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## PROLOGUE

With a muted roar from his Harley-Davidson WL, a messenger pulled over to the curb on a quiet street in a suburb of San Francisco. A few children were playing on the front lawns of the other houses, but only one or two took any notice of him.

After raising his goggles and taking off his heavy gloves, he dug into the bag on the right side of the motorcycle to search for the telegram he was supposed to deliver.

"1281 Beech Lane... yup," he said, checking the address on the telegram against the number on a small post by the street.

The messenger swung his leg over the motorcycle and walked up the garden path, completely ignoring the neatly groomed lawn, the well-trimmed low hedges or the immaculately painted white front of the house. Instead, he had his eyes firmly trained on an army-spec Harley WLA similar to his own machine pulled slightly out of the garage next to the house.

He could hear soft music playing from the garage, but since he had already made up his mind to try the door bell on the front door, that's where he went.

After using the bell, he took a step back, trying to catch another glimpse of the Harley - but when the front door whooshed open, he turned his attention back to the present, personified by a tall, statuesque, dark-haired woman in her late thirties wearing dark slacks and an off-white cotton blouse.

The first thing he noticed was the tall woman's ice blue eyes, partially hidden behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses; the second was that she was a very good looking gal, indeed.

"Good afternoon. What can I do for you, Sir?" the woman said in a gentle Southern accent.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. I have a telegram for Dr. Covington. Would you mind fetching your husband?" the messenger said, holding up the telegram.

The woman didn't reply at once - instead, her left eyebrow crept up her forehead. "One moment, please," she said, closing the door.

Shaking her head, Mel Pappas walked through the house she shared with Janice Covington, archeologist extraordinaire. She walked through the hall, into the scullery and out into the garage where Janice was busy working on her Harley-Davidson.

Janice was sitting on the garage floor, taking a large screwdriver to an exhaust bracket that had come loose. She was wearing an indescribably filthy World War Two-vintage USAAF surplus cover-all, but that hadn't stopped her from getting smears of oil all over her hands, across her forehead and even down the bridge of her nose.

The radio was on and the thirty-six year old Doctor of Philosophy was boppin' along to Jo Stafford's *'Hey, Good Lookin'*, whistling out loud and generally having a good time - except when she was cursing the screws that were supposed to hold the bracket tight, but weren't.

"Jan? Jan, dear? JAN!"

"Whut?" Janice said, reaching over to turn down the radio.

"There's a telegram for you. The messenger asked me to fetch my husband."

"Again? Is that the fourth time?" Janice said as she got up from the floor. She wiped her hands on a rag, but unfortunately, the rag was even dirtier than she was so she just smeared more oil on her hands.

"More like the tenth. Ah, you're not going through the house like that, dear," Mel said, putting a firm hand on Janice's shoulder.

Janice chuckled, spun around on the heels of her US Army surplus boots and walked out of the front of the garage.

At once, she spotted the messenger waiting impatiently by the front door. She licked her lips, thinking about how she should break the news that she was in fact Dr. Covington. She decided to take the direct approach.

"Hi de ho, fella. I'm Doctor Covington. You have a telegram for me?" she said, putting her hands on her hips.

The messenger felt his jaw go a bit slack as he studied the unusual looking character standing in front of him - the woman was five foot five, with broad shoulders, a wild, blonde mane and plenty of sparkle in her forest green eyes.

He let his eyes climb up her body from the army boots past the baggy surplus cover-all and up to the smears of oil on her otherwise pretty face, wondering very strongly why any woman would want to dress like that. "Uhhh, yes. Yes, I have it right here. Are you really a Doctor?"

"Ph.D. in Archeology, yes. May I have the telegram, please?"

"Uh, of course. Here you go, ma'am."

"Doctor."

"I beg your pardon, Doctor Covington. Good afternoon," the messenger said, hurrying away from the unusual looking woman before he would catch any of the weirdness that apparently hung around the house.

Janice followed him with her eyes before walking back to the garage. On her way there, she tore the telegram open and began to read it.

*'8-7-51 -- Doctor J Covington -- You don't know me STOP My name is Giorgos Kalogerikou STOP I'm a dig foreman for Professor Isaksson STOP the Professor is missing from a dig near Platamonas STOP Searching for Cecrops' treasure STOP I fear foul play STOP Please come as soon as you can. STOP STOP.'*

"Cecrops' treasure!" Janice said out loud as she turned into the garage.

"Oh! Have they found it?" Mel said excitedly, jumping up from a chair in the corner.

"No, they're still searching. Professor Isaksson is missing... damn, Stein Isaksson, I can't believe it... How soon can we pack?"

"Now, you just hold on for a rootin' tootin' minute, Jan Covington! I demand to know what's going on. Let me see that telegram," Mel said and snatched the piece of paper out of Jan's oily grip.

After reading it, she furrowed her brow and looked at Janice. "Jan, I need to know a few details. From the top, please."

"All right. Stein Isaksson was one of my father's closest friends. When I grew up, he acted as my mentor... he taught me a lot of things, actually. Anyway, he was a skeptic at first when it came to the Xena Scrolls, but my father eventually made him into a believer," Janice said, rubbing her brow as she was sitting down on the corner of a workbench.

Mel watched the new smears of oil on her partner's forehead and rolled her eyes repeatedly. "But we already found the Xena Scrolls. Why is he still out there?"

"Well... we were only searching for answers but I guess his target was something slightly more substantial."

"Treasure."

"Yes. But that doesn't make Professor Isaksson into a bad guy, Mel. Unlike my father, Stein never sold any of the items he found. He kept some of the less valuable items for himself, but nearly all of it was donated to museums."

"Hmmm. There can't be too many items of lesser value in Cecrops' treasure, Jan," Mel said, forming the quotation marks with her fingers.

Janice slapped her hands down on her thighs and got up from the workbench. "No, you're right... there can't. We need to go. I owe it to Professor Isaksson. He helped me out of more than one jam back in my wild youth."

"Wild youth, wild twenties, wild thirties," Mel mumbled under her breath. "How long do you think we'll be away?" she continued, speaking out loud.

