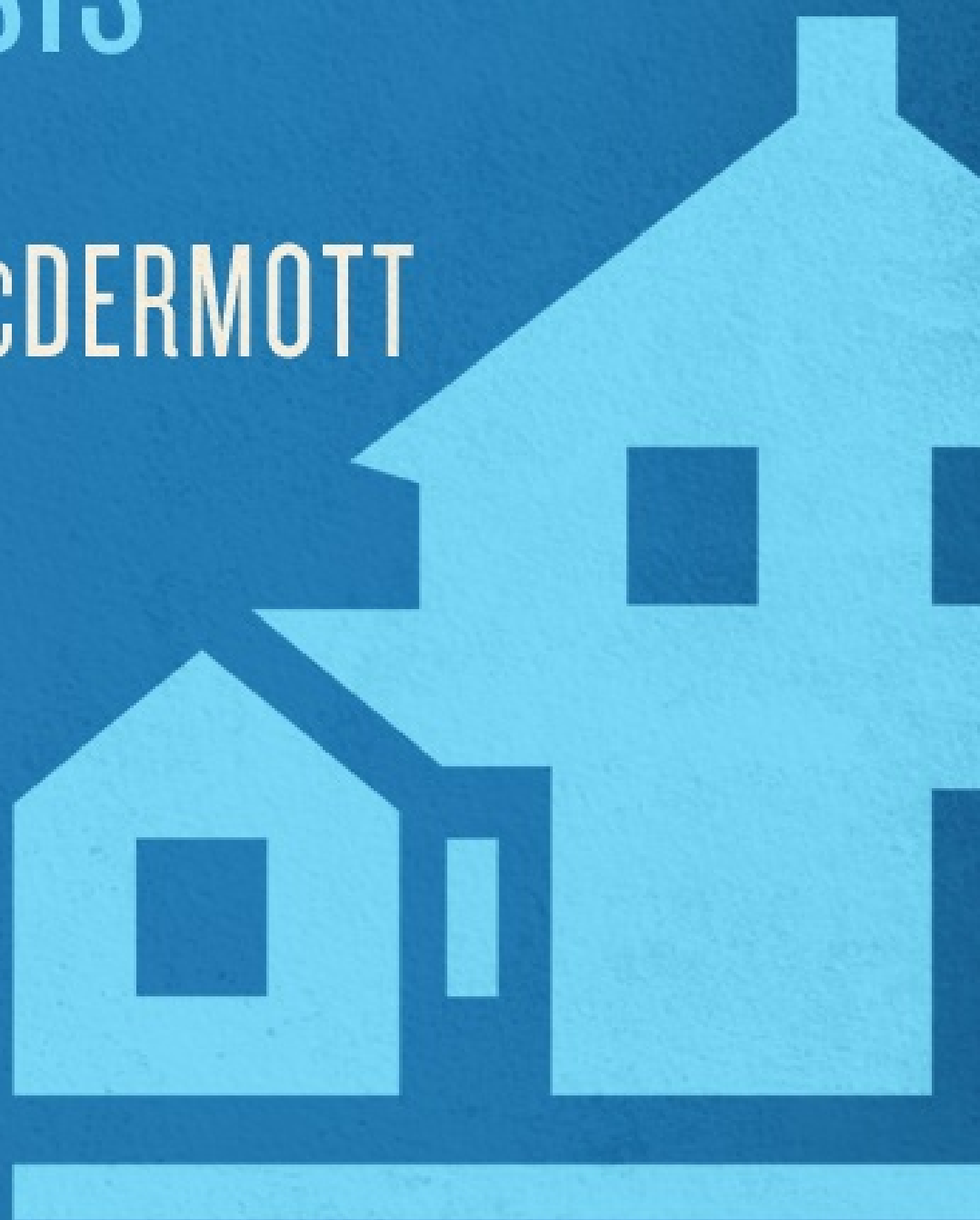


THE COVENANT OF GENESIS

ANDY McDERMOTT



BY ANDY MCDERMOTT

Featuring Nina Wilde and Eddie Chase

The Hunt for Atlantis

The Tomb of Hercules

The Secret of Excalibur

The Covenant of Genesis

The Pyramid of Doom

The Sacred Vault

Empire of Gold

Return to Atlantis

The Valhalla Prophecy

Kingdom of Darkness

Stand-Alone Novel

The Shadow Protocol

THE
Covenant
OF
Genesis

Andy McDermott



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Contents

Cover
Other Books by This Author
Title Page
Dedication
Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Epilogue
Copyright

Oman

For all that the Arabian desert was traditionally supposed to be devoid of life, there was far too much of it for Mark Hyung's liking. A cloud of flies had been hovering in wait as he left his tent just after dawn, and now, three hours later, they had seemingly called in every other bug within a ten-mile radius.

He muttered an obscenity and stopped, removing his Oakleys and swatting at his face. The flies briefly retreated, but they would resume their dive-bombing soon enough. Not for the first time, he cursed himself for volunteering to come to this awful place.

"Got a problem there, Mr. Hyung?" said Muldoon with barely concealed contempt, pausing in his ascent of the steepening slope. The bearlike Nevadan was a thirty-year veteran of the oil exploration business, tanned and leathery and swaggering. Mark knew Muldoon saw him as just some skinny fresh-out-of-college Korean kid from California, and rated him little higher than the desert flies.

"No problem at all, Mr. Muldoon," Mark replied, replacing his sunglasses and taking out a water bottle. He took several deep swigs, then splashed some on his hand and tilted his head forward to wipe the back of his neck.

Something on the ground caught his attention, and he crouched for a better look. The object was familiar, yet so out of place it took him a moment to identify it: a seashell, a fractal spiral chipped and scuffed by weather and time. "Have you seen this?"

"Yeah," said Muldoon dismissively. "Find 'em all over. This used to be a beach, once. Sea level was higher than it is now."

"Really?" Mark was familiar with the concept of sea level changes due to climatic shift, but until now the concept had been only abstract. "How long ago?"

