing my peripheral vision. The tunnel walls caved inwards, and a stabbing pain began pounding beneath my ribcage. The need to breathe was a physical agony. *I’m drowning*, came the thought.

I know it hurts, just keep kicking! There’s a light just ahead! You can make it!

For a few seconds, I was too disorientated to understand, but then I realised that my head had broken the surface and that I was breathing - beautiful, rich breaths that reached right down to my

toes.

My limbs were so heavy, I was content to let myself float. Unbidden, I felt a smile part my lips and heard my own laughter.

Clap, clap. Clap, clap.

“Congratulations, Miss Croft! You are positively Amazonian. That Vault has defeated us for months!”

I whirled, sending up a burst of spray. Eckhardt stood, sneering down at me from a mental gantry. The shadow of Gunderson loomed beside him, as did the furtive bulk of Dr. Muller.

Even from my disadvantaged position, I could tell there was also a figure lying, bound and gagged, at Eckhardt’s feet.

My stomach did a barrel-roll.

It was Kurtis.

Chapter 41

Kurtis.

For the second time in five minutes, I felt my grip on reality slipping. But the reason wasn't lack of oxygen.

It was fury.

For a dizzying instant, I wanted to fly up and wrap my hands around Eckhardt's scrawny throat. Nothing else would have satisfied me except to choke the life from him - to wipe that sadistic leer from his face and see the fire die from his eyes.

Eckhardt seemed to sense my feelings. For the first time I met his gaze directly, and felt sickened to my bones. Even his smoked glasses could not hide the madness in those eyes. Here was a creature so old, and so saturated with its own perversity, that all else that the human man, Pieter Van Eckhardt, had once exemplified, had been consumed. All that remained was a rotting husk - barely able to contain the corruption bloating his spirit from within. The fact that this creature still walked and talked like a human being was pure coincidence.

"Very impressive," he nodded to Gunderson. The bodyguard adjusted a control panel and the chamber filled with the whir of machinery. The water began draining away, and a wire-mesh floor rose under my feet. Realisation struck me; I must have escaped through a side tunnel that linked to more of Eckhardt's excavations.

The lifting mechanism slowed as the mesh became one with the rest of the floor. I quickly assessed my surroundings. The chamber

was easily wide enough to have parked several double-decker buses abreast, and so tall that two or three could have been stacked on top of each other before they reached the ceiling. Ranks of heavy tunnelling machines occupied padlocked niches on the far side of the room. The balcony occupied by Eckhardt's little gang provided a commanding view of proceedings, but the steel ladders that would have provided access were retracted a good twelve feet off the ground.

I felt like a mouse trapped in a bucket, with hungry cats peering in over the sides.

The key was to show no fear. Despite my near-drowning, I could not let my captors see any weakness. My footsteps rang out as I strode over to them, and I slid my hand down, surreptitiously checking my gun. "What do you want, Eckhardt?"

He reached down and caressed Kurtis' cheek, one glance stopping my own hand in its tracks. The message was clear, and I felt my heart thudding.

For the first time, Kurtis stirred. I couldn't see his face, but he obviously recognised Eckhardt. I heard his breathing change to a snarl as he fought the gag, while Eckhardt turned him this way and that, like a museum specimen.

"I'm not interested in you or your friend, Miss Croft," Eckhardt said. Abruptly, he dropped Kurtis and continued in the same dispassionate tone. "Give me the Painting, and you may both leave."

Damn, damn and damn. I bit my tongue hard enough to draw blood. My guns had never felt so tempting. Had I been alone, I wouldn't have hesitated. Whatever else Eckhardt was, he wasn't stupid. Far from it, in fact. He knew - and I didn't know *how* he knew - that I had only one lever at that precise moment, and he wasn't hesitating to pull it.

Kurtis had tilted himself to look at me - his eyes feverish with defiance. It was the worst cliché in all villaindom, to hold the hero's (or heroine's) heart to ransom, but it had *become* a cliché precisely because, nine times out of ten, it worked. I'd vowed never to get involved with this level of scum, but convention - and Eckhardt's love of cruelty - had other ideas.

Damn him.

"What choice do I have?" I spat, and unzipping my pack, threw the Painting with all my strength.

Eckhardt caught it one-handed, without even looking.

"Gunderson," he snapped, "Release Boaz."

The man stepped aside for his master, and then calmly put his boot under Kurtis' flank. I rushed forward and managed to help break his fall, and two seconds with my knife cut through his ropes and gag. His face was livid.

"Dammit, Croft, why didn't you just shoot him?" Kurtis demanded. His consonants were slurred, and he swayed as if drunk; but I could see him fighting to assert his will to stay upright. His right eye squinted through swollen, bruised flesh, and there were ugly red weals around his neck and wrists. *Drugged and beaten*, I thought, grinding my teeth. He held up a warning hand as I stepped closer, but the gesture held more reassurance than hostility.

"You're welcome," I lifted an eyebrow, drawing my guns; fortunately, they didn't seem to be worse off for a short dunking. I noticed Kurtis' own pistol was missing, but he calmly withdrew the metallic disk from beneath his shirt.

Before I could question how his torturers could have missed it, a commotion broke out above us.

"Not you Muller, you useless piece of dross!" Eckhardt barked. "You failed me, too!"

I heard the scientist pleading, babbling about loyalty, but then Gunderson's shadow eclipsed the gantry and Muller came tumbling down. He had no clue how to land properly, and the snap of shattering bone burst through the chamber like a gunshot. He rolled, howling in agony, and clasped at his ankle that was bent almost at a right angle.

Kurtis met my eye.

"Come on, I'll give you a boost!"

My confusion must have shown, but there was no time to argue. Eckhardt had already disappeared.

I holstered my guns and put my foot into Kurtis' cupped hands. Just then, a metallic screeching erupted on the far wall. A doorway was

rising - its winch mechanism sounding like it hadn't been used in years.

Something stirred in the darkness beyond.

"This old colleague of mine was once a human," Eckhardt's disembodied voice chuckled. The echoes ran around the room, taunting us. "Before she displeased me, of course. It seems that close acquaintanceship with Muller's specimens creates some interesting effects. Study her well."

The shadows came together, forming a solid mass more than twice the height of a man. I had the impression of too many legs on a vast, bloated body, with the knees arching high above its abdomen, like a giant, corpulent spider.

The last time I'd seen Boaz, she had been halfway down the gullet of a cross between a mutant lamprey eel and a subway train. If that was what Eckhardt meant by 'close acquaintance', then I was determined to keep as far away as possible.

On ponderous steps the thing advanced, click-clacking its mandibles. I felt Kurtis stiffen, and we both backed off several metres. I gulped, my guns suddenly seeming puny and infantile.

Kurtis traded me a look, and without needing to be told twice I braced against his shoulders.

Muller's shriek of terror jarred through my calm, but I was already launching off Kurtis' hand with all my strength. The ridiculousness of his plan slammed home to me; there was simply no way I would reach the balcony from such a manoeuvre. But no sooner had the thought occurred to me, when I felt a force like a giant hand scoop me up and carry my momentum eight metres *straight up*. In shock, I managed to grab the railings and scramble to safety, wincing from fresh bruises.

Behind me, Kurtis lowered his hand and winked.

Wow.

"Kurtis, come on!"

Infuriatingly, he calmly pulled the two Periapt Shards from his pocket and tossed them up to me. "Here, take these. You'll need them."

For a moment, I was speechless. Then Muller's screams jolted me

back. The beast had reached him and had pinned him down under one enormous claw. The wounded scientist's shrieking grew more frantic - becoming drowned out by even more horrific noises - and I turned away, my stomach rebelling.

Kurtis, however, stood as though carved from granite. He looked so small and vulnerable, still with blood trickling down his cheek, but his face betrayed no hint of fear.

"These things are your speciality, Kurtis!" I cursed, stuffing the cool blades into my pack. "Get your ass up here!"

"I can't self-jump," he replied matter-of-factly. "Don't worry about me and Ugly. Go on, Croft - you're wasting time! I'll catch you up."

"You'd better!" I shouted, backing away. For a moment, I contemplated throwing down the Viper, but the last thing I wanted was to face Eckhardt with just my pistols. Besides, Kurtis might have seemed defenceless, but with that disk on his side, he was probably better-equipped than I was.