"Hard to say, but traveling light is always better, Mel."

"That's easy for you to say! You only need your boots, your regular outfit and your fedora... that easily fits into a duffel bag. Me, on the other hand, I need two suitcases full of books and utensils for my translation work and another suitcase for my clothes," Mel said with a pout.

"Well, true, but I don't know how much translating there'll be this time."

"But... don't you want me to come?" Mel said and adjusted her glasses.

"Whoa, where did that pop up from? Of course I want you to come!" Janice said, putting out her arm to wrap it around Mel's shoulder. At the last moment, Mel moved away so she wouldn't get any oil on her off-white cotton blouse.

"Where I go, my books go."

"All right, all right. I'll even carry the suitcases for you. How 'bout that?"

"Mmmm."

"Now gimme a little kiss," Janice said and leaned in towards the Southern Belle.

"Ah! Not until you've cleaned up, Doctor Covington," Mel said firmly, putting her fingers on Janice's shoulder, the only clean spot on the entire cover-all.

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An hour later, Mel put down the telephone in the sitting room. "All sorted, dear. PanAm to Washington D.C., then BOAC to London Airport and onto Athens."

"When?" Janice said, standing in the doorway, combing her wet hair back.

"First flight out tomorrow morning. We need to be at the airport at seven thirty. Oh dear, it's going to be a very, very tiring trip, isn't it?"

"Probably. Did I hear you speak Greek just now?"

"Yes, I've also chartered a small plane from Athens to Platamonas."

"A woman of action! That's my Mel Pappas!" Janice said and strode over to the translator only wearing a tightly wrapped towel. Grabbing hold of the tall woman's hands, she pulled her upright and claimed her lips in a searing, but loving, kiss.

Once they separated, Janice grinned broadly and moved her fingers down Mel's smooth cheek. "But first..." she said, pulling Mel through the sitting room and towards their bedroom.

"Oh, my!" Mel said as the door closed behind them.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

When the pilot finally took the rattling, noisy Fieseler Storch below the cloud cover, Janice reached over to the seat next to hers and put a reassuring hand on Mel's thigh. "Take a look, Mel. We're home... we're in Xena country."

"I'll have to take your word for it. I daren't look down! If I had known that the plane would be so horrible, I would've rented a car!"

"It's keeping us up, ain't it?"

"Just barely! What kind of plane is this, anyway?"

"It's a Storch, a German transport plane from the war. I guess they must've left it behind."

Alerted by the conversation, the Greek pilot turned around and gave the two women a double thumbs-up, grinning broadly. "No, no, I steal it myself!" he exclaimed proudly, still looking at his passengers. "One of the last days of the war, I go into their airbase and steal it from under their noses!"

Mel's face lost all color when she realized that the pilot didn't pay any attention to his controls, and she pointed at the wobbling flight stick with a trembling hand. "Your... will you... the controls!"

Before she had completed the sentence, the Storch went into a slow descent, but the pilot just laughed out loud and pulled it back up.

Blinking a few times, Mel wiped a few beads of sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. When she looked at Janice, she was dismayed to see that the adventurer was completely unaffected by the drama and was even matching the pilot's grin with one of her own.

"How far to the dig site?" Janice said, leaning forward so the pilot could hear her clearly.

"Not long now. We'll be there soon."

"Are you sure you can land there?"

"Ha! I could land in a sheep pen if I had to!"

"Just checking," Janice said and patted the pilot's shoulder.

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"Hello, back there... get ready! We're landing in a little while," the pilot said a bit later.

"Ohhhhh!" Mel said and made sure her seatbelt was pulled as tight as it would go.

The Storch's small engine howled as the pilot dropped down to a few hundred feet above ground. The terrain ahead of them was anything but smooth - dozens of rocks and boulders were littered across the dusty piece of soil doubling as the runway.

Even Janice began to feel a bit uncomfortable by the prospects of landing in the middle of something resembling a quarry, but the pilot gave them another thumbs-up moments before he came in to land.

The first time the Storch made contact with the ground, it made a bad bump and promptly took off again, resulting in an agonizingly loud, high-pitched squeal from Mel.

The Storch settled down again another hundred feet further along the makeshift runway, and this time, the pilot was able to get it to stop before it became airborne again.

"See? Told you I could land here," the pilot said as he taxied back towards a cluster of tents.

"So you did. We never doubted you for a second, did we, Mel?" Janice said, grinning broadly.

Mel concentrated on getting her hair in order, keeping silent until she could come up with an answer that didn't include swearing. She eventually gave up and settled for a shrug.

As the Storch came to a halt behind a large tent, a Greek man came out to meet them. Appearing to be in his late thirties, his classic features and well-groomed mustache made him fairly handsome, and he was wearing a Greek army uniform that consisted of black boots, khaki pants and shirt, and a desert cap that wouldn't have looked out of place among Field Marshal Montgomery's men in the North African theater a decade earlier.

Mel quickly opened the flimsy door and stepped out, glad to be out of the rickety contraption. She reached in, grabbed her two suitcases and pulled them out of the hold that was really too small for them. At the same time on the other side of the plane, Janice patted the pilot's shoulder again and jumped down onto the rocky ground holding her duffel bag over her shoulder.

With a 'pew', she took off her fedora and wiped her forehead thoroughly with her jacket sleeve. Looking around, she could see the Greek man in the army fatigues walk over to Mel, but she was more interested in the general shape of the camp.

It was made up of ten tents; three larger and five smaller ones for the personnel, an open-sided mess tent and a radio shack with a huge antenna.

The waste pit had been dug on the other side of the runway, and something resembling a bathing trench had been dug next to a motley collection of trucks - two ex-US Army long wheelbase GMC CCKW Six-by-Sixes and a German Opel Blitz where the rear bed had been converted into three rows of benches to transport the diggers.

Judging by the number of Greek workers loitering around the smaller tents, they were clearly used as shelters for the local workers - which meant that the three larger tents were reserved for the senior members of the dig.

Everything appeared to be in pretty good condition but Janice had expected no less at a dig run by Professor Stein Isaksson. The wheelbarrows, the trucks and the general digging equipment were worn, but of high quality, and the workers appeared to be well-fed and fairly well dressed.