"I dunno; hundred thousand years ago, hundred and fifty." Muldoon gestured at the low bluff ahead, their destination. "This woulda been a nice resort spot. Cave-girls in the raw." He chuckled lecherously.

Mark held in a sigh. No point making his relations with the old-guard oilman any worse. Instead, he returned the bottle to his backpack. "Shall we go?"

Sweating in the hundred-degree heat, they trudged across the sand for another half mile, finally stopping near the base of the bluff. Muldoon used a GPS handset to check their position, then spent a further minute confirming it with a map and compass as Mark watched impatiently. "The satellites are accurate to within a hundred feet, you know," he finally said.

"I'll trust my eyes and a map over any computer," Muldoon growled.

"Well, that's why we're here, isn't it? To prove that computers can do a better job than anybody's eyes."

"Cheaper-ass job, you mean," Muldoon muttered. He folded up the map. "This is it. We're

two thousand yards from the spike camp, just like you wanted.”

Mark looked back. Barely visible through the rippling heat haze were the tents and transmitter mast of their encampment. Two other teams had set out at the same time, also heading for points a mile and a quarter distant, to form an equilateral triangle with the camp at the center. “In that case,” he said, taking quiet relish in his moment of authority, “you better get started, hadn’t you?”

* * *

It took Muldoon an hour to prepare the explosive charge.

“No way this’ll be powerful enough,” he said as he lowered the metal cylinder containing fifteen pounds of dynamite into the hole he’d dug. “You need a couple hundred pounds, at least. Shit, you’ll be lucky if any of the other stations even hear it.”

“Which is the whole point of the experiment,” Mark reminded him. He had set up his own equipment a safe distance away: a battery-powered radio transmitter-receiver, connected to a metal tube containing a microphone. “Proving that you *don’t* need a ton of explosives or a drilling rig or hundreds of geophones. All the simulations say this will be more than enough to make a detailed reflection map.”

“Simulations?” Muldoon almost hissed the word. “Ain’t no match for experience. And I’m telling you, the only results you’ll get will be fuzz.”

Mark tapped his laptop. “You would—without my software. But with it, four geophones would be enough to map the whole area. Scale it up, Braxoil will be able to cover the entire Arabian Peninsula in under a year with just a couple of dozen men.”

That was hyperbole, and both men knew it, but Muldoon’s disgusted expression still said it all. Traditional oil surveys were massive affairs involving hundreds or even thousands of men, laboriously traversing vast areas to set up huge grids of microphones that would pick up the faint sonar echoes of explosive sound waves bouncing off geological features deep underground. Mark’s software, on the other hand, let the computer do the work: from just four geophones, three at the points of the triangle and the fourth in the center, it could analyze the results to produce a 3-D subterranean map within minutes. Hence Muldoon’s displeasure: long, labor-intensive—and very well-paid—surveys would be replaced by much smaller, faster, and cheaper operations. Not so good for the men who would have to find a new line of work, but great for Braxoil’s bottom line.

If it worked. As Muldoon had said, everything was based on simulations; this would be the first proper field test. There were hundreds of variables that could screw things up.

Muldoon carefully inserted the detonator into the cylinder, then moved back. “Okay, set.”

“How far back should we stand?” Mark asked. “Behind the radio?”

Muldoon let out a mocking laugh. “You stand there if you want, Mr. Hyung—I won’t stop you. Me, I’m gonna go all the way up there!” He indicated the top of the bluff.

Mark’s own laugh was more nervous. “I’ll, ah ... defer to your experience.”

The two men climbed the hillside. The bluff wasn’t tall, but on the plain at the southern edge of the vast desert wasteland called the Rub’ al-Khali—in English, the Empty Quarter—

stood out like a beacon. As they climbed, Muldoon's walkie-talkie squawked with two messages. The other teams had also finished planting their explosives.

Everything was ready.

After reaching the top, Mark gulped down more water, then opened his laptop. His computer was linked wirelessly to the unit at the foot of the bluff, which in turn was communicating with the main base station at the camp and, through it, the other two teams. The experiment depended on all three explosive charges detonating at precisely the same moment; any lack of synchronization would throw off the timing of the arrival of the reflected sonar waves at the four geophones, distorting the geological data or, worse, rendering it too vague for the computer to analyze. "Okay, then," he said, his mouth drier than ever. "We're ready. Countdown from ten seconds begins ... now."

He pressed a key. A timer on the screen began to tick down.

Muldoon relayed this through his radio, then dropped to a crouch. "Mr. Hyung," he said, "you might want to put down the computer."

"Why?"

"Cause you can't cover both ears with only one hand!" He clapped both palms to his head. Mark got his point and hurriedly fell to his knees, putting down the laptop and jamming his fingers into his ears.

The charge exploded, the noise overpowering even with his eardrums protected: a single bass drumbeat deep in his chest cavity. The ground beneath him jolted. He had involuntarily closed his eyes; when he opened them again, he saw a plume of smoke rising from the base of the bluff. In the distance, two more eruptions rose above the shimmering haze in seemingly slow motion. After a few seconds, the thunderclaps of the other blasts reached him.

A fine rain of dust and tiny pebbles hissed down around the two men. Mark picked up the laptop again, blowing dirt off the screen. The first results were coming through, the geophones confirming that they were receiving sonar reflections. It would take a few minutes to gather all the data, then longer for the computer to process it, but things looked promising so far.

Muldoon peered down the slope. "Too close to the surface," he grumbled as he wiped sweat from his face.

Mark stood beside him, examining the incoming data intently. "It's working just fine." He flinched as another tremor passed beneath his feet. "What was that?"

"Can't be the other charges; they weren't powerful enough ..." Muldoon sounded worried. Mark looked up, concerned. The shuddering was getting worse—

The ground under his feet collapsed.

Mark didn't even have time to cry out before the breath was knocked from him as he dropped down the slope amid a cascade of stones and dust. All he could do was try to protect his face as he bounced off the newly exposed rocks, pummeled from all sides.

Then something hard hit his head.

* * *

The first of his senses to recover, oddly, was taste. A dry, salty taste filled his mouth, caking his tongue.