I drew my guns, and raced down the gantry to the exit. My quarry couldn't have got far.

Chapter 42

You'd better! was her last remark, before her footsteps pounded into the distance.

No, I hadn't imagined it.

Miss Hard-Boiled herself, *concerned* about me?

It had been a long, long time since anyone had given a damn about my wellbeing. The fact that the remark was coming from a woman who had held a gun to my head only a few hours before only added to the irony.

Mind you, she might at least have left me that machine gun of hers behind. Considering our foes, I probably needed it more than she did right now.

My annoyance gave way to satisfaction. At least Eckhardt wouldn't have everything going his way with Lara around. The woman had a talent for causing disruption.

She was also a survivor.

As are you, my companion whispered. My fingers stroked the metal, sharing mutual reassurance.

I was practically kicking myself for getting captured. It should have been obvious I was walking into a trap - from the moment the guards had ambushed me out in the corridor, to the amateurish way they'd allowed me to advance. While I was picking them off - darting from one point of cover to the next - a *second* team had snuck up under my guard. The Chirugai had been my only warning, but even so, we were two foes against twenty. My realisation that they all wore rebreather

masks came too late; by then, the gas had already started to overcome me.

I'd recognised the leader, Gunderson, from dossiers on the Deep Web that I'd trawled up during my extra-legal years between mercenary outfits. Though I'd not known him in person, he had lived up to his reputation. The man was as cold as a Wisconsin winter. He barely even looked at me as he dragged my half-drugged ass along by my ankle, and bound me with ropes as easily as if I'd weighed five kilos instead of my actual eighty-five. As has been noted, I'm not a wimpy guy, but Gunderson had made me feel like a seven-year-old standing next to a Hummer.

My ribs ached from the beatings, and from being jostled around whilst dangling from Gunderson's shoulders. The drugged gas had made me too groggy to put up more than token resistance. Weird tastes and phantom sensations had come and gone, dulling my perception of time. I'd only been vaguely aware of Karel's presence as they had talked over me and confiscated my gun. Demonstrating more than even its usual good sense, the Chirugai had hidden itself under my shirt, in the hollow of my back where it sat quiet as a mouse. I'd felt its regret and helplessness at not having the means to carry me out of there by itself.

And then Eckhardt had arrived. I sensed him as a sickness in my head that overruled every other sensation. Being so close to my father's killer and yet unable to even think for the pain had been a physical and emotional torture. The Proto's presence in the ether had been as hungry and urgent as a saw-toothed dagger. But Eckhardt was something else entirely - a corruption so absolute that it writhed and burrowed like maggots through my spirit. It was like being buried alive in a tide of rot and filth; even my normal senses had been overwhelmed to the point of agony. Despite the fog of drug-induced torpor, I was screaming as he probed me with instruments, and hands, and the drenching oblivion of his will.

At that moment, I realised how stupid I'd been to think I could take on Eckhardt alone. He'd already butchered his way through the ranks of Lux Veritatis adepts - all of whom had had decades of experience to drawn upon. A punk like me expecting to match mind-on-mind

against this creature was suddenly laughable, and it had been the height of arrogance for me to imagine otherwise. Imprisoning him for all those centuries had only pushed him further into the depths of insanity, and it was from there that his gruesome efficiency drew its strength.

He had picked my mind apart piece by piece - easily dismantling my defences and laughing at my rage. The physical assaults on my body were meaningless compared to the way he stripped away my thoughts. His amusement became almost whimsical as I felt him bring forth my memories of my nineteen-year-old self, and the way I had vowed to never get involved in the Shadow War. As a young man, I had fled the conflict and cursed my gifts - the inheritance of the Sight that had seemed a freakish burden rather than an asset to be treasured.

It was that very inheritance that made me so vulnerable to Eckhardt's influence, and that would have saved me had I not abandoned my training. My final kernel of strength was almost gone when Eckhardt showed me what he had done to my father.

My memory became a little... unreliable after that.

But then a guard had appeared to say that Lara had been sighted, and my torturer had - reluctantly - withdrawn.

Bless her.

My only wish now was that I'd have the chance to thank her one day.

The beast, Boaz, finally finished its grisly work and noticed my presence. If I was to stand even a chance of surviving, I'd have to get my scrambled head back together - fast. I backed off, careful not to let myself be cornered, and observed my opponent. Her carapace was mottled brown, with a toadstool-speckled underbelly and legs that were black as polished jet. Her hind end sported a bulbous tail studded with metre-long spines.

In a sickening rush, I realised that I had absolutely no idea what manner of creature this was, and I didn't have a clue how to kill her.

The head tilted, clacking its pincers, and suddenly I had no time to note anything except how quickly I could dodge. Her jaws opened, peeling apart like the skin of rotten fruit, and the sickly-sweet stench

increased. I had just enough warning to get clear before the thing spat a globule of phlegm right where I'd been standing. In horror, I watched as the green goo hissed - dissolving the concrete wall as if it were hot water on sugar.

Enraged at having missed, the beast bellowed. I didn't hang around.

I was always good at running. In the Legion, I ran for at least eight kilometres a day - four on my days off. My training had placed more emphasis on endurance over sprinting, but even so, I could really move when the situation demanded it. My head was already clearing, and the exercise helped to purge the last of the drugs from my system.

Running also helped push aside the memories; I was damned if I was going to let Eckhardt beat me this way.

We resorted to a game of cat-and-mouse - quickly establishing that Boaz's bulk made her considerably slower on the turns than on a straight line. I could dart in and out of her field of view with ease, and her reactions were sluggish. Nevertheless, I couldn't get overconfident. After only two or three minutes, the walls and floor had become pock-marked with liquefied holes, and the beast didn't seem even close to running out of juice.

Her tail narrowly missed me killing me with a dead-on swipe, and I decided to change tactics. She was losing patience, growing angrier every second. I'd mapped out her weaknesses. If I left it any longer, I would start to tire, and she obviously had a lot more in the way of reserves than I did.

After all, she'd just eaten a decent meal.

I flung my hand out in a ripping gesture, and the nearest ladder exploded away from the wall, taking part of the gantry with it. Grunting with effort, I managed to wrench off a long strut just as the beast lumbered over - her jaws opening like giant bolt cutters to slice me in half.

But then she reared up, squealing in pain, as I jammed the metal through the back of her throat. A twist, and the metal snapped in two. I hit the deck and scrambled clear with about three feet of steel still clutched in my fist. Her pincers went berserk trying to pull the strut free, but it was lodged too deeply and she couldn't get a grip.

I didn't wait, but freed the Chirugai just as I took a flying leap onto her back. Her armour felt like rubber-coated roof tiles. Before she could react, I'd plunged the metal spike into a chink between the armour plates. I pulled, and wrenched the plates apart just as the Chirugai sailed past me like a golden cannonball and plunged into quivering, custard-coloured flesh.

The beast screamed and I tumbled down, landing heavily on my shoulder.

"Umph!" I gasped, and flung myself aside just as a clawed foot stabbed down where my stomach had been a nanosecond before. Ducking, I crawled through the tangle of thrashing limbs and managed to get clear.

Sweat ran into my eyes. Some of the corrosive slime had dripped onto my shirt - burning holes through the cloth but fortunately missing the skin. Panting and triumphant, I watched until the beast finished its twitching, arched its back, and fell still.

A flap of torn exoskeleton burst open, and the Chirugai flew out in a shower of light - shedding gore like water off a hot skillet. I couldn't help but smile as it returned to my hand, radiating smugness.

"That's how we kill monsters," I spat on the massive corpse. Dead, it could be a foam-rubber creation from Stan Winston's special effects studio, although there wasn't a rating in the world that would sanction it being used in a movie.

It was over.

I'd won.

Christ, I could have murdered a beer.

Fear. Caution.

I stopped in my tracks - the Chirugai suddenly growing hot in my hand. "What's wrong?"

Then I heard it; a chittering, squelching hiss. A lump of dread settled in my stomach as I turned. The corpse rocked and its bloated abdomen bulged outwards - reminding me all too vividly of a certain breakfast scene aboard the *Nostromo*.

Yeah, and that had turned out so well.

"Damn, why aren't these things ever simple?" I muttered, wishing I had another metal pole to hand. But the beast had rolled over as it

died, and crushed the mangled ladder beneath its bulk.