The only thing that spoiled the professional look of the camp was the unusual sight of at least a dozen diggers not doing anything at all. Furrowing her brow, Janice took off her jacket and slung it over her duffel bag.

The man in the army fatigues put out his hand and bowed his head slightly. "Doctor Covington?" he said in a pleasant, nearly accent-free voice.

Mel promptly shook the man's hand. Once they separated, she stared at the layer of dust that had been transferred to her own.

"No, I'm Melinda Pappas. That's Doctor Covington," Mel said, pointing at Janice who had come up to stand next to them.

"Oh... how do you do. I'm Giorgos Kalogerikou, the foreman of the dig. I'm the one who sent you the telegram," the man said, shaking hands with Janice.

"Hello, and thank you for doing so. Is Professor Isaksson still missing?" Janice said, shouting to be heard over the roar of the Fieseler Storch as it took off down the rocky runway.

As soon as the airplane had taken off, Giorgos shook his head and took off his desert cap, revealing a full head of pitch black hair. "I'm afraid your trip was for naught, Doctor Covington. We found Professor Isaksson earlier this morning."

"Found him?"

"In a ravine four hundred yards further south. He's dead."

"Oh, no!" Mel said and put her hand across her mouth.

"Damn!" Janice said and punched her fist into the palm of her hand. "Did the police come for the body?"

"There's no police out here, Doctor Covington. We placed the Professor in his tent until-

"May we see him?"

"Jan!" Mel said in a shocked fashion. "Do we really want to look at a dead body in this stifling heat?"

"You don't have to go in there, Mel. Like I told you back home, he was my mentor. I need to give him a proper send-off," Jan said surly.

"Oh... of course."

"It's right over here, Doctor," Giorgos said and took Janice by the elbow. Once he noticed the look she shot him, he let go of her elbow and took a step back.

"I'll store our things in the other tent in the meantime, Jan," Mel said and hoisted up in her suitcases.

"Actually, Miss Pappas, the other tent is mine," Giorgos said.

"Surely you can't expect us to share a tent with a dead body, Mr. Kalogerikou! Really!"

"No, but-

"And the third large tent?"

"It's reserved for-

Mel let out a snort and began to drag the suitcases towards the second of the larger tents.

Giorgos scratched his cheek, wondering if it had been the right decision to send the telegram. As he was tracking the two feisty American women with his eyes, he chuckled, remembering what Professor Isaksson had told him about the Doctor and her companion. So far, everything had been right.

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Janice pulled the curtain aside and stepped into the tent. When she noticed Stein Isaksson's body on a bunk to the left of the tent, she sighed and took off her fedora. After walking up to stand at the top end of the bunk, she pulled back the thin sheet of canvas that covered the professor's face.

The moment she did so, she knew something was horribly wrong. The professor reeked to high heaven of liquor, but she knew for a fact that he had been a tee-totaller all his life.

Furrowing her brow, she put her hands on her hips and observed the dead body closely. Next to her, Giorgos slipped into the tent, mouthing a silent prayer.

"Giorgos... would you mind if I called you that, by the way?" Janice said and put her hat back on.

"Oh, no, Doctor. It's my name."

"All right. Giorgos, what's wrong with this picture?" Janice said, pointing at the dead body.

"... I'm sorry, Doctor?"

"What's wrong here?"

"I don't know what you mean...?"

"He smells of liquor. Of Ouzo, if I'm not mistaken."

"Oh, yes, that's right. He had a bottle with him. It had broken in the fall."

"Giorgos, have you ever seen the Professor drinking?"

"What...? No... now that you mention it, no," Giorgos said, smoothing down his mustache.

"He didn't drink. Not one drop... but look at him now. In the telegram, you said you suspected foul play, Giorgos. Is this what you meant?" Janice said and moved the canvas sheet back up to cover the professor's face.

"No, I... no, it wasn't. We hadn't found him yet when I wrote the telegram..." Giorgos looked left and right and then moved in close to Janice. "What I meant was the behavior of two of the people working here. They've acted very strangely."

"I think I need to have a word with them," Janice said harshly and began to move away, but before she could take a step, Giorgos had put a hand on her elbow.

"They're not here now, Doctor. They're not Greek diggers, but a Russian and an Italian. Sir Alastair's personal assistants."

"Who?"

"I'm sorry, Doctor, everything is happening so fast..." Giorgos said, shaking his head. "This dig is financed by Sir Alastair Brougham-Tibbett, maybe you've heard of him?"

"No, but I'm sure Mel has. She's more into all that hob-nobbin' nonsense than I am."

"Well, anyway... Sir Alastair has obtained one of the famed Xena Scrolls, and he-"

"What? How? Which one?" Janice said, spinning around to face Giorgos.

"It's the scroll titled The Lost Mariner. That's-"

"The original was stolen from an exhibition in San Francisco four years ago! Mel and I only have a copy of it!" Janice growled.

"I, uh... I couldn't say how he got it, Doctor, I only know that he has it. May I go on?"

Janice took off her fedora and wiped her forehead. With a harrumph, she nodded at the foreman.

"Thank you. It deals with the Cecrops myth, as I'm sure you know already. Sir Alastair was apparently snared in by the descriptions of the wealth, and he decided to finance this expedition. Professor Isaksson hired me because we had worked together on another, similar dig last fall. Well, to cut a long story short, the reason I suspected foul play is that the Professor's notes have gone missing."

"Missing? Like in stolen?"

"Ah, yes."

"And you think Sir Whatever's personal assistants did it?"

"I have no evidence... but they were constantly giving Professor Isaksson a hard time. You know, always asking about the dig and future sites and details of the scroll..."

"Hmmm...?" Janice said, scrunching up her face.

"Yes, and they were often reporting back to Sir Alastair on the progress of the dig."

"You know, Giorgos, I'd really love to meet this Sir Alastair," Janice said while she walked out of the tent.

"You will shortly, Doctor. We sent urgent word to Sir Alastair when we discovered Professor Isaksson dead. That's why his assistants aren't around. They've gone to bring him here," Giorgos said as he put his desert cap back on.