Mark coughed, then spat out a mouthful of sand. The back of his head throbbed where the stone had hit him. He tried to sit up, then decided it was probably a better idea to remain still.

A muffled sound gradually resolved itself into words, a voice calling his name. "Mr. Hyun. Where are you? Can you hear me?"

Muldoon. He actually sounded genuinely concerned, though Mark's faculties had already recovered enough for him to realize that the sentiment was professional rather than personal. Muldoon's job was to look after the specialist; an injury on his watch would look bad on his record.

"Here," he tried to say, but all that came out was a faint croak. He spat out more revolting dust, then tried again. "I'm here."

"Oh, thank Jesus." Muldoon clambered over loose stones toward him. "Are you hurt?"

Mark managed to wipe his eyes. He grimaced at the movement; he was going to have some real bruises tomorrow. "I don't think so." He turned his head to see the slope down which he'd tumbled. "Wow. That's new."

Muldoon looked up, surprise on his face as he registered the change in the landscape. The landslide had exposed a large opening in the side of the bluff, a deep cave. "Lucky you didn't fall straight down into it. It'd probably have killed you." He held out a water bottle. "Here. Can you move?"

Mark gratefully took the bottle and swallowed several large mouthfuls, then gingerly moved his legs. "I think I'm okay. What about the computer?"

Muldoon held up the screen, which in addition to being cracked was no longer attached to the rest of the machine. "I don't think the warranty'll cover it."

"Damn," Mark sighed.

Muldoon helped him up. "Sure you're okay?"

"My knee hurts, but I think I'm fine apart from that."

"I dunno." Muldoon examined the back of his head. "You've got a big cut there, and if you were knocked out you might have a concussion. We should call for the chopper to come pick you up, get you to the hospital in Salalah."

"I'm fine," Mark insisted, even as he spoke wondering why he wasn't taking Muldoon up on his offer of an immediate trip out of the desert. "Can you see the rest of the laptop? You might be able to recover the data on the hard drive."

Muldoon snorted but turned to hunt for it. Mark looked the other way, toward the cave entrance. It was hard to believe that the relatively small explosive charge could have opened up such a large hole.

Unless the gap had been there all along ...

That thought was brushed aside as he spotted the rest of the broken laptop just inside the cave entrance. "Here," he told Muldoon, limping toward it. It looked battered, but unless the

hard drive had actually been smashed open it ought to be salvageable.

He crossed into the shadow of the cave and picked up the computer. Eyes adjusting to the low light, he examined the casing. It was more or less intact, dented but not actually broken. The experiment might not be a total loss after all.

Cheered slightly by the thought, Mark glanced deeper into the cave ...

And was so surprised by what he saw that he dropped the laptop again.

* * *

Muldoon clapped Mark on the back. “Well, son, I had my doubts about you ... but you’re gonna make us all very rich.”

“Not quite how I’d planned, though,” said Mark.

“Doesn’t matter *how* a man gets rich, just that he does!”

Muldoon had joined him in the cave, and had been equally stunned by what lay within—though he had recovered from his amazement rather more quickly, radioing the rest of the survey team to demand a rendezvous *right now*. One of the other men had a digital camera; once they, too, had overcome their astonishment and obtained photographic proof of the discovery, they had all returned to camp to send the images back to Houston via satellite.

Mark couldn’t help thinking events were moving too fast for comfort. “I still think we should inform the Omanis.”

“You kidding?” said Muldoon. “First rule of working out here: never tell the Arabs about *anything* until the folks at home have okayed it. That’s why the company has all those high-powered lawyers—to make sure our claims are one hundred percent watertight. And that’s just for oil. For *this* ... Jesus, I don’t even know where to start. We’re gonna be famous, son!” He laughed, then ducked into the tent housing the communications gear.

“Maybe.” Mark drank more water, not wanting to get his hopes up. For a start, he was sure that Braxoil would take full control of his discovery. The Omani government would certainly also lay claim to anything found within its borders.

But still, he couldn’t help fantasizing about the potential fame and fortune.

He finished the water, then followed Muldoon into the tent. The survey team’s six other members were already inside, flicking through the digital photos on another laptop. Debate about exactly what they had found was still ongoing, but the overall consensus was much the same as Muldoon’s: it was going to make them all very rich.

“Of course,” said one of the men, a New Zealander named Lewis, “since it’s my camera that means copyright on the photos is mine.”

“Company time, company photos, fellas,” said Muldoon.

“Yeah, but personal camera,” Lewis insisted.

“Guess we’ll have to let the lawyers work that out.”

“If anyone ever bothers getting back to us,” said a laconic Welshman named Spence. “mean, we sent the things three hours ago.”

“What time is it in Houston?” Mark asked.

Muldoon looked at his watch. "Time somebody was in the office. Still no reply?"

Lewis switched to the laptop's email program. "Nothing yet."

"Check the satellite uplink," Mark suggested. "There might be a connection glitch."

Lewis toggled to another program. "That explains it. No connection."

Mark raised a puzzled eyebrow. "Wait, *no* connection? You didn't log off, did you?"

"You kidding? Soon as we get an answer, I want to read it!"

"Weird. As long as we're logged in to the Braxoil network, we should be getting *something*

Here, let me ..."

Lewis gave up his seat to the computer scientist. After a minute Mark leaned back, more puzzled than ever. "Everything's fine at our end; we're still transmitting. But we're not getting anything back. Either the satellite's down, which is pretty unlikely ... or someone at the other end's blocked us."

Muldoon frowned. "What do you mean, blocked us?"

"I mean, canceled our access. Nothing we're sending's getting through, and nobody can send anything to us."

"The hell they can't." Muldoon picked up the satellite phone's handset. He entered a number, listened for several seconds, then jabbed with increasing anger at the buttons. "Not a goddamn thing!"

"Try the radio," suggested an American, Brightstone. "Call Salalah. The guys there can patch us through to Houston."

Muldoon nodded and moved to the radio, donning a pair of headphones. He switched the set on—and yanked off the headphones with a startled yelp, making everyone jump. "*Jesus!*"

"What?" Mark asked, worried.