The hiss suddenly climbed to a screech of fury. As I watched in horror, a bone-white spear - longer than my arm and jointed like a mantis' claw - burst out of the beast's underside. It was followed by a human-like hand, whose fingers scrabbled away slices of dead flesh as *something* wriggled and tore its way from the beast's innards.

The claw made a lunging stab - punching through the concrete floor like Styrofoam - and used the leverage to drag its body through the bloody opening. I swallowed hard, fighting the urge to vomit. A head - covered in raven-black hair and slick with gore - looked up at me and screamed. Its wasp-like body staggered, and fragile-looking, insectile wings unfolded from its shoulders. The horror's eyes were glittering, compound globes and the mouth, when it opened, sprouted rows of needle teeth and a prehensile tongue thick with slime.

I took a step back, then another. *Lux Veritatis mecum*. Breathe. Relax. *Lux Veritatis mecum*. Calmness settled around me like the folds of a warm cloak - aided by the presence in my hand. This was nothing I couldn't handle. I'd already killed two monsters today - on top of Eckhardt's spiritual flaying. This two-bit reject from *The Fly* wasn't about to spoil my day.

"Yeah, pleased to meet you, too-" I said, as suddenly it pounced, claws extended. In a blur I brought my hand up, and the Chirugai's gold met slimy bone.

"Eeeeeeeaaaaaaaaahhh!" the creature snapped at my face. Its tongue lolled, covering me with saliva. I felt my arms beginning to sag. Damn, but it was *strong*.

"Christ!" I gritted my teeth. The creature's hot breath washed over me, ranker than a sewer, and it leaned its body into mine, increasing the pressure.

At the last moment, I deliberately let my leg give way as the Chirugai ignited in fury. The creature toppled forwards, sailing harmlessly overhead, and howled like a baby as it clutched at the stump where its hand had been.

"Gah!" I scrambled as it lunged with that wicked long claw. Its face was incapable of expression, but I decided it looked even more pissed

than before.

It shrieked, “Eeeeeaaaaaaaahhh!” and suddenly I felt it - a powerful stirring in the air, like the sensation before a thunderstorm. The hairs on my arms leapt to attention.

“Oh shi-” I began, but was cut off by the bolt of freaking *lightning* that the creature flung at me from its outstretched claw.

Let me tell you, it hurt. A lot. When I was ten, I’d accidentally gotten caught on an electrified fence while crossing between cattle fields on a friend’s farm. The charge had been relatively minor, but I still had the burn marks to show for it.

This was the same sensation multiplied by two or three times. I tried to scream, but my muscles had completely seized up. The smell of singed hair filled my nose, but for a wild moment my brain registered it as cotton candy, instead. A jolt like that screws up the whole nervous system, top to bottom.

It lasted barely a second, but totally floored me. Gasping, I realised that I’d been holding the Chirugai, and that its embossed designs were now burned forever onto my palm.

For a wild moment, I thanked God I’d not gotten that piercing Alexis had suggested.

“Bitch!” I coughed. Yeah, my lungs hurt too. The creature had climbed to its feet and was stalking me, prowling in slow circles around her victim.

Victim be damned. She was going to die.

It happened so fast that I barely registered it. One second she was frozen, sizing me up as I staggered upright. The next, she was springing towards me - sweeping her claw around to take my head off.

It takes a special kind of crazy to stand your ground against demonic mosquito-women. I ducked the arc of her claw and stabbed out with my right fist - the one still holding the Chirugai - and immediately felt it sink through layers of hot, yielding flesh.

“Eeeeeaaaassssssshhhhhh!”

“Aagh!” I grunted, but resolutely tightened my grip. The creature twisted and fought, but nothing could disengage her. I turned my face aside - pointlessly trying to avoid the blood already drenching

my entire front - but gradually, the creature's motions subsided. Its body slumped as I fought - and lost - the battle to stay upright.

Groaning, I collapsed to my knees, bearing the dying beast to the ground. I felt numbed - too focused on her heart thumping in my grasp to care about the rest of the world. It seemed to take forever, but slowly, the beats grew fainter and the fountain of blood dwindled to a trickle.

I was shaking, my victory slowly taking shape as I pulled my hand away. The body fell back - limp as a piece of butcher's meat.

I'd... done it. For the second time.

Suddenly, I laughed. It couldn't be helped. My whole body looked like it'd been spray-coated scarlet, and stank worse than an abattoir in high summer. I could have passed for a monster myself, with my teeth gleaming white through the smeared gore as I laughed and grinned and laughed some more at the sheer joy of being alive.

The core of my being - battered but intact after Eckhardt's ravages - swelled until I thought I would burst. Three abominations in one day. Even my father would have been impressed.

Unsteadily, I got to my feet. It hurt when I tried to scry further than a couple of metres, and my body was one big ball of pain. But Lara still needed me, and I wouldn't be satisfied with my work until I saw Eckhardt's body with my own eyes.

My boots made suck-sucking sounds as I staggered through the bloody puddles. A quick check confirmed that two of the ladders were still intact, and could be used to reach the balcony. I smiled, imagining Lara's reaction when I turned up.

It happened then - so gently that I almost didn't feel it.

In confusion, I turned - wondering why the Chirugai had suddenly blazed into life without my consent. It flashed across my vision like a vengeful comet, until I saw the shattered, blood-soaked remains that had crawled up behind me. A severed head with glittering compound eyes went bouncing off into the shadows.

Only then did I notice the metre-long claw sticking through my belly.

Huh, I thought, that's... not good.

The Chirugai sailed overhead as the chamber rolled upwards. Or

perhaps it was me falling. *It's okay*, I wanted to say, but my mouth refused to work properly. Alexis might have called it an improvement, the bastard.

Details slid away as I tried to pin them down, but the floor felt so deliciously comfortable - even with my cheek cushioned in still-warm blood. And I was so damned tired...

You'd better be! The memory of Lara's voice yelled in my ear, as in a rush of regret, it all came back to me.

Damn... was my last thought, as the darkness rushed up and claimed me with open arms.

Chapter 43

A stitch wrenched at my cracked ribs, and doubt nipped my heels, but I didn't dare slow my pursuit.

The corridor forked for the fifth time. As always, I instinctively chose the path that headed down. Bare rock replaced concrete and tiles, and the lights dwindled to lonely bulbs every ten metres or so. Every shadow was a figure lurking in wait, but I passed them all by - my guns darting and dismissing every false enemy almost as soon as it appeared.

My main concern was not Eckhardt himself, but the horde of unknowns that lay between us - most especially, Gunderson and his men. I had no illusions about my plan; taking on Eckhardt might be just as dangerous as walking into a dragon's lair, but at least he was one foe instead of many. I wasn't in any shape to face the entire Strahov security force in a head-on battle.

It lifted my spirits to remember that, in point of fact, I *had* actually walked into a real dragon's lair once, and survived. On the other hand, getting caught in a crossfire with thirty or forty expectant guardsmen - particularly in these narrow, twisting tunnels - would be disappointingly fatal.

There was a jumble of different footprints in the dust; the most recent had been made by high-quality leather Oxfords, with a brisk but deliberate stride. *Eckhardt*, I thought, and quickened my step. To my unspoken relief, I saw no signs of Gunderson. A man built to his scale would be wearing custom-fitted army boots and leave footprints

the size of golf bunkers.

The air grew warmer. I felt sweat collect on my upper lip and stick to my back. I wondered just how far I had come under the streets of Prague. Kurtis' words came back to me, as vividly as if he was whispering them into my ear:

Eckhardt guards the Shard in his old alchemy lab, in the lower regions.

He must be stabbed with all three Shards.

Eckhardt's blessed - or cursed - with some of the Nephilim's immortality.

The Shards disrupt that power - make him mortal and vulnerable.

With furious effort, I pushed my thoughts about Kurtis away from my main goal - becoming one with my predatory instincts. Worrying was for later. Now, all my focus was on finding that third Shard and visiting its justice upon Eckhardt.

Without warning, the tunnel opened into a roughly-hewn chasm. I only just arrested my momentum in time to keep from skidding over the edge and into fathomless black. Gravel skittered and pattered into the depths. If I squinted, I could just make out the suggestion of a reddish glow far below; the faint whiff of crushed and molten rock did not increase my desire to hop down and investigate. Genuine torches dribbled burning pitch and threw shadows like cavorting demons amongst the crags and outcrops.