"Oh, really? How interesting. Mel? Mel? Mel, where are you?" Janice said, turning around in a circle in the center of the camp.

"Will you please curb your impatience, Jan Covington, I'm right here," Mel said, stepping out of the second of the large tents. In the meantime, she had changed into a pair of brown work boots, sturdy, high-waisted, pale khaki pants and a long-sleeved pale khaki shirt.

Even the stifling heat couldn't hide the fact that Mel Pappas looked dashing in her digging fatigues, and a crooked smile quickly graced Janice's features when she took in the sights.

"Well, I'm here now... what did you want?" Mel said and put a pencil and notepad in one of her breast pockets.

Grinning, Janice put out her hand and turned to Giorgos. "Thank you for filling me in, Giorgos. My lovely associate and I will stay for a few days to see what falls down when we give the apple tree a good shake."

"Uh... pardon?" Giorgos said as he was shaking Janice's hand.

"Figure of speech. It was nice talking to you," Janice continued, effectively ending the conversation. Giorgos looked puzzled, but he eventually shrugged and moved over to the Greek workers to tell them about the new arrivals.

"Jan, brushing him off like that was rather rude," Mel said. When Janice took her by the elbow and led her into the tent she had only just come out of, she looked as puzzled as Giorgos had done only seconds before.

"Did the heat get to you already? When are you going to tell me what's going on here?" Mel said, stopping with a jerk as soon as the two women were inside the tent.

"Mel, something stinks here. The Professor is dead all right, and he was murdered. Also, his notes are-"

"Wh-when you say murdered, you mean...?"

"Murdered, like in pushed down a ravine, toots."

"Oh, my Goodness!"

"Yeah, exactly. And his notes are missing, too. Giorgos just told me that he's suspecting the money-man's personal assistants," Janice said and threw her fedora on the closest bunk. After doing that, it took her a few seconds to realize that unlike back home, she and Mel were going to sleep in separate bunks.

"The... the money-man?" Mel said, adjusting her glasses.

"Sir Alastair something-or-other... never mind. And get this, Giorgos just told me that His most esteemed Lordship Sir Whatshisname is coming here later today. I presume his assistants are with him... ohhh, I hope I'll get a chance at chewing on their chops. I'm definitely gonna give those palookas a piece of my mind," Janice said, standing with her hands on her hips, thinking about the easiest way to move the two bunks together.

The puzzled look on Mel's face grew to comical proportions while Janice was talking. "Jan, dear, you need to drink some water. You're incoherent."

"Giorgos told me that they were leaning on Professor Isaksson. I don't like it when goons lean on my friends. Gives me the itch to hand out a couple a' knuckle sandwiches, if ya catch my drift."

"Not exactly, no..." Mel said, scratching her hair.

"I'll explain later. C'mon, help me move this bunk over to the other one."

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Darkness was close to falling when a deep green, and very dusty, right-hand drive Bentley Mark VI drove into the camp four hours later. As it approached the main tents, the driver honked several times to alert the people at the camp of their presence. At once, Giorgos stepped out of the tent where the dead body was stored, grabbed a torch and walked over to the car.

Over by the other tent, Janice folded the curtain back to observe the luxury car and the people in it.

Moments later, a large man stepped out of the driver's side door and walked around the car. As he came into the flickering cone of light from the torch, Janice noted that he was dressed in uniform-like fatigues. She didn't recognize the cut at first glance, but she only needed one look at the man's features to know what he had on his agenda.

"Goon," she said out loud. Mel came up to stand next to Janice to see for herself.

"Who? Oh, that brute... I agree with you," Mel said, adjusting her glasses. The man they were looking at was Slavic in appearance, six foot five and looking to be weighing close to two-hundred and seventy pounds - all muscle, save for the ring of fat he sported around his waist. His head was clean-shaven but the three-day stubble on his chin and square jaw more than made up for it.

The goon opened the left-side door and stuck his head inside. A short while later, he pulled it back out and held the door open for whomever the passenger was.

Janice cocked her head, waiting expectantly for the VIP to make an appearance.

Her wish was fulfilled when a slight man stepped out of the Bentley. Dressed in fair, neutral clothes and with a white Panama hat on his head, Sir Alastair Brougham-Tibbett was younger and more cat-like than Janice had anticipated - even the black hardwood cane he held in his right hand didn't detract from the image.

Giorgos hurriedly bowed to the new arrival and began to report the latest developments. Once in a while, Sir Alastair looked over to where Janice and Mel were waiting.

"And there we have him, His most esteemed Sir Whatshisname. I smell a rat. Do you smell a rat, Mel?" Janice said, leaning against the door post to the tent.

"I sure hope not, Jan, though that Garlic Gyros they served us for dinner did give me heartburn."

"You know what I mean. He looks smart. Too smart. A real Dapper Dan."

"Now, Jan, let's not get carried away. You know the British, they always look smart. Epitome of class and all that."

"Mmmm."

Over by the Bentley, Sir Alastair nodded to Giorgos and said a few words to him. Giorgos bowed again and hurried back to the other large tent.

"Looks like we get to talk to him, Mel."

"Um, Jan... I'll do the talking. I'm quite sure he'll be used to sophisticated people," Mel said and folded her hair back behind her ears, oblivious to the cheeky look Jan shot her.

As Sir Alastair began to walk towards Mel and Janice, he waved his hand, prompting the Slavic brute to close the Bentley's door.

"Charming," Janice said and moved away from the door post.

Mel noticed at once that Sir Alastair was walking with a pronounced limp and moved towards him so he wouldn't have to walk too far. "Sir Alastair, how do you do. I'm Melinda Pappas and this is my associate, Doctor Janice Covington," Mel said, bowing slightly to the man.

"How do you do, Miss. Oh, please don't bow to me. I'm far too young for such antiquated etiquette," Sir Alastair said. His voice was cool and cultured and it carried a distinct upper-class tone.

"I see..." Mel said and started to move away, but before she had time to react, Sir Alastair had brought her hand to his lips and gave it a chivalrous kiss. "Oh, my!" she continued, blushing over the unexpected attention.