"Beats the hell out of me. Listen." He unplugged the headphones. An electronic squeal came from the radio's speaker, the unearthly sound making Mark's skin crawl.

"Oh, shit," said Spence quietly. Everyone turned to him.

"You know what it is?" Mark asked.

"I used to be in the Royal Signals. That's a jammer."

Muldoon's eyes widened. "*What?*"

"Electronic warfare. Someone's cutting us off."

That prompted a minor panic, until Muldoon shouted everyone down. "You're sure about this, Spence?"

The Welshman nodded. "It's airborne. The pitch is changing too fast for it to be on the ground."

There was a sudden rush for the door, the eight men spreading out to squint into the achingly blue sky. "I see something!" yelled Brightstone, pointing north. Mark saw a tiny gray speck in the far distance. "Is that what's jamming us?"

"Where are the binocs?" Muldoon asked. "Someone—"

An earsplitting roar hit them from nowhere. Mark had just enough time to see a pair of sleek, sand-brown shapes rush at him before two aircraft shot less than a hundred feet overhead, sending sand whirling around the men. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, the two planes had shrunk to dots, peeling off in different directions.

“What the fuck was that?” Muldoon yelled

Spence stared after the retreating aircraft. “Tornados! Those were Saudi Tornados!”

“But we’re forty miles from the border!”

“I tell you, they were Saudi!” They watched as the two fighters came about. One of them appeared to be turning back toward the camp. The other ...

Mark realized where it was heading. “The cave!” he cried, pointing at the distant bluff. “It’s going for the cave!”

Even as he spoke, something detached from the fighter, two dark objects falling away. Then another, and another, arcing down at the bluff.

The hillside was obliterated, the explosions so closely spaced that they seemed to have been caused by a single giant bomb.

“Jesus!” someone shouted behind Mark as a churning black cloud swelled cancerously across the face of the bluff. The sound of the bombs reached them, shaking the ground from over a mile away.

The Tornado banked sharply north, afterburners flaring to blast it back into Saudi airspace at Mach 2.

The second Tornado—

Mark whirled to find it.

He didn’t have to look far. It was coming straight at him, bombs falling from its wings—

Their encampment vanished from the earth in a storm of fire and shrapnel.

* * *

Black smoke was still coiling from the bluff the next morning.

The four-thousand-pound bombs dropped by the Saudi Tornado ADV had caused a good part of the hillside to collapse into the cave beneath it. But the opening remained, a dark hole rendered more sinister by the soot streaking the surrounding rock.

The men who stood around it were all armed and in desert battle fatigues, though none wore the insignia of any military force. In fact, they wore no insignia at all. Despite their identical dress, however, there were divisions within the team. Whether by order or by instinct, the soldiers had formed into three distinct groups, touching at their edges but never quite mixing: oil and water beneath the desert sun.

The intersection point of the three groups was a trio of men, all watching the sky to the south. It was obvious that they were the leaders, experience evident in every line on their faces. One was an Arab wearing a black military-style beret, a dark mustache forming a horizontal line above his mouth. The others were both Caucasian, but even so the differences in their backgrounds were clear at a glance. The younger, a tanned, black-haired man with a cigar

jammed in the corner of his mouth, was Jewish; the oldest of the three had thinning blond hair and eyes of as intense a blue as the sky.

The blond man raised a pair of binoculars. "Here he comes," he said in English.

The Arab frowned. "About time. But I don't see why we need him at all. Our air strike destroyed the site—bury it and be done."

"The Triumvirate voted, two to one. Majority rules. You know that."

The Arab's face revealed his displeasure at the decision, but he nodded. The blond man turned back to watch the approaching helicopter.

It landed beside the choppers that had brought the soldiers to the site. Visible in the cockpit were two people: a man in his early forties wearing a pristine white suit and a young woman in sunglasses.

"What is this?" snarled the Arab. "He was supposed to come alone!"

The blond man's face briefly betrayed exasperation at the new arrival's indiscretion. "I'll handle it," he said. They waited as the suited man emerged from the helicopter and strolled toward them. His passenger remained in the cockpit.

Once clear of the rotor blades, the pilot donned a white Panama hat, then approached the trio, smiling broadly. "Ah, Jonas!" he said to the blond man. "Jonas di Bonaventura, as I live and breathe. Marvelous to see you again." Though his accent seemed at first a precise upper-class English, there was a faintly guttural undercurrent that revealed his Rhodesian origins.

"Gabriel," replied di Bonaventura as they shook hands. "You flew here yourself?"

"As you know, I prefer to be in control."

They shared a small laugh, then di Bonaventura looked pointedly toward the helicopter. "I see you brought a guest. That was not something we were expecting."

"A life without surprises would be terribly dull." He smiled over his shoulder; the woman smiled back. "She's a former student of mine. Her father hired me to take her on a tour of various African anthropological sites. We were in Sudan when I got your call for my help."

"You shouldn't have brought her here," said the Arab, scowling.

A Cheshire cat smirk spread across the new arrival's face. "Oh, I couldn't leave her behind. She gives me much more than just money." It took a moment for the Arab to get his meaning when he did, he looked disgusted. "So, Jonas, are you going to introduce me to your compatriots?"

"Gabriel," said di Bonaventura, indicating the Arab, "this is Husam al Din Zamal, former head of the Saudi General Intelligence Directorate." He nodded at the cigar-smoking man. "And Uziel Hammerstein, previously of Mossad."

The suited man raised a faintly mocking eyebrow. "A Saudi spy working with an Israeli spy? To say nothing of *your* background, Jonas. The Covenant of Genesis really does make for strange bedfellows."

Di Bonaventura ignored the comment. "Husam, Uziel," he went on, "this is Professor Gabriel Ribbsley from Cambridge University in England."

The men shook hands. "And don't forget," added Ribbsley, his chest swelling smugly, "the

world's leading authority in ancient languages. Whatever that amateur Philby in New York might think. And as for Tsen-Hu in Beijing ... hah!" He looked past Zamal and Hammerstein at the cave mouth, his voice becoming more businesslike. "Which is why you need me here, imagine. So, what have you found?"