On the opposite side, some twenty metres away, two statues guarded a stone arch with the Strahov's snarling lion symbol carved upon its doorway. The statues' right hands were turned towards me in a gesture both of warding and defiance, and their faces were shrouded within the grim depths of their hoods.

A rope bridge - barely wide enough for one person - was the only means of crossing.

I suppose a simple 'no entry' sign would have been far too déclassé, Maggie sniffed.

"Just stay with me," I whispered, my heart fluttering madly.

The bridge swayed, sagging almost a foot before stabilising. Maggie blurted, *Crap!* and we winced as the hempen ropes audibly creaked with the strain. Clearly, Eckhardt did not expect or encourage regular

visitors. Gods only knew how the likes of Gunderson ever made it safely across - if he ever merited an invitation. The ropes weren't actually all that old, and I had the suspicious feeling that the bridge was replaced on a regular basis.

A third stone figure gazed down disapprovingly at me as - with considerable relief - I stepped back onto solid ground. The smoke and fumes had hidden him from view until I stood in the shadow of the doorway. His torso emerged from above the lintel like a ghost caught and petrified whilst swooping through the wall, and its chiselled features reminded me not a little of Eckhardt himself.

Perhaps he had it commissioned when he was younger, Maggie suggested. Nothing beats giving the old ego a stroke every time you pass by.

"Perhaps," I murmured, and tapped at the door - jerking my hand away in shock as a thread of molten metal suddenly split the lion carving in two. The edges glowed red, orange and finally white, filling the air with smoke.

As smoothly as if they were on oiled bearings, the two halves of the doorway rolled apart - their edges still glowing with residual heat.

Huh, I thought. Show-off.

You know, it's no shame to admit that you're afraid, Maggie said. All this wise-cracking cynicism isn't fooling me.

"Oh, I'm afraid, alright," I peered into the darkness, but nothing was lurking in wait. "But since when has that stopped me?"

So far, never, she replied happily. Just remember - you won't be alone down there. We're all with you, Lara.

The warmth of a desert wind embraced me, and a bleak smile touched my lips as I clicked the safeties off my weapons. "Then let's get this over with."

*

Down I went.

The passageway corkscrewed deeper and deeper. Astringent, chemical smells wafted from the darkness, caressing the clanking, whirring whispers of machinery.

I had reached Eckhardt's laboratory.

It wasn't a vast room, but what it lacked in size, it more than made up for in macabre eccentricity. Shelves rose to the ceiling and were bowed under the weight of enough books to replenish the Vault of Trophies three times over. Long trestle tables had been set up with the kind of equipment usually associated with the more intellectual class of drug chemist. Vials glittered and crucibles glowed over flickering, pink-tinged flames; retorts of every shape and size bubbled and frothed, adding even more fumes to the pall that hung over the entire room like a threatening storm-head. I found myself feeling woozy after only a few breaths, and gave the benches a wide berth - only to run into even more graphic smells. A butcher's table held disturbingly-human body parts - neatly dissected, labelled, and jostling for space amid piles of annotated journals. The air was alive with the buzzing of flies. I tried not to dwell on the St Andrew's cross rack mounted on the wall, or the recent bloodstains (and worse) clogging the nearby drain.

The layout seemed to obey Eckhardt's rambling whimsy, rather than any logical methodology. A fragile, spun-glass distillation system sat next to a blacksmith's forge, complete with wrought-iron tongs, pokers and... well, you don't want to know. My hair crackled as I walked past a bench laden with steam-driven Tesla-coils, connected to a shallow tray of acid. In the tray, frothing and spitting, was an ingot of pure gold. An entire wall was given over to age-blackened wooden panels, dials and levers that might have been the Renaissance's answer to a personal computer. A medieval-style gibbet swung forlornly in one corner; its skeletal occupant was over-equipped for the human race by three heads, five arms and a tail.

I was so engrossed with the bizarreness of it all that I nearly tripped over my own feet. Some idiot must have thought cutting long grooves in the floor added to the aesthetic feng shui. The twenty-first century had obviously given Eckhardt plenty of new toys to play with, but where the hell was the *Shard*?

I searched the benches and drew a blank; nor was it cunningly concealed amongst the racks of books. Concern began bubbling within me, until I discovered the annex at the back of the chamber. Eckhardt - or a luckless servant - had taken the trouble to excavate

most of the floor, and line the resulting pit with thick ceramic tiles.

The liquid that filled it to the brim rippled sluggishly - an ugly, oily brown that was horribly familiar.

"Acid," I pursed my lips and drew back to the relative safety of the lab. Frustration gnawed at my insides. "Sulphuric acid. And the bloody Shard is right at the bloody bottom."

Well, we knew Eckhardt was devious, Maggie pointed out as I paced restlessly. *But he must have the means to access the Shard whenever he wants. He's a brilliant alchemist, after all.*

There was a bloodcurdling scream.

Let me set the record straight. Ravenous wolves don't worry me. Crocodiles run and hide when I'm around, and man-eating mutant mummies would rather throw themselves into lava than pick a fight with me when I'm in a bad mood.

Nevertheless, I am only human - with the exactly the same nervous system as every other human on the planet. Certain sounds don't bother to check in with our brains when we hear them, but instead jump straight to the department marked *What the hell was that?!*

I dashed over to the scream's source - a narrow doorway on the room's far wall. Cautiously, I nudged it open, and was bathed in bluish-purple light. There were steps leading down, presumably to a sub-basement. I drew my gun just as another cry rent the air.

"COORIRI, OMBRES! DORMITOR EXSUSCITARE!"

"Maggie... I need that Shard, and I need it *now*."

Well, that's stating the obvious, Maggie said. *Did you have any ideas?*

Time paused as I took stock of the situation. I was bone-tired and starving; it had been days since I'd slept properly or eaten a square meal. Apart from my trusty tranquiliser gun, my main weapons were dangerously low on ammunition. My clothes were torn and - in places - singed black with soot. The gash on my upper arm was still bleeding - in stubborn defiance of the fact that I'd run out of bandages. The painkillers I'd wolfed down earlier were starting to wear off, and my fractured ribs were making their displeasure abundantly clear. On top of all that, I had over a dozen other cuts, burns and grazes that - in all the chaos of the past three days - I'd not had time to attend to. Even my ankle was starting to act up - I must

have twisted it when I tripped over, stupid fool...

A broad smile suddenly broke across my face. I holstered my guns.

“Only one,” I said.

Chapter 44

“COORIRI, OMBRES, AD DOMINUM NOSTRUM CONGRUERE!”

Shivering and biting my lip, I limped towards the circle of light. The ceiling, and the speaker, were so far above me as to be nearly invisible. But I could see him - a tiny figure in grey, reaching a gloved hand beseechingly up to a contraption hanging before him.

Electricity crackled, crisping the air with ozone. I smelt charred hair and scorched insulation. Every few seconds, huge arcs would flash across the divide from glove to machine, and scurry across its surface like ants defending their nest.

Eckhardt's cries were a chant, growing to a crescendo.

“UOCARET NEPHILIM ARCESSERE!”

Instinctively, I shielded my eyes. Machine and insane operator were suddenly enveloped in a massive discharge - the combined lightning strikes of an entire storm concentrated into the space of a few heartbeats. The machine roared - almost matching Eckhardt in volume - as it lowered its burden in a cradle of cables.

And I saw it.

Pearlescent skin - on a body that might have been the skeleton of an angel - glowed and seemed to radiate back every photon of light in the room. Extraordinarily long limbs lent it a preternatural beauty even as it hung, limp and passive, within the sparkling restraints. The clawed hands twitched as the electricity played along its nervous system - like a child dreaming in its sleep.

There were giants in the Earth in those days... Maggie whispered,

awestruck.

The Sleeper.

And Eckhardt, his face transported with ecstasy as he held his gloved hand aloft, screamed with elation - a flash of dancing bronze in his grip.

I sighed, and took aim.

Plink!

Damn ricochets, I cursed. Natla was never this awkward.

The dazzling light show faded a little, but continued to flicker in Eckhardt's eyes as he looked down and spotted me.

Amazingly, he smiled.