Growling under her breath, Janice fought an urge to slap the hand away.

"This is my preferred style of greeting, Miss Pappas, especially when it's a rare beauty such as yourself," Sir Alastair said with a twinkle in his almond brown eyes.

"Oh...!"

Putting more weight on the hardwood cane, Sir Alastair turned to face Janice. "Well, Professor Isaksson told me a great deal about the two of you. Especially you, Doctor Covington,"

"Only good things, I hope," Jan said flatly.

"Oh, but of course." The man turned around and waved the Slavic brute over to them. "Please allow me to introduce my personal assistant, Vitali Komaroff. He's Russian."

The big man lumbered over to the three people, growing ever more ungainly as he came closer. Mel became transfixed on Vitali's impressive jaw - which was as square as a dry dock - and on his two beady, deep-set eyes that were of an indeterminate color.

"I never would ha' guessed. Hi de ho, Joe," Janice said and put out her hand. The brute stared at it for a few seconds before grabbing it with his meaty paw and giving it a thorough shake.

"My second assistant, Ludovico Ricci, is a bit late. He had some things to do up in Leptokaria, but he should be back shortly," Sir Alastair said.

*'Like disposing of the Professor's notes after milking them for all their worth,'* Janice thought, but kept a smile on her face.

Mel suddenly snapped out of her trance-like state and forced herself to look away from the Russian's jaw. "Please, Sir Alastair, come and join us in our tent for some refreshments. I'm sure you must be tired after the journey."

"Oh, thank you very much, Miss Pappas. Yes, I could use a little water."

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Ten minutes later, Sir Alastair sat on the only working chair in the tent. Janice was standing with her hands folded over her chest, but Mel was sitting on the two joined bunks with her legs crossed in a very ladylike fashion.

Janice hadn't failed to notice the contemptuous way Sir Alastair's nose had crinkled when he had noticed the joined bunks, and that had only made her dislike him even more.

"Miss Pappas, Doctor Covington, I have a suggestion to make. With the unfortunate accident that has befallen Professor Isaksson, my dig is without a captain. Mr. Kalogerikou is a capable foreman, but no more than that. He's not... how shall I put it... experienced enough to manage such an expedition. Nor is he a born leader. You, my dear Doctor Covington, are."

"You want me to manage your dig site?" Janice said, cocking her head.

"Yes. Quite simply."

"Mmmm. We don't work for free."

"Oh, now you're insulting me, Doctor! Naturally I was going to suggest a very fair salary."

"Sir Alastair, we only know bits and pieces. I think it's high time to show us the whole picture," Janice said, smoothing out a non-existent crease on her sleeve.

Mel looked from Sir Alastair and over to Janice. She had a hard time understanding Janice's stance on the matter, but she trusted the feisty archeologist enough to know that she had to be playing some kind of charade.

"I understand, Doctor. All right. This expedition was set up to search for Cecrops' treasure. Or rather, a part of it. In particular, we're searching for the emerald that was so big that Gabrielle, the bard who was with Xena when they negated the curse, had trouble holding it in one hand. That's what we're here for."

"Cecrops' emerald... have you considered that Gabrielle might've been exaggerating to make the story sound more exciting?" Janice said, making Mel shoot her an annoyed look.

"Oh, I have. The bard from Potaideia wasn't prone to exaggeration, however. In fact, I know that she quite often played down the dangers they were in."

"Mmmm. Mel?"

Mel cleared her throat and adjusted her glasses. "Well, Jan, I must agree with Sir Alastair. In the scrolls I've translated, I have discovered several times that while she told us the truth, she didn't tell us the whole truth... as it were."

"Mmmm. Sir Alastair, how did you come to own the Lost Mariner scroll?" Janice said matter-of-factly. Mel drew a sharp breath at the barely hidden accusation, but Sir Alastair merely waved his hand.

"You needn't worry, Doctor. It's a copy and not one of the originals that were stolen from you. Oh, yes, I've heard that you lost some of the original scrolls in a break-in at an exhibition in San Francisco in 1947. In fact, I've heard several stories about you and the delightful Miss Pappas," Sir Alastair said, once again glancing at the joined bunks.

Knowing that they were headed for rough waters, Mel hurriedly cleared her throat and leaned forward. "Did you get your limp in the war, Sir Alastair?"

"Oh, good heavens, no! No, I fell off a horse whilst playing polo. No heroics for me, I'm afraid. I'm simply not blessed with any form of heroic strain."

"Mmmm," Janice growled again.

"Well, that was a very long tale for a very short question. Doctor Covington, are you interested in working for me or not? Being in charge of this expedition until we've found Cecrops' treasure...?"

"We are."

"Excelle-"

"But we need to do it our way. The dig foreman told me that your personal assistants hounded Professor Isaksson pretty badly. We don't particularly like having people like that breathing down our neck. So... please... tell them to back off. Or else there's no deal," Janice continued.

"You are most certainly a decisive woman, Doctor Covington. All right, I'll ask Vitali and Ludovico to, how shall I put it, take a few steps back. To allow you some leeway. Would that be satisfactory?"

"It would."

"Good. And now I bid you a good night. Doctor, Miss Pappas," Sir Alastair said and rose from the bunk.

"So you're staying here for the night, then?" Janice said, moving over to the curtain and holding it aside to let Sir Alastair walk out.

"Yes. I've asked Mr. Kalogerikou to set up a tent for me and my assistants. After all, I've invested heavily in this dig. I need to see the morale and discipline of the workers."

"And of the managers?"

"Jan!" Mel said, putting her hand across her mouth.

"Now, now, Doctor Covington, let's not ruin the evening by acting unfriendly towards each other. Only the workers," Sir Alastair said and stepped out of the tent, already looking to see where his assistants had gone.

Growling at Janice, Mel shot the adventurer a dark look above the rim of her glasses before she hurried after the nobleman.

"Sir Alastair... please... please wait," she said, putting a delicate touch on the nobleman's sleeve.

"Yes?"

"Please excuse the behavior of my associate, Sir Alastair. Doctor Covington is a very clever woman, as you probably know, but she can be so dreadfully uncultured. Why, there are times where she even barks at me."