Hammerstein spoke first, his voice low as if to keep what he was about to say a secret even from the wind. "Our friends in the American NSA alerted us to a photo intercept from an oil company survey team. Their computers had performed a routine analysis of the images—and identified the language of the Ancients."

"Oh, please," said Ribbsley mockingly. "You're still calling them that? How tedious and prosaic. I use 'Veteres' myself—I'm sure Jonas can appreciate the Latin."

Hammerstein drew impatiently on his cigar. "As soon as we realized what they had found, we arranged for a computer virus to be introduced through an NSA back door into the company's servers to erase the photos, then locked out the survey team's satellite link to isolate them. After that—"

"We destroyed them and the site," cut in Zamal bluntly.

Ribbsley looked toward the darkened opening. "So, you just decided to bomb the site. See." After a pause, he wheeled about on one heel. In a voice dripping sarcasm, he asked, "And what *exactly* did you expect me to learn from a smoldering crater?"

"We still have copies of the survey team's photographs," said di Bonaventura. He beckoned a younger man, another blond European, to approach. The soldier held up a manila envelope.

Ribbsley dismissed it. "Happy snaps taken by oily-thumbed roughnecks are hardly going to be helpful." He reached under the brim of his hat to knead his forehead with his fingertips. "Do you know why translating this language has been so hard? Why it took eight years for me to work out even the basics?" He lowered his hand and glared at Zamal. "Because every time the Covenant finds even the tiniest scrap of anything new, they blow it up and kill everyone in the vicinity!"

"That is the Covenant's purpose," Zamal said angrily.

"Yes, if you take the most literal, blockheaded interpretation possible." Ribbsley let out a theatrical sigh. "Flies, honey, vinegar, catch ... can anyone rearrange these words into a well-known phrase or saying?"

"You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar?" offered the soldier with the envelope, a Germanic accent to his clipped English.

Ribbsley clapped his hands. "Top marks! Jonas, who is this prodigy?"

"Killian Vogler," said di Bonaventura. "My protégé." A note of challenge entered his words as if daring Ribbsley to continue mocking him. "I will soon be retiring from the Covenant for a new position in Rome—Killian will take my place in the Triumvirate."

Ribbsley backed down, slightly. "A new position? Still *in pectore*, I assume.... Well then, I hope this young gentleman keeps the saying he just recited in mind once he takes your place." Vogler gave him a sardonic look. "The next time you make a discovery like this, Mr. Vogler, perhaps you might consider allowing me to examine the site *before* you blow it to pieces? If I can decipher more of the language, I may be able to locate other sites—before

they're stumbled upon by random passersby whom you then have to kill."

"I will bear it in mind, Mr. Ribbsley," said Vogler with a humorless smile.

"*Professor* Ribbsley, thank you very much." He snatched the envelope from Vogler's hand and riffled through the contents. "Well, it seems consistent with the other sites—the *remains* of the other sites, that is. And the characters on the tablet in this photo do match the Veteres alphabet. But there's nothing I haven't already seen." He looked back at the cave. "What else is in there?"

Di Bonaventura nodded to Vogler. "Killian will show you. You may as well get to know each other—I'm sure you will be working together again in the future ..."

* * *

Ribbsley emerged from the cave just ten minutes later, disappointed and angry.

"Nothing," he said, shooting an accusing glare at Zamal. "Absolutely nothing worthwhile was left intact. Just more scraps." In one hand he had a clay cylinder about two inches in diameter, fine grooves encircling its length—up to the point where it ended in a jagged break. He dropped it to the ground at his feet; it shattered. "A complete waste of my time."

"For which you are being very well rewarded," di Bonaventura reminded him. "And you still have the photographs of the site."

"I already told you, there's nothing new on them. I'll be able to translate the text properly once I can check my notes, but I could read enough to know it's nothing of interest." He looked at his helicopter. The young woman was still in the cockpit, clearly bored. "Well, since there's nothing more for me here, I'll be going. I do hate the desert." He irritably brushed some sand off his white linen sleeve.

"I'll walk you to your helicopter, Gabriel," said di Bonaventura. Ribbsley started toward the aircraft without even looking back at the others, di Bonaventura beside him. "What were you *thinking*?" said the soldier in a quiet growl once they were out of earshot.

"About what?"

"Bringing your—your *girlfriend* with you. Are you mad? Zamal would have shot her without a thought just for being here, and Hammerstein would not have tried to stop him."

Ribbsley smiled. "Ah, but I knew you'd be in charge, Jonas."

"Not for much longer. Once I go back to Rome, all I can do is advise. Killian will be making the decisions in the Triumvirate. And despite my teaching, he is still young enough to see the world in absolutes. And one of those absolutes is that anyone who could reveal the secret of the Veteres to the world is a threat to be eliminated."

"Don't even think about hurting her," said Ribbsley, a sudden hardness in his voice.

Di Bonaventura regarded him with mild surprise. "She's that important to you? Interesting."

"Meaning what?"

"No threat intended, Gabriel, I assure you," di Bonaventura said with a placatory smile. "She just seems younger than I expected." He took a closer look as they approached. "How old is she? Twenty-one?"

“Twenty-two.”

“And you are now ...?”

“Her age isn’t the issue,” snapped Ribbsley defensively, forcing the older man to hide his amusement. “What matters is her personality.”

By now di Bonaventura could see that Ribbsley’s passenger was extremely beautiful, with a body that would put many a model to shame. “But of course.”

“She’s quite incredible, actually,” Ribbsley continued, his tone softening as he gazed at her. “An exceptionally cultured and refined woman. And as you know, I’m a man of very refined tastes.”

Di Bonaventura caught the scent of overliberally applied Bulgari cologne. “And expensive ones.”

“Which is why I put up with you calling me across continents at a moment’s notice. The Covenant pays far better than Cambridge!” Both men chuckled, then shook hands as the chopper reached the chopper. “Well, good luck with the new post, Jonas. Maybe I’ll pop in to see you next time I’m in the Eternal City.”