"Still alive, Miss Croft? You *are* resilient."

"And impatient!" I shouted, swaying with effort.

"But still only a mortal, I see," Eckhardt cocked his head, and began stalking along the gantry towards me. There were several of them winding all the way to the top of the vertiginous chamber, enclosing the room and the Sleeper's casket in criss-crossing, conflicted shadows. Before I could take another step, Eckhardt flicked a disdainful hand at a switch, and the ladders to each walkway retracted out of my reach. I was trapped on the ground, and when I looked up, Eckhardt had gone. Only his voice remained. "And I'm afraid over the decades I've killed more mortals like you than I can remember."

"And stole their body parts, like a cheap grave robber!" I spun round, gun in hand, but there was nothing to aim at.

"As I shall now take yours."

Bang! My shot rang out, but the whisper that had been beside my ear was now gone.

"To wake this *thing*?" I spat. "You are grotesque!"

"Only my great arts can cause the Higher Race to flourish again!" came the snarl. I was ready - or so I thought. My bullet once again hit only thin air and concrete.

I could see where Muller had borrowed his penchant for overblown language, and for talking when he should be killing. As a famous author once pointed out, a bad guy will gloat over the moment of the kill, whereas a good guy will simply kill you. In that sense, I was glad

to be facing one of the bad guys. I sighed, and reloaded my pistol.

"So," I said, clicking the fresh magazine into place. "I guess it's up to me to stop you, then."

The voice turned scornful. "The Lux Veritatis tried for centuries to destroy me, and I hunted down and killed every last one of them. *You are nothing to me!*"

My heart clenched, trying not to think of the man I had left to Boaz's mercy. I felt the weight of Salieah's pendant and drew on my courage.

Very slowly, I withdrew the final Periapt Shard from my pocket and held it up.

Whether it was the Sleeper or Eckhardt's presence - or because all three Shards were finally reunited - the blade in my hand began to shine with a halo as pure and as beautiful as moonlight. It washed over my spirit like a cool balm, leaving me infused with resolution.

"The *Shards!*"

"Scary, huh?" I smiled, and looked up into Eckhardt's incredulous eyes. He gripped the railing - his confusion battling with rage.

"Really, Eckhardt, if you wanted to keep the Shard safe, you shouldn't have left the key laying around for anyone to use!"

Well, Maggie added, by 'key', she means that device taking up most of your lab. You may be a genius at some things, Eckhardt, but at others you're a blundering idiot. Anyone could have gotten the Shard if they sat down and used their brain for five minutes!

My ego was too tired to feel insulted; besides, she was right. Logic had demanded that Eckhardt *had* to have a way of gaining access to the Shard whenever he wanted; the simplest solution would be to neutralise the acid, and that meant having just the right formula within easy reach.

Enter Eckhardt's Renaissance computer, and the pre-cut channels in the floor that I'd - quite literally - stumbled across in my search for a solution.

I'm no chemical engineer, but fortunately Eckhardt suffered from the same laziness that affects even the most brilliant minds. Rather than whip up the formula from scratch each time, he had thoughtfully left the right stuff ready for me to dispense with the flick

of a few switches. Within moments, a silvery, rippling stuff had dripped out of the machine and along the pre-cut channels scored into the floor - moving with peculiar grace somewhere between a liquid and vapour. I watched, fascinated, until the formula reached the annexe's pit, whereupon the acid had started frothing and churning like a cauldron full of demons. Crackling lights flashed in the depths, and unfathomable smells clouded the chamber. But almost as quickly, the violence had subsided, allowing me to approach.

The only thing remaining in the pit had been crystal-clear, unadulterated, and one-hundred-percent-safe water.

In the silence, I matched Eckhardt's glare. My back straightened and I lost the fake limp.

Eckhardt sneered, and vaulted the railing. He landed on both feet - after a fourteen-metre fall - and regarded me without so much as a hair out of place.

"It is my destiny to breed Hell on Earth," he whispered, advancing slowly. Suddenly he wasn't a frail old man, but a demon growing taller with every step. I could see now that his gloved hand was sheathed in a corona of deathly hues - sickly-emerald, congealed yellows and lurid, mesmeric purple - that shone and writhed between his fingers like ribbons of radioactive smoke. A bronze device sat coiled in his grip, but its form kept changing, defying my senses; its extremities kept vanishing and reappearing at random - sometimes passing right *through* solid flesh. I had the disconcerting feeling that it was not quite of this reality, and that the languid, sensuous motion was somehow *alive*.

The Black Alchemist smiled - the Sanglyph's emanations casting his cheekbones and teeth into skull-like relief. If I'd thought he was mad before, I could now practically *feel* his insanity - a nauseous pressure building in my temples, making me break out in sweat. His willpower made the very air vibrate with every perfectly-enunciated syllable. "You cannot stop the Nephilim's ascension, and you cannot kill me. I am *immortal*!"

I suddenly remembered Luddick's body, cooked beyond all recognition, and Werner's stomach gushing blood onto the Persian

rug as he lay dead in my arms.

Um...

I backed up a step, crouching defensively - my pistol in one hand, and a Shard in the other. Its light pulsed, sending a shiver down my spine.

You'll see me again one day.

You promise?

I promise.

My mind closed around the memory like a lifeline, and I was lifted along by a chain of images surging around me, pushing aside my doubts. I remembered Putai's irascible tutelage and Salieah giggling at my stories. I felt the jolting motion of crossing the desert on Ahmak, the evil-tempered camel, and the simple joy of paddling my bare feet in an oasis. I remembered the way Putai had combed and oiled my hair, and the smell of charcoal as she sat drumming in Horus' temple, helping to guide me in my visions.

The mnemonic avalanche became more recent; I felt my heart falter at seeing Werner's face again, and the awe of standing in the Hall of Seasons. I remembered the way Kurtis had held me - even as he stole the Painting that I'd sweated, bled and fought for - and the deep-seated trust inspired by his cocky half-smile. The smell of Janice's cigarette and Bouchard's expensive cigars blended with the atmosphere of a Parisian morning, and I heard the cold crunch of tyres on snow as Luddick pulled his car up in the shadow of the Strahov.

A billion moments had led me to this - every one of them precious beyond measure.

I smiled.

"D'you know," I said, looking up into Eckhardt's eyes. "It's going to be a real pleasure to shut you up."

Chapter 45

With hindsight, one probably shouldn't make sarcastic remarks in front of half-demonic evil geniuses; it only pisses them off.

A force like a wrecking ball slugged me in the stomach. Had I been standing next to a pillar - or struck the far wall with my head or back - it would have killed me instantly. Instead, I tucked into a ball and tumbled base over apex for about a dozen metres. My ribs screamed in red-hot protest - but I was alive to hear them.

"Ugh!" I grunted, and blinked through the fog of stars just in time to see the shape looming above me, and dodge away from the *crunch* of smashed concrete. Dust cascaded from Eckhardt's glove as he pulled it back, taking aim once more.

Pure chance prompted me to swerve left instead of right. I scrambled out of reach - almost falling over from the tremors as Eckhardt's fist crashed down again, right where my ribcage would have been. My ears were ringing and every breath felt like swallowing broken glass.

Gods, he was *fast*.

Sidestepping several metres, I took aim with the Viper - counting on the extra half-second to increase my accuracy. The gun chattered, on full automatic, and shredded across his immaculately-tailored suit.

Holes appeared in the wall behind him, but Eckhardt merely jerked at the impacts. Blood sprayed in random gouts from the gaping tears in his flesh, but he looked up, seemingly disinterested. I ceased firing, and in the abrupt silence gazed in disbelief as the blood reversed its

direction - soaking back through the holes like water being sucked up a straw.

It seemed as though mere seconds went by. Thoughtfully, he picked at the now-clean rips in his clothes and focused his gaze once more upon me. He smiled horribly.

"Tell me, Miss Croft," he said. "How many bullets does that gun hold?"

Crap.

There was no warning but inevitability. I knew he was lunging for me even before he spread his gloved hand wide - his fingers become eviscerating claws. Any self-respecting killing machine would have done the same in his position, and it was exactly what I was hoping for. Fresh pain jarred up through my arm and I buckled, gritting my teeth against the terrible momentum.