"Oh, I'm very aware of the good Doctor's skills, Miss Pappas, but I fear that her tongue... and particularly the way she uses it... will get her in trouble one day. Maybe it already has," Sir Alastair said with a sparkle in the eye directed at Mel.

"Why... I..."

"Good evening, Miss Pappas."

Turning away, Sir Alastair made his way back to the dark Bentley.

"Good evening, Sir Alastair," Mel said with a wan smile. Feeling her temper rise, she spun around on her heel and stomped back into the tent where she found Jan sitting on the chair with a very pensive look on her face.

"Janice Covington! What were you thinking? What came over you, insulting a nobleman like that?" Mel said, standing with her hands on her hips and tapping her boot into the dusty floor.

Getting up, Jan put her fedora back on and trailed the edge with her index finger to make sure it was on just right. "Mel, if there's one thing I've learned on the many digs I've been on, it's that when it looks like a rat and smells like a rat, it's a rat. And a rat in an expensive, flashy suit is still just a rat. Only a fat one."

"But...! This isn't the filthy back alleys of New York City, you know. Sir Alastair is a nobleman and I insist you treat him accordingly."

"You mean I should put on my kid gloves?"

"Yes!"

"Forget it, toots. No, scratch that... I think I will put on my gloves. His kind are usually so slimy they'll leave some residue behind," Jan said and brushed past the translator.

"Where are you off to now, Jan? I thought we were going to bed soon?"

"I'm going to talk to Giorgos and some of the key workers. We need to get to the bottom of what's been happening here before the goons start hounding us."

Looking quite forlorn, Mel drew a short sigh and let her arms fall limply down her sides. "But Sir Alastair just told us that he'd ask his assistants not to do that..."

"I know, but..." Noticing Mel's despondent face, Janice decided to go easy on her partner for the time being. She walked back to the tall southerner and put a comforting hand on the tall woman's elbow. "Hey, Mel, I don't know how long I'll be, so perhaps you could unpack in the meantime...? You know, get your books ready and all that? I'm sure we'll find something for you to work on tomorrow."

"Well, I guess I could do that..."

"Good. Mel?"

"Yes, Jan?"

"I could use a good kiss right about now. Wouldya mind leaning down and slapping one on me?" Janice said, taking her hat off and winking saucily.

Mel blinked a couple of times and then adjusted her glasses. "Goodness me, you don't mince your words today, Jan."

"It's the land we're on... it's Xena's influence. Well, how about that kiss?"

"Oh, all right," Mel said and leaned down. Moments later, their lips touched in a nice, little kiss that left Jan beaming.

"Catch ya later, sweetheart," the adventurer said as she put her fedora back on and left the tent.

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As Janice walked down towards the mess tent, she noticed that Giorgos and a few locals were busy erecting a medium-sized tent for Sir Alastair. Vitali, the square-jawed goon, was waving his hands in the air, barking like mad in a mix of Russian, broken Greek and even worse English to get the workers to set up the tent the way he wanted it.

Chuckling at the sight, she changed her plans and made a sharp right to help the unfortunate Giorgos.

With their combined effort, the tent was soon standing, and Vitali lumbered away to get Sir Alastair's luggage.

Janice took that as her cue and leaned in towards Giorgos. "Hey... I need to speak with you. Now."

The dig foreman wiped his sweaty brow with a slightly filthy kerchief and then stuffed it into one of his pockets. "I can't right now, Doctor Covington. I need to make sure the workers set up the furniture correctly. Sir Alastair is a very demanding man."

"Oh, your men look clever. I'm sure they'll manage. If they can't, I'll take full responsibility. Come on, let's go down to the mess tent," Janice said and wrapped an arm around the foreman's shoulder.

"The mess tent, Doctor?"

"Just walk with me, Giorgos."

"Uh... all right." Almost as an afterthought, Giorgos turned to his men and gave them a few orders in Greek. Some of them nodded and some just looked confused, but most of them began to carry the furniture into the tent; a bunk with a mosquito net, a rickety chair, a desk, and a small kerosene lamp to go on it.

As they were walking down towards the mess tent, Janice kept looking over her shoulder at the dark Bentley and at the figure sitting still inside it. When she and Giorgos were almost at the mess, Vitali helped Sir Alastair out of the car and over towards the new tent.

"Giorgos, where can a woman get something to drink around here?" Janice said as she stepped into the mess tent with the foreman in tow.

"Drink, doctor?"

"I'm talkin' about Ouzo."

"But... a woman... drinking Ouzo?"

"I'll bet I've had more than you, my friend," Janice said and took off her fedora. With a tired sigh, she proceeded to wipe her brow on her sleeve.

Giorgos' face looked like a big question mark, but after a short while, he shrugged as he accepted the peculiar request. "You Americans... All right. I'll get you some Ouzo."

Plopping her hat back down on her head, Janice turned around and sat down on the nearest bench. "Good. Once you've done that, call in your best guys. We need to talk about a few things."

While she waited for the foreman to round up the crew, Janice inspected the mess - it looked like any other she had ever seen. Three long tables with integrated benches that had been crudely slapped together from raw planks of wood, six kerosene lamps hanging down from the rafters, two above each table, and a large brass triangle by the entrance to the tent, used by the cook to alert the diggers when food was to be had.

It wasn't long before Giorgos came back with five sturdy diggers. Their olive-toned skin was leathery from spending most of their lives outside, and they were all wiry and tough-looking.

Janice nodded her approval when she looked the diggers in the eye - her experience told her that they were good, solid workers.

Giorgos came into the tent at the end of the line, pushing the last of the diggers ahead of him. Once he was inside, he gave Janice an unlabeled bottle of Ouzo. "Doctor Covington, these men are strong but uneducated. None speak English. Do you want me to translate for you?"

Holding the bottle, Janice stepped up on the bench and then the tabletop so she could get a clear view of the workers. "Yes, please, Giorgos," she said, even though she'd be perfectly able to understand and talk to the men - she wanted to let them feel ahead of the game.