“I look forward to it.” Di Bonaventura stood back as Ribbsley climbed into the cockpit quickly and expertly running through the preflight sequence. The rotors groaned to life, rapidly picking up speed. The soldier moved back out of the whirling sandstorm.

“Good-bye, Cardinal!” shouted Ribbsley, giving di Bonaventura a jaunty wave. The helicopter left the ground, wheeled about, and headed south.

Di Bonaventura watched it go, then returned to the cave, looking in the direction of the ragged craters marking what had once been the survey camp. There was still cleanup work to be done; the bodies of the men at the camp, or whatever was left of them, had to be found and buried, all evidence of the camp itself removed. Anything that could expose the Covenant had to disappear. Without a trace.

Without exception.

* * *

“Why did you call him Cardinal?” the young woman asked.

“Private joke,” Ribbsley told her.

“So who were they?”

He paused before reluctantly answering. “They’re ... archaeologists. Of a sort. occasionally help them with translations of ancient texts.”

“I had no idea Cambridge professors made house calls for translation emergencies.”

“They’re very competitive about their work. Cutthroat, you might say.”

“Really?” She arched an eyebrow and smiled wolfishly. “I’m intrigued.”

Ribbsley huffed. “They’re hardly your type, Lady Blackwood.”

Sophia Blackwood grinned. “I suppose not. Can you imagine what my father would say if I spent time with some bit of rough trade? He’s suspicious enough of you as it is.”

“Now, for what *possible* reason could his lordship be suspicious of a Cambridge professor?”

Sophia leaned closer, her long dark hair brushing his shoulder as she slipped her hand between his legs. “I don’t know. Maybe because you’re secretly fucking his daughter?” She cupped her fingers around his groin and squeezed gently.

He made a muffled noise of pleasure deep in his throat.

She laughed, then tightened her grip slightly. “So, you aren’t going to tell me any more about those people?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Ribbsley, smiling back at her.

Tighter still. “Really?”

The smile vanished. “Ngh! No. Believe me, Sophia, this is one of those very rare occasions where ignorance really is bliss. Or at least safer.”

She withdrew her hand, turning away in feigned offended disappointment. “I see *Professor*.”

“Oh, don’t be like that, *my lady*,” said Ribbsley, playing along with her game. “I’m sure I can make up for it somehow.” He thought for a moment. “I recall that you have a reasonable ability with languages ...”

“Don’t go out of your way to praise me, Gabriel,” she said sarcastically.

“Compared to me, I meant. But you could help me with the translation—it’d save me a lot of time if you took care of the drudge work.”

“Oh! Thrilling.”

“You’ll find it interesting, trust me. The language is ...” He smiled. “*Unique*. The day afterward, since we’re in Oman, a meeting with the sultan, perhaps? I’ve met him before; I’m certain I can arrange something.”

Her perfect smile returned. “You know, that might do the trick.”

“I thought it might.”

Her hand slid between his legs once more. “Although ... I’m still terribly hurt that you wouldn’t tell me who those men were.”

He tensed for a moment, before her touch made it clear that she was joking. “Some things in life have to remain mysterious, Sophia.”

Attention divided between flying the helicopter and the movement of her hand, Ribbsley didn’t pick up her low words over the clamor of the cabin. “Not for me, Gabriel. I *always* get what I want. Eventually.”

Indonesia

Eight Years Later

Shark!" At almost a hundred feet beneath the Java Sea, daylight was diffused to a dusky turquoise cast, but there was still more than enough illumination for Nina Wilde to see the predator turn toward her. "Shark!" she repeated, her voice rising in pitch. "Eddie, do something!"

Eddie Chase swept past her, using the thrusters of his deep suit to place himself between his fiancée and the shark as he brought up his speargun. He aimed the .357 Magnum cartridge forming the spear's explosive power-head at the approaching creature ... then lowered it again.

"What are you doing?" Nina asked, green eyes wide with fear. "It's coming right at us!"

"It's only a thresher. Don't worry, it won't do anything."

"But it's *fifteen feet long!*"

"It's not even six. I know the helmet magnifies things, but Jesus!"

The shark came closer, mouth gaping to expose ranks of sharp triangular teeth ... then turned its head almost dismissively and powered off into the murk.

"See?" said Chase. "Nothing to worry about. Now, if it'd been something like a tiger shark you'd know about it."

"How?"

"'Cause I'd be shouting 'Shit, it's a fucking tiger shark, aargh!' and firing off spears as fast as I could load 'em!" The balding, broken-nosed Englishman turned so that the lights on his deep suit's polycarbonate body lit up the redhead's pale face through her transparent bubble helmet. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine," Nina answered, with a slightly embarrassed smile. She had undergone diving training off the coast of Long Island, near her native New York City, and was still getting used to the enormously more varied marine life of Indonesia. "It's just that to me, 'shark' equals 'severed head popping out of a boat.'"

Chase chuckled; then a hint of concern came into his voice, even through the distortion of the underwater radio system. "How's your leg?"

"It's ... okay." That wasn't technically a lie, as the bullet wound she had received to her right thigh four months earlier, now more or less healed, wasn't actually hurting. But it had definitely stiffened up during the dive.

"Uh-huh." He didn't believe her. "Look, if you want to go back to the ship—"

"I'm fine, Eddie," Nina insisted. "Come on, let's carry on with the survey."

“If you’re sure.” Chase managed an approximation of a shrug through the deep suit’s bulk casing.

She gripped the flexible control stalk on her suit’s chest and engaged the thrusters to lift herself off the seabed, using her finned feet to bring herself to a horizontal position before zooming away, Chase behind her.

* * *

Their survey led them along a circular route, taking twenty minutes to complete. Nina was disappointed that she failed to discover anything new—but that feeling vanished as they returned to the center of the circle.

Almost a year earlier, a local fishing boat had, by chance, dredged up a handful of wood and stone artifacts from the seafloor. The Indonesian authorities quickly realized they were very old and hence potentially extremely valuable; the lucky fishermen had received payment to persuade them to “forget” exactly where they had made their discovery, so the site could be properly examined before opportunistic treasure hunters picked it clean.