Eckhardt let out a bellow that shook the stalactite-festooned ceiling, and I dropped into a roll, eager for some distance between us. Silvery-blue light wreathed him like arcs of possessive lightning, and lifted his thrashing body several feet off the ground. The Shard's milky-white hilt protruded from his right pectoral, just below his shoulder.

Gotcha! Maggie crowed.

But something was wrong. The light suddenly changed - flaring sickly yellow fingers through the Shard's cobalt nimbus. I backed off, uncertainty running through me.

With a wrenching cry, Eckhardt's body spasmed and began floating back to earth. His face contorted as he wrestled back control, until he could stand, teeth bared in hatred. The area around the blade was peeling away - blackening before my eyes like a speeded-up necrosis - but the pain only seemed to make him angrier. He seemed unable to touch the Shard, or make any attempt to pull it free. He raised his hand, and I saw that the Sanglyph was still held tightly in his grasp.

"Die," he hissed as the light gathered.

And my world dissolved in fire.

I had my eyes closed. *This is the end*, I thought, as flames roared over me in a blazing shroud. Part of me was relieved to feel no pain - apart, of course, from the injuries I had carried with me into the

chamber.

It's actually quite a nice feeling, I thought, puzzled. Really, it wasn't much worse than when I'd travelled across the desert with Putai. The sensation transported me back to the open dunes, with the Harmattan wind howling like the breath of a furnace, and the Sun God's sacred hawks circling on the thermals high above me.

And there, in the arms of Eckhardt's deadly holocaust, I heard their triumphant cries.

Lara.

Horus? My body must be dying for them to sound so close. Putai?

Peace, Lara. Open your eyes. Your battle is not over yet.

When I did, I almost laughed in shock. Eckhardt was snarling - his whole frame twisted with effort as he poured forth wave after wave of oily flames from the Sanglyph. The noise was incredible, and the air sizzled and shimmered with heat. Yet, as I lifted my arms, I felt it as nothing more than a pleasant breeze that caressed my limbs and ruffled through my hair.

How...? I asked.

This creature is not unlike my uncle, spoke the voice within me - Putai's wryness blending with Horus' chocolate-rich baritone as one harmonious whole. *The Black Alchemist knows only cold, and the sweet rot of death. Fire is my servant, and will not obey him even if he should demand so for a thousand years.*

Then he can transmute the Sanglyph's energy into what he wants - whatever he wants - but its fire can't hurt me?

Even so. You saved my land from my uncle's wrath, and were reborn in the desert's heart, Lara. We protect you now, as we swore to. A debt must be paid, must it not?

Eckhardt's mouth twisted in fury, and dropped his hand. The inferno died, leaving behind dribbling nodules of melted stone - a perfect, soot-charred circle more than ten metres across, with me completely unharmed at its centre.

It's just not his day, is it? Maggie smiled at his expression. *Yeah, just try that again, you dried-up old God-wannabe!*

Unfortunately, Eckhardt was a quick learner. Even without being privy to my conversation, he must have realised that mere

pyrotechnics weren't going to finish me off.

Before even Maggie could give me warning, he knelt and plunged his hand into the ground. The air stirred, crackling with unseen forces. My knees buckled and I was slammed to the floor - so hard and so painfully I thought for a wild moment I'd been crushed by a train. The gantries groaned and squeaked, making me think the entire chamber was going to come crashing down around our ears.

Eckhardt was laughing - manic, delirious laughter. The cackling made me want to scream, but no matter how much I struggled, I could not break free. A deadly pressure was building in my chest, making each breath shallower than the last, and I felt my heart quiver with the strain.

Gravity! Maggie yelled. *He's playing with the damn gravity!*

Wonderful to know! I shot back. The pressure kept increasing - as though I was trapped under a mechanical roller - and every cavity in my body felt like it was being crumpled like a drinks can.

Just as the scarlet tide claimed my vision, the awful force relented, and I came back to full consciousness in a starburst of pain. I gasped - utterly disorientated - and a shadow fell across me.

"Still only mortal," Eckhardt was saying in his dust-dry voice. His breath smelt of old tombs, and I felt the Sanglyph's baleful aura brush my cheek as his other hand enclosed my throat. Dimly, the part of my brain still attached to reality remembered; *he's a villain, and villains like to play with their food. Good guys are the ones who kill cleanly.*

"You have remarkable vitality, Miss Croft - almost as much as a Lux Veritatis. I will harvest you slowly and when I'm done, I will give your body to the Nephilim as tribute," his face twisted into a dreadful leer. "It will be hungry after such a *long* sleep."

My hand closed on a sliver of ice.

What can I say?

I'm one of the good guys.

Eckhardt tumbled backwards as though struck by a charging bull - with the Shard sunk deep in the flesh above his navel. A glacial wind whipped at his clothes as the Shard's light engulfed him once again, wrenching inhuman, tormented howls from his throat. My whole body felt weak and dizzy as I struggled to my feet. Automatically, my

hand went for my pistol - reassuring with its familiar weight.

It took longer for him to wrestle free this time. He tried calling on the Sanglyph as a shield, but the device's throbbing darkness kept getting battered down by the power of the light which held him. It was a battle between two forms - one silver-bright and cold, and the other bloated with an urgent, searing hunger that nothing could fulfil.

Just when I thought that neither could gain the ascendancy, Eckhardt suddenly tumbled, landing awkwardly on all fours. The warring conflagration faded, leaving only a broken old man. Decay was spreading across his belly in a rippling tide, and he crawled away from me with one hand clutching his wound - limping and panting like an animal. Blackened flesh writhed and fell through his fingers like maggots dripping off a corpse.

Some small part of me - perhaps the little girl that had played in the Royal Botanic Gardens - urged me to end it quickly. But the part that had seen the harm he had inflicted whispered for me to let him rot slowly from within. It was the least he deserved. The Lux Veritatis had imprisoned him in a pit for five centuries, and the prospect of leaving him this way for another half-millennium seized me with sudden, intense attraction.

Eckhardt was whimpering. His glasses had fallen off, and his once-smouldering red eyes were dull black, like a fire that has been dampened and forgotten. The final Shard gleamed as I drew it from my pocket - a blade of burning ice that grew brighter with every step I took towards the wounded monster. He must have recognised me, even through the fog of his own pain, for his face turned fearful, perhaps for the first time in his miserable life.

Yes, feel that, you monster, I thought. This is what you've made your victims feel, time after time. How many have you killed, Eckhardt? Or did you never bother to keep count? How many lives have you destroyed and would have ruined with your Great Work?

I felt my lips parting - every breath seeming to intensify the pleasure of seeing him so helpless. Faces blurred across my vision - Werner and Carvier, Rennes and even Bouchard. Kurtis' lingered most intensely of all - the man who had lost his own father to this

monster but hadn't given up hope of revenge. Every gasp of agony from the creature at my feet was a gift to his victims, in this century and those before it. Eckhardt had thrown everything he had at me, but in the end, I was the one left standing - with the power to prolong his agony a year for every second of misery he had brought to those I cared about.

But suddenly another thought burst into my mind.

You might not realise when your desire for justice turns into need for revenge. You may choose either, but vengeance will not help you to forgive Von Croy for abandoning you.

"How will I know the difference?"

You will know. Your healing is going well. By the time the choice comes, you will know.

Grief and revulsion like nothing I had ever felt before shattered my thoughts, almost making my drop the Shard. With difficulty, I mastered my trembling, and looked on Eckhardt with fresh eyes.

All I saw was an old man, wretched and pathetic - the perfect mirror of my future if I gave into those desires.

Would anyone be willing, or able, to give me *my* death-blow if I became the monster in his place?

Unbidden, my thoughts turned to Kurtis.

"Enough," I whispered, and raised the Shard to strike. As I did, Eckhardt's mouth lifted in a triumphant smile.

And someone grabbed my wrist from behind.

Chapter 46

I landed on my back, wrist burning where the Shard was wrenched from my grasp.

In the space of a heartbeat, I trained my pistol on the figure looming over me - the Shard held high and shining in his right hand.

"Karel?!"

The blond-haired man was as expressionless as a block of ice - his gaze even colder than the Shard poised above my heart. I tried to swallow, but couldn't.

There was a sound; a dry, hacking whisper, like the rustle of dead leaves in winter.

Eckhardt was laughing.

"Go on," he chuckled. "Kill her! Kill her!"