"All right, listen up, please," Janice said, pausing to give Giorgos time to translate. "Professor Isaksson was my friend, my mentor. His-

"Pardon, Doctor Covington... mentor?" Giorgos said, holding up his hand.

"Teacher."

"Sorry."

"Think nothin' of it. Anyway, his death has made me very angry... no, actually, it has pissed me off royally..."

Once Giorgos had translated, the diggers all laughed at the profanity.

"... and I won't rest until we've found out who killed him. Now, I've been appointed... uh, chosen to lead this dig, and we're staying here until we either find what we're looking for, or come to the conclusion that there's nothing of value here."

The diggers all let out appreciative murmurs and exclamations, and Janice knew she had said the right things. One task remained.

"Giorgos, how did the men view Professor Isaksson?"

"They think he was a hard but fair master, Doctor Covington."

"Good. Tell them I need a few men to help me bury him in accordance with the ancient traditions. It would be fitting and it's the least we can do for him. Once the pyre has been lit, we will all drink two shots each. One for the dead and one for the living," Janice said and held up the bottle of Ouzo.

When Giorgos had finished translating, all the men raised their hands in the air. "They all want to help, Doctor."

"All right. Let's do it," she said and jumped off the table.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

*Two days later.*

Letting out a long, slow sigh, Mel walked up to the edge of the current excavation site and looked down at her partner who was on her hands and knees, studying a piece of pottery she had just uncovered. "Found anything, Jan?" Mel said, shielding her eyes from the murderous sun.

"No. Not a damn thing," the archeologist said, throwing away the potsherd that had proven to be only a few decades old.

"Not even a tiny fragment?"

"No."

"Not even-"

"No, Mel, dammit!" Janice said, looking up at the translator who appeared to be ten feet tall from Janice's position.

"Oh. I'm bored."

Taking her hat off, Janice wiped her sweaty face and took a sip of water from a canteen she had placed in the shade. "I know you are, hon, you've told me four times today already... and it's only... what time is it?"

"Quarter to eleven."

"Okay, four times in four hours, that's..." Janice said, pretending to work out the maths by counting on her fingers.

"Well, you can laugh all you want, Jan Covington. I am bored. I've even erased all the letters from an old crossword puzzle I found in the liner of my suitcase and entered them again. And I've never really liked crossword puzzles!"

"Poor you."

Grunting, Janice threw down her rake and leaned back on her thighs so her boots supported her weight. "Hell, we ain't getting nowhere here. If we only knew what Professor Isaksson saw in this God-forsaken terrain. There's nothing here... nothing at all. Well, except a few old potsherds like the one I just threw away, but they're from the twentieth century."

"I think you're right, Jan. It does smell a little off, and I don't mean the rather strong scent coming from you, dear," Mel said, waving her hand in front of her nose.

"Oh, ha, ha," Janice said, looking down at the dark stains under her arms and down her chest.

"No, I mean why would Cecrops, the master mariner don't forget... why would he put his accumulated treasure here... \*here\*, of all places," Mel said and put out her arms almost as if she tried to gather the entire area in her grasp.

The dig site was located in a flat, sun-scorched wilderness that consisted of hard-packed, reddish soil and a few scattered boulders. Two hundred yards to their right, a steep cliff went down to a rocky beach approximately one hundred and forty feet below.

Mel wasn't as experienced as her partner when it came to the actual excavation part of their job, but from looking around at the desolate scenery, she felt that it was all wrong.

Taking off her glasses, she dabbed the dampness off the top of her ears with a lavender-laced handkerchief. "You saw how strong the surf was when we flew in here in that rickety contraption the other day. It's been two millennia... the relentless beat of the waves must have eroded several hundred yards of the coast line since then."

"Hmmm, that's a very good point. If only we could find the professor's notes..." Janice mumbled, punching her fist into the palm of her hand.

"Jan, were there any towns in this area in ancient times?"

"Yes, two of the maps indicate several small villages, but you know how imprecise they can be. Ah, I need a break, anyway." Climbing up from the excavation site, Janice wrapped her arm around Mel's waist and led them into the shadows of a nearby tent. "Hey, what's on your mind, Mel?"

"Oh, I was thinking... if we look beyond the erosion for a moment, if there were villages in the vicinity back in Cecrops' time, it would've been a good place for a fortified watch tower or a small fortress... you know, to guard the townships from pirates."

"Mmmm, I agree, but we haven't found anything that would indicate that," Janice said and took a long swig from her canteen. "Ohhh, now I see what you're gettin' at. Of course Cecrops wouldn't have placed his treasure right under the noses of soldiers or militia or whatever."

"Exactly, Jan," Mel said, adjusting her glasses and shooting her partner a beaming smile.

"Hmmm. On the other hand, we have proven... actually, you have proven in your translations... that Gabrielle wasn't always entirely truthful when it came to the things she talked about in the scrolls, right?"

"Well, sure, but..."

"After analyzing so many of 'em, we know that some of the things she wrote about took place several centuries apart, right?"

"Well... yes... but-"

Janice handed the canteen to Mel, but the translator shook her head. "And, drawing a conclusion from that, the scrolls aren't necessarily trustworthy."

"Jan! Did you forget that we were face to face with an ancient God of War a decade ago? I think the scrolls have proven themselves to be mostly right. Now I'll readily admit that they contain one or two flights of fancy, like repeatedly travelling to and returning from the Underworld, but there is no reason to believe that the Lost Mariner scroll isn't trustworthy."

"Well, apart from the fact that it's about an immortal-"

"Apart from that! We're at the wrong place, Jan. I can feel it in my... in my ... in my bones," Mel said and harrumphed angrily.

Hearing her partner's uncharacteristic outburst, Janice put a hand on the tall woman's elbow and leaned in towards her. "Mel, is this you speaking... or Xena?"

"It's me, Jan. I haven't felt the Warrior Princess since that day in the tomb. You know that."

"Just checkin'."

Suddenly a dark shadow fell across the ground just next to where they were standing, prompting Janice to look up.

Vitali Komaroff was standing unpleasantly close to them, dressed in white for once and holding a canteen that almost disappeared in his meaty hand. "Problem?" he said in his customary thick accent.