The job of exploration fell to the United Nations’ International Heritage Agency. Nina, at the time the agency’s director of operations, had already been engaged in a project to chart in detail humanity’s expansion across the world in prehistory; the Indonesian find had the potential to pinpoint a date with great accuracy. It had taken several months for everything to be arranged, but now they were here.

And had made a discovery.

“Nina, look at this!” called Marco Gozzi over the radio. He and another scientist, Greg Bobak, were using a vacuum pump to clear away the layers of sediment and vegetation they had built up over millennia.

“What is it?” Nina asked. She switched off the thrusters and swam the last few yards to join them: stirring up the bottom would wipe out visibility and cost them valuable time. The deep suits could operate underwater for longer than traditional scuba gear but still had their limits—and on an operation like this, time was money. The research vessel anchored a few hundred yards away, the *Pianosa*, was privately owned, with other clients waiting to use it after the IHA.

Gozzi aimed a light at what had been exposed. “It’s a net!” said the Italian.

“It is,” Nina said in awed agreement. “Wow, this is incredible!”

Chase, hanging back, was less impressed. “Ooh. A net. Just like the thing that found this location in the first place.”

“Eddie,” Nina chided, “this isn’t exactly a nylon drift net we’re talking about here.” She reached out with a gloved hand, gently brushing sand off the crudely knotted strands. “Looks like they wove it from the local rainforest plants. Palm strands, maybe?”

“Or vines,” said Bobak in his strong Polish accent. “Strangler figs, perhaps. There are many on the islands.”

Gozzi dug a finger into the gray sediment. “The mud must have buried it and stopped it from rotting. Could have been caused by a tsunami, or a volcanic eruption.”

“Mark the position,” Nina told them. “If it’s a fishing net, they would have kept it close to the shore.” She checked the little display in her helmet to get their exact depth. “Ninety-eight feet. If I put that into GLUG, I’ll be able to work out exactly how long ago this spot was last above water.” She saw a yellow mesh bag on the ground nearby. “What else have you found?”

“Stone tools, we think,” Gozzi told her. He pointed to a spot behind Chase. “We found them there.”

Chase turned in place. An orange-painted stick marked where the other divers had been working. Near it, a little mound of round-edged stones stood out above the seafloor.

He looked back at Nina, who was using a smaller version of the vacuum pump to clear sediment away from the net. He swam to the stones, the deep suit’s neutral buoyancy letting him hover just above them. “Anything under these?”

“I don’t know, we didn’t look,” said Gozzi.

“Mind if I do?”

“Wait, you want to do some actual archaeology?” Nina asked, amused. “I guess my influence is finally rubbing off on you.”

“Nah, it’s just that if you’re going to keep oohing and aahing over a bit of old net, I’ll need something to keep me occupied. It gets boring just watching out for sharks.”

Bobak spun in alarm. “Sharks? Where are sharks?”

“There aren’t any sharks, Gregor,” said Nina as Gozzi suppressed a laugh. Still, Bobak surveyed the surrounding waters with deep apprehension before finally returning his attention to the net.

“We have cataloged there,” Gozzi said. “Go ahead.”

“If you find anything, tell us,” Nina added.

“If it’s just some stone knife, then yeah, I’ll tell you,” said Chase. “If it’s a pirate treasure chest, I’m keeping that to myself!” Quickly scanning for sharks or other potentially dangerous marine life—despite his earlier jokiness, part of his job was to look after the rest of the team, a responsibility he took very seriously, especially where Nina was concerned—he prodded the nearest rock with his speargun. Satisfied that a moray eel or similarly nasty surprise wasn’t going to spring out, he pulled the stone free of the sediment.

While the exposed end had been smoothed off, the rest of it was flat-faced and hard-edged, reminding him of a large brick. Putting it aside, he aimed a light into the new hole. It was sadly lacking in pirate treasure, or even stone knives: nothing but thick sediment and the chipped corners of more blocks.

He extracted another brick, which came stickily free of its home of untold centuries like a bad tooth from a gum. A couple of colorful fish came to investigate the resulting hole, but like Chase they, too, were disappointed to find only more bricks.

“No treasure chest?” Nina asked as he rejoined her.

“Narr, me hearty. Didn’t find anything except some old bricks.”

Nina exchanged shocked glances with the other two archaeologists, then slowly face

Chase. “You found *what?*”

* * *

The brick sat on a table in Nina’s lab aboard the *Pianosa*. Slightly over a foot in length and about five inches to a side in cross section, slightly curved, it hardly seemed remarkable.

Except for the mere fact that it existed.

“It’s a *brick*,” said Chase, not for the first time since Nina had raced past him to the pile of stones. “What’s the big deal?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Nina, turning around the Apple laptop on which she had been frenziedly working. On its screen was a map of part of Indonesia and the Java Sea, with Sumatra and its myriad surrounding islands on the left side. “This is the sea level today, right?”

“Okay. And?”

She zoomed in on one area. “This is us, here. The depth of the site is ninety-eight feet below sea level. But if I wind back time to show the last time the site was *above* sea level ...

The program she was using was called GLUG, for Global Levels of Underwater Geology—its full name contrived after the developers had come up with the jokey acronym. Using the most up-to-date radar and sonar maps, the program allowed members of the IHA and its sister agencies to see the topography of the entire planet, above or below the waves, with an accuracy previously available to only the best-equipped militaries. But GLUG could do more than simply show things as they were in the present: using data gleaned from geological and ice-core surveys, it could also raise or lower the sea level on a map to match that at any point in the past ... or, by a simple reversal of the algorithm, list all the times when the sea had been at a specified level.

Which Nina had done. “This is what Indonesia looked like when the sea level was ninety-eight feet lower,” she said. As Chase watched, the map changed, new islands springing up around the coast. She pointed at a yellow marker on the edge of one of the freshly revealed landmasses. “See? That’s the dig site, right on the coast—sixty thousand years ago.”

Chase scratched at his thinning, close-cropped hair. “So? I thought that’s exactly what you were trying to prove, that early humans spread along the coastlines way back when. The whole Paleolithic-migration hypothesis thing.”