Karel's eyes never left mine. And then he whirled, fluid as a snake, and buried the Shard in Eckhardt's forehead.

I was on my feet in an instant, as the old man gave one long, gurgling scream, and then slumped forward. The Shard's light blazed as the flesh around it blackened and disintegrated, falling away from the skull even as the bones became ash.

Something, insubstantial as smoke, fought its way loose from the corpse's mouth, and then vanished with a thin wail far beyond the reach of normal hearing.

Maggie regained her senses first, and shut my mouth for me.

"I knew you'd find the third Shard," Karel said quietly, gazing down at his dead master. "He was right; you are... resourceful."

"But why?" I heard myself demand. "You worked for him!"

"No, unknowingly he worked for *me*," Karel smiled, and it was the softest, most gentle smile I'd ever seen outside of a Renaissance painting. "When he tried to kill your friend, I knew his usefulness was ended."

"Will you destroy his work?"

"Of course not! The Great Work must be finished. Eckhardt put so much effort into it, while he lasted. He came so close, until *you* proved why he was no longer needed."

Hang on, something... isn't quite right...

Karel cocked his head, and I hurriedly shushed my inner voice. My thoughts felt fuzzy. "I'm merely offering you the chance to become part of a benign new order in the world. Make no mistake - it is more than Eckhardt planned for you and your kind."

"My... kind?"

His expression clouded with sorrow, giving me a glimpse of something so much older, and so much wiser, than a simple human woman could ever understand. The empathy would have broken my heart, but then he *changed*.

The lawyer's frame rippled and reformed - its contours sharpening and his physique taking on a gaunt, ethereal beauty, elongating till I became almost childlike beside him. His pupils dilated until the eyes were spheres of polished obsidian. Scars - ancient as the fault lines of the earth - crept across his cheeks and forehead, and curled into the depths hidden by his blood-red scarf. I caught a whiff of his scent - a heady, sweet perfume like late-summer flowers. His fingers grew so long that the dove-grey gloves peeled away, revealing skin like polished mother-of-pearl. Only his hair remained the same - the strands so pale and fine as to be mistaken for spider silk.

My breath faltered; he was so beautiful.

"We Nephilim have only ever been trying to *survive*," he said. Even his voice had transformed; its subtle harmonics wove tenderly around my perception in ways that would have made Mozart give up composing there and then. I would have begged him to say anything, then, simply for the pleasure of listening. "Outcasts for millennia, driven to the brink of extinction. What would *you* do, if you were the

last of your race, knowing that you could save them with the help of another, stronger species? And how *grateful* you would be, how well you would *reward* those who helped you..."

Someone shook me roughly, and I realised it was Maggie.

Wake the fuck up, you dolt! Can't you see what he's DOING?

Shocked, I awoke and suddenly saw the scene through Maggie's eyes. Had he tried convincing me with brute force, I would have resisted automatically. But Karel wove a subtler net. His words had been like silken pillows and a goose-down mattress; soft, welcoming, and so awfully tempting to my exhausted, injured body and mind.

It had almost overcome me, and only my subconscious had realised the truth.

"Too... Too many people have *died* for me to trust you," I managed. It was like trying to swim uphill, but I persisted. "Including a good friend."

"Von Croy?" Karel nodded - his expression a perfect mirror of my own grief. "He was... an unfortunate victim of history, Lara. Eckhardt was stupid to have killed him. I've *helped* you all along, both here and in Paris."

And before my eyes, he *changed* again - too quickly for my eye to follow.

A perfect copy of Bouchard flashed me an amiable grin. "Ou else would 'ave told you so much about the Cabal, or the Vault of Trophies, right when you needed to 'ave that information?"

Blink!

Luddick, complete with his coffee-stained shirt, turned to regard Eckhardt's corpse with a sneer. "Who helped you get into the Strahov, and gave you what you needed to defeat security?"

Blink!

Kurtis reached out a hand to me, with the half-smile I liked so much and dark hair falling carelessly across his eyes. "Who helped the last of the Lux Veritatis find his way here in time to help you? And who *protected* him from the Cabal when he left the Louvre with the fourth Painting?"

Blink!

Karel the Nephilim smiled; angelic, hypnotic. "And who has been

watching over your every move, keeping Eckhardt's pets out of your way so that you could succeed? Diverting security, planting information... You can *trust* me, Lara Croft."

"I..." the words died. I felt feverish, like living through a nightmare blending memory and imagination. My all-too-real exhaustion was making me sway on my feet, and Karel's transformations only added to the sense of surrealism. It was too much to absorb, too much to make sense of.

But then something caught my eye - Karel's hand, reaching in a gesture of trust to match his smile. The palm was turned upwards and there, etched deep into the flesh, was a scar; a couple of lines within a circle, nothing special, unless...

I'd seen it before.

Maggie's embracing strength rushed to catch me, even as the memory broke the banks of amnesia and flooded my perception.

I'm tracking five Obscura Paintings for a client...

Get out... get out... of... the ... way...!

The dull pain of concussion. Werner crying. The crash of thunder.

"You located the Painting for me." Eckhardt's whisper, cold as death. "Why have you not retrieved it?"

Werner sobbing. "I... daren't collect it... I-it's too dangerous! B-but she'll be able to!"

A silence, broken at last by Werner's stifled scream. The thud of his body hitting the floor. Then other, more gruesome sounds and the sharp, urgent scent of blood.

There had been the tinkle of glass. Werner's gold-rimmed spectacles had dropped to the ground. A figure had stepped over me - blurry as the raindrops on the window - and paused to brush my hair back with tender fingers.

"You humans break so easily," it had said - his voice soft, almost fatherly.

The memory released its hold, and I was back in the Sleeper's chamber, breathing as hard as though I'd run a marathon.

Goosebumps thrilled along my arms as I tightened my grip on the pistol, levelling it at Karel's face.

"That scar..." I said. "It was you... You killed Von Croy."

Karel's eyes narrowed with pity. "Dear Lara... Is one man's life worth throwing away your future? He left you to *die*."

"He was *human*," I whispered, feeling a tightness in my chest. Hot tears ran down my cheeks, and I laughed like someone who has finally gotten the joke.

And I had.

"Why do you laugh?" Karel's angelic features knotted in puzzlement.

"Because I *forgive* him," I grinned, welcoming my tears when once I would have despised them. "How could I hate someone who had taught me so much? He's a reason why... I'm *me*. Maybe it's a mortal thing - you probably wouldn't understand."

Uh-oh, wrong thing to say.

Glowering, Karel's lips pulled back, exposing pointed teeth. "*Mortal?* I was there when your race still lived in caves and squabbled like rabid dogs for food. If any race deserved to flourish, it was mine! We were the Chosen, the strongest and best of all. Nature does not forgive the *weak*!"

"Maybe not. But Werner was still my friend."

"You're being a *fool*!"

What can I say? She's a sucker for the underdog, Maggie supplied, as I clicked the safety off the pistol.

Karel nodded, and his eyes glistened black and hollow. "So be it."

Chapter 47

The bullets were only a distraction. I already knew Karel would shrug them off as easily as raindrops.

But Karel was not my real target.

He leapt aside from the stream of gunfire, and vanished behind a pillar with a speed that made Eckhardt's acrobatics look like a stegosaurus plodding through a swamp.

I dived towards the corpse; well, if you could still call it that. The Shards had reduced the Black Alchemist to a man-shaped pile of ash that yielded to my fingers like dense smoke. In less than a second, I had found all three Shards and stuffed them into my pack.

There was something else under there, too.

If this doesn't work, I'll say it was your idea, Maggie said, as I shook the Monstrum's glove free of soot. I hesitated only a moment before slipping it on my right hand. It came up past my elbow and stank, like pushing my hand into a vat of rotting meat.

Steady, girl. Now hurry!

"Gah!" I heaved, but managed to manoeuvre the Sanglyph until I could grasp it tightly. The metal reacted like a spooked cobra, and within moments had wound its tendrils into the very fabric of the glove. My nausea vanished like a switch being thrown. Instead, I felt the kind of euphoria normally associated with firing up my Harley V-Rod, with all its power thrumming at my fingertips.

A sizzling bolt of energy flashed across my vision. It was only when the green glow faded that I realised I'd thrown my hand out

instinctively, and that the deadly energy had dissipated harmlessly through the glove. It acted like a lightning rod, leaving me unhurt but flushed with adrenaline.

If anything, the Sanglyph felt even more potent then before.

Blimey.

Karel loomed into view, hovering in a halo of that same greenish-blue energy. His angelic countenance was no less beautiful, no less perfect, but the hatred in his eyes revealed it for the mask it was. Underneath lurked something corrupt, and older than time.

Another bolt sizzled past my ear. Unlike Eckhardt, Karel wasn't one to waste effort with melodramatic gloating.

Just my luck.

I parried the blows as he pressed his attack. Every time I deflected with the glove, I felt the Sanglyph's hunger swell. The more energy it absorbed, the more it *wanted* to absorb. It was a craving in my mind like an aching thirst, with each fresh infusion a tiny sip that left me wanting more.

It didn't take long for me to realise I was sweating, and my heart was thumping with near-orgasmic intensity.

No wonder Eckhardt went mad.

Snap out of it! Maggie commanded, as yet another energy bolt nearly brought one of the gantries crashing down on my head. *You're going to get yourself killed! Get to the Sleeper! End this, now!*

Her voice cut through the exhilaration with all the tact of an ice cube slipping down my back. Muzzily, I stumbled across to the fallen gantry and began to climb the twisted metal. The razor-edges cut my left hand, and the sudden pain was electrifying. The Sanglyph was even feeding off *my* emotions.

Inspiration struck.

"Hey, Karel!" I faced him as he rounded a pillar, a mad gleam in my eye. The crackling arc was loosed before he even realised what I was doing, which was concentrating like I'd never concentrated before.

Think of a happy thought... any happy little thought.

After all, if Eckhardt could do it, why not me?

The Sanglyph flared as it gulped down the energy - no mere deflection this time, but the entire bolt. My thoughts coalesced and I

felt myself hurtling upwards as if fired from a cannon.

Let me tell you, gravity is overrated.

"Yahhhhh!" I crowed. *WhEEEEEEEEEE!* screamed Maggie, as we flew right up into the nest of wiring beside the Sleeper. The whole edifice crackled with energy discharges - any one of which could have stopped my heart. But the Sanglyph shone in my hand like the eye of the devil, and channelled every deadly bolt before it could do me harm. Its manic light glowed brighter every second as its appetite swelled to titanic proportions.

My hair stood on end as I beheld the Sleeper. Its jaw hung slack and its wide-open, unblinking eyes were the colour of rubies. My nose was full of the stink of ozone overlaid by another smell that had no place in a mad scientist's laboratory.

It was the smell of sunlight and hibiscus flowers, fresh-cut summer grasses and wide horizons.

This creature - *no*, I corrected, this *person* - had walked the Earth in the garden of its youth. Perhaps he had had family - angelic like their Fallen fathers, or human like the women who had borne them. Maybe he, too, had known friendships and betrayals, love and grief, as he lived under the open sky and felt the sun's warmth on his skin. And yet here we were, tangled in a nightmare of technology and death, uncounted fathoms beneath the ground. Neither of us would see the sunlight again.

My thoughts went to Salieah.

Without hesitation, I plunged the Sanglyph into the Sleeper's fragile heart, and tugged my arm free of the glove. I felt the power leave me like the surf drawing back from the beach.

"NOOOOOO!" Karel's scream echoed from below me, but I was already falling, tumbling the twenty-something metres to the concrete and steel below.

It didn't bother me that I was already dead - I was going to be taking Karel with me.

After all, the waves only draw back ahead of a tsunami.

A cable caught me around the waist - almost knocking the wind from me - but then my hands were reaching out to grab it, to ride it down like some mad stunt double.

Maggie? I thought, even as my subconscious tucked my body up to land in an ankle-saving roll just as the rumbling overcame my hearing.

Yeah, like I'm going to let you die now?! She yelled, but I was already running - my legs pumping to increase the distance even as the whole chamber exploded in dazzling light.

The noise hit me seconds later. Over the scream of metal and blasts of exploding concrete, I thought I heard someone cry out in despair.

Something hard struck my head, and I knew no more.

Epilogue

Ow.

A lump the size of a tennis ball throbbed in the dark. In the silence, I gradually realised the lump was attached to my head, and the realisation brought with it a whole explosion of new pains. I was trapped, with thousands of tons of rubble between me and the Egyptian desert...

Ouch. Ow. And...

"I'm alive?"

Lara? You still with me? Lara? Lara!

"Wuzifl?" I spat out blood and, after a moment of painful fumbling, a tooth as well. "Maggie?"

Memories replayed through my mind; the Sanglyph wrapped around my arm like a parasitic, golden snake; the chamber collapsing, pulled inwards by the irresistible forces I'd unleashed; Karel howling, clawing futilely at passing masonry; the Sleeper exploding from the energies within - its blank eyes snapping open for one terrible instant of full consciousness before oblivion.

The ground rushing up to claim me.

The doorway.

The steps.

The lab.

Who else? She snapped, but even she sounded relieved. You're okay. That bruise on your skull isn't bleeding. Thank the gods; I half-thought I'd lost you. Spending the rest of my life alone in here would get really

boring.

I laughed, but then my heart suddenly contracted. "Kurtis!"

Yeah, I thought he'd be down here by now too, Maggie frowned, a hint of worry in her voice. *Come on, we'd better hurry - I don't know how much damage that blast did to the foundations.*

Nothing would satisfy me until I saw that Kurtis was okay. The ground continued to tremble as I made my way back to where I'd left him to fight Boaz. Each new twist in the tunnel had me hoping to run into him coming the other way, only to be disappointed. Every step made me wince with fresh pains; my body was running on the dregs of its reserves, but at that moment I simply did not care.

My thoughts circled and fought each other.

He stalked me for days.

He tried to protect me.

He made me look like an amateur.

He could have killed me, but didn't.

He...

At last the corridors ended, and I was back in Eckhardt's grisly idea of an arena.

He wasn't there.

The reek of death was overpowering, but the lump that had risen in my throat was even worse. Somebody had let down the ladders. Simply climbing down them was agonising, but I hardly noticed.

I limped around Boaz's corpse, alarming even in death, until I reached her *second* corpse. The bodies oozed acid-green ichor, and looked to have died with more than even my usual quota of violence.

Close by was another slick of spilled gore - lots of it, and definitely human.

"No..." I felt my fists clench, my chest constricting. *He can't be dead! After all we've been through, he just can't!*

My knees were hot and sticky where I knelt in the blood. In a detached sort of way, I was aware of my triumph crumbling, falling apart from the inside. Even Maggie seemed too shocked to offer a witty remark.

The unfairness struck me so hard I suddenly wanted to scream. Even I knew it was a childish reaction - one brought on as much by

exhaustion and injury as disappointment - and a small part acknowledged that Kurtis had at least killed his foes before he died. But right then and there, I just didn't give a damn.

My hand touched something hidden in the blood. Numbly, I drew out the disk-shaped device Kurtis had always carried at his side - the device that had almost taken my head off, and that had been shining and alive the last time I saw it.

Now it was dead, too.

Without thinking, I slipped my fingers through the grip.

A surge went up my arm and I blanched, almost dropping it. With a *hiss*, the blood dissolved, revealing living gold beneath. I felt it tugging me to my feet, and a voice that wasn't a voice at all spoke in the depths of my mind.

Greetings, Lara Croft.

That... wasn't me, Maggie said, her voice hollow, but I knew that already. This wasn't just words in my head, but an entirely separate *presence*. There was none of the Sanglyph's sinister hunger; if anything, it was the polar opposite, a force that *gave* power rather than took it. Just holding it was like gulping down three litres of black coffee after a week-long massage, and even my cracked ribs started to feel a little better.

The disk sparkled in my grasp, and drew my arm around almost in a full circle to face a yawning doorway on the arena's opposite wall.

Urgency. Desire. Friendship?

My sense of wonder relaxed, and the blades retracted.

"He's alive?"

Hope. Help us?

I don't know what it is, but I like it, Maggie said.

Soothing ripples tingled through my arm, accompanied by a sense of gentle laughter - and understanding.

"Chirugai," I whispered. "Its name is Chirugai. And we've got to hurry."

Full of hope, I slipped the disk into a loop at my belt, and strode into the darkness.