"No, Mr. Palooka. We're just taking a break," Jan said, earning herself a pointy elbow in the side courtesy of Mel Pappas.

"Sir Alastair don't like it when no work is done."

"Sir Alastair left and appointed me the dig captain, Vitali. You aren't working, either. Do you want me to tell Sir Alastair that the next time he pops up?" Janice said cockily.

For a while, Vitali's only answer was a sneer but the giant eventually spun around and lumbered back to the excavation site.

"Oh, Jan! I wish you wouldn't do that," Mel said and adjusted her glasses. "You know how volatile these people can be. One morning, you might wake up wondering why your head is on the floor while your body is still in the bunk!"

Chuckling, Janice patted Mel's shoulder. "Aw hell, if that's what you're afraid of, I can tell you that it ain't so bad. I've already tried that. One day up in Macedonia, the cook tried to blend his own liquor, and, well, it tasted like-

"No, I meant permanently," Mel said flatly, moving her fingers across her throat to show exactly what she was talking about.

"Ah, don't worry. The goon hasn't been born yet who can get the better of Janice Covington. That's a promise, hon."

"I just don't want anything to happen to you, love," Mel said, lowering her voice so none of the nearby workers would pick up the term of endearment.

"I know. It's all right," Janice said and plopped her sweat-soaked fedora back on her head. "Tell you what, I'll keep diggin' until the lunch break at noon and then we'll sift through every single piece of paper in Professor Isaksson's tent. From what I recall, he always kept very thorough records of his work and plans."

Nodding enthusiastically, Mel once again waved her hand in front of her nose to dissipate the strong fumes emanating from her partner. When it didn't work, she had to fall back to pinching her nostrils. "Sounds good. I'll start right away..." she said in a muffled voice, "... even if I can't find anything, it has to be more exciting than solving the crossword puzzle in the Charleston Evening Post from February fourth, 1932."

"Gotta be, toots," Janice said with a grin, thumping Mel's shoulder.

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Stepping into Professor Isaksson's tent for the first time, Mel was surprised to see how homely and comfortable it was. Apart from an army surplus bunk, a utilitarian metal desk with dozens of rolled-up

maps on it and a canvas safari chair placed behind it, the rest of the items wouldn't have looked out of place back in the civilized world.

The professor had a woven carpet on the floor, and even though it was quite sandy, it was clear to see that it was of a pretty high quality. At the far end of the tent stood a tall, wooden book cabinet with five packed shelves, crammed so full that all the planks were bending downwards quite severely. On top of the cabinet, the Professor had a globe and a kerosene lamp where the glass dome was cracked.

As Mel digested all this information, she narrowed her eyes and began to give the tent a very thorough once-over. Her first stop was the maps on the desktop and she made a mental note to start there. Continuing to peruse the tent, she kept a running tab in her mind: *'First the maps, then the drawers...'* she thought.

Scratching her chin, she walked over to the book cabinet to suss out how she should proceed.

"... then the book cabinet. Good Lawrd, I'll need to empty it out completely before I can do anything, or else it'll topple over. Why do these professor types always keep so much paperwork...? It's almost like they nest in it," she mumbled quietly to herself.

When it dawned on her that her own suitcases were just as full of books as Professor Isaksson's cabinet, Mel snickered and returned to the metal desk.

Sitting down on the safari chair, she could see that on the right side of the desk, it had three integrated full-sized drawers and a narrow drawer with a pane of glass for keeping important papers.

"Hmmm," she said, disrupting her own plan by trying to pull the drawers open. All three of the lower drawers were locked and the glass drawer was empty.

"Hmmm. All right. I need a key. That's for later. First the maps," she continued, taking the nearest roll.

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After looking at all fourteen maps - most of which covered the area around the dig site, but two were from potential dig sites further up the coast - she came to the conclusion that if the professor had kept a separate set of notes, they weren't there. In fact, all she had gotten out of the exercise was dust in her nose.

"Now, where would I put the keys for the drawers...? Hmmm." Looking around, Mel soon spotted a small pile of clothes the professor had worn when he had fallen to his death. Being torn and bloodied, they weren't particularly inviting, but she swallowed her discomfort and went through them - unfortunately, the gruesome task yielded nothing.

Standing back, Mel put an index finger on her lips and began to hum a simple tune while she looked around the tent. "Think, Mel Pappas. Think. Where would I put the keys for the drawers...? Think..." she mumbled to herself.

Still humming, she knelt down and looked at the underside of the desktop, but came up short. Continuing her search, she ran her fingers along the smooth underside until she came to a narrow crevice above the drawers.

Stretching out her long fingers as far as they would go, she probed the entire length of the crevice. When she touched something metallic, she let out an ecstatic "A-ha!", reached in and scooped out a set of keys.

At that exact moment, her peripheral vision registered movement at the entrance to the tent, and she quickly put the keys into one of her breast pockets and shot to her feet, pretending to be doing something that didn't have anything at all to do with finding a set of keys.

Expecting to see Vitali's sinister visage, Mel was quite surprised by the sight of a freshly bathed and damp-haired Janice looking back at her with a cheeky gleam in the eye.

"I say, Miss Pappas, what on Earth were you doing on the floor?" Janice said in a mock upper class accent.

Feeling slightly insulted, Mel adjusted her glasses and let out a brief harrumph. "Well, for your information, Miss Yankee Clipper, I've found the keys to the drawers."

"Great. Where are they?"

"In my pocket," Mel said and patted her breast pocket, producing a jingling- jangling sound.

"Oooh, let me get 'em," Janice said, reaching out ahead of her.

Narrowing her eyes and putting on her best attempt at a steely gaze, Mel removed the keys from the pocket before Janice could reach her. "No. I'll open it," she said and inserted the key into the lock on the top drawer, which opened at once.

Janice pretended to sulk, but when she noticed that it didn't have any effect on her tall partner, she shrugged and moved down to the other end of the tent to stand next to the book cabinet. "All right. I'll start here. Call me if you find anything of interest, toots."

"I will. Jan?"

"Yes, dear?"

"How did you get cleaned up?"

"How? I took a bath. What did