Nina gave him a surprised smile. “You’ve been reading my research?”

“Hey, I don’t spend *all* my spare time watching action movies. Okay, so sixty thousand years ago, Ig and Ook used to live here, catching fish and making bricks. Isn’t that what you expected to find?”

“More or less—except for *that*.” She lifted the brick. “You know when the earliest known bricks date from?”

“A week last Tuesday?”

She smiled. “Not quite. The earliest known fired bricks were found in Egypt, and date from around three thousand B.C. Even plain mud bricks only date from at most eight thousand B.C. Kind of a gap between that and *fifty-eight* thousand B.C.”

“What if it’s more recent? Maybe it fell off a ship.”

“You saw how rounded the exposed parts of the other bricks were. That’s not centuries of erosion, that’s millennia.” She turned the anachronistic object over in her hands. Though battered, its surface still retained the vestiges of a glaze, suggesting a relatively advanced and aesthetic-conscious maker. Neither concept fitted well with a Paleolithic origin.

She put down the brick. “I think we need to expand the survey parameters.”

Chase raised his eyebrows. “Oh, you do, do you?”

“Hey, I’m the director of the IHA. It’s my job to decide these things.”

“*Interim* director,” Chase reminded her. Nina had assumed the role four months earlier following the death of her predecessor, Hector Amoros. The U.N.’s decision on the permanency of her appointment was pending. But it was a lock, she was sure; not bad for someone who had only turned thirty that year.

“Whatever. But I still think we should do it. Proving a theory is one thing, but making a discovery that could change everything we thought about early man ...”

Chase stepped behind her and wrapped his thick arms around her waist. “You just want to be on the cover of *Time* again, don’t you?”

“No. Yes,” she admitted. “But think about what it would mean! Current theory posits that *Homo sapiens* didn’t develop anything but the most basic stone tools until the upper Paleolithic period fifty thousand years ago. But if they had kilns able to bake bricks ...” She trailed off as Chase’s hands made their way up to her breasts. “Eddie, what are you doing?”

“You get so turned on when you’re talking about archaeology,” he said, a gap-toothed lecherous smirk on his square face. “It’s like your version of porn. Your nipples pop up like grapes.”

“I do *not* have grape nipples,” Nina told him in a faux-frosty tone.

“Well, they’re still nice and tasty. We could just nip—*fnarr, fnarr*—to our cabin ...”

“Later, Eddie,” she said, pulling his hands away. “Come on, I need to talk to Captain Branch and start a sonar survey.”

Chase rolled his eyes as she strode from the room. “Right. Because there’s nothing sexier than a sonar survey.”

* * *

Nina leaned against the railing on the *Pianosa*’s deck, watching the red-and-white de Havilland Otter floatplane nudge up to the L-shaped floating pontoon dock extending out from the ship’s starboard side. Chase waved at her from the copilot’s seat.

She waved back, then headed for her lab. It had taken some time to persuade Captain Branch—a stickler for adhering to the exact letter of a contract—to allow the floatplane to be used for anything other than its agreed-upon purpose of bringing in fresh food from Jakarta over the course of the ten-day expedition. But she eventually got her way ... with the promise of some extra money from the discretionary budget going *his* way.

The Otter had been outfitted with a small “dunking” sonar array, then spent the next few hours making short hops along a rough spiral course out from the ship. At each landing, Chase lowered the sonar into the water to scan the surrounding seabed. In theory, if any of the

results matched the reading from the dig site, there was a good chance they would find more of the mysterious bricks, perhaps even their source.

In theory. There was an equal chance that the search would uncover absolutely nothing.

Chase entered, carrying the tubular sonar array. Behind him, holding the sonar's data recorder, was Bejo, one of the Indonesian members of the crew. He was in his late teens, and growing up on one of the vast archipelago's many islands meant that he had spent almost as much of his life in boats as on land.

"How was the trip?" Nina asked as Chase returned the sonar to its large metal box.

"Pretty good. Hervé even let me hold the controls. For about a minute."

"I *thought* I heard terrified screams," Nina joked as Bejo put the recorder on a table. "Thanks, Bejo."

"No problem, Mrs. Nina," Bejo said cheerily.

"Please, I told you," she said as she connected the recorder to one of the lab's computers. "I'm not 'Mrs.' anything. Not until next May, anyway."

"Ah! I see, then you will be Mrs. Eddie?"

"No, nonono." Nina wagged a finger. "Then *he'll* be Mr. Nina."

Bejo erupted with laughter. "Mr. Nina!" he cried, pointing at Chase. "I like that, that's funny."

"Yeah, hilarious," Chase rumbled. He joined Nina at the computer. "See you later, Bejo."

"And you ... Mr. Nina!" Bejo left the lab, his laughter echoing down the corridor.

"Cheers for that," said Chase, batting Nina lightly on the back of her head. "Now I'm going to be 'Mr. Nina' for the rest of the bloody trip."

"Ah, you don't mind, really. Because you *lurve* me." She nudged him playfully with her hip.

"Yeah, I need to get my head checked sometime. So what've we got?"

Nina was already working. "Let's see, shall we? Okay, this is the dig site." An image appeared on the screen, blobs in various shades of gray against a black background. "It's a composite of four readings—only objects that stay stationary in all four show up, so we don't have to worry about fish confusing things." She zoomed in and indicated one particular group of scattered objects. "These are the bricks you found."

"More than we dug up," Chase noted. "How far under the bottom can the sonar read?"

"Up to two feet—it depends what's on the seabed. If it's just sediment, any more bricks should show up clearly. Okay, let's see what you found."

The first composite image came up. Nina examined it, zooming in on everything that gave a strong sonar return, but found nothing resembling the regular forms of the bricks. By the time she had finished, more images had been processed, ready for inspection. She opened each up in turn.

"Oh, oh," she said excitedly as the eighth reading appeared. "This looks promising." A jumbled swath of sonar reflections showed up strongly, like a handful of tiny diamonds scattered across black velvet. "Wow, it looks like some of the readings we got from Atlantis."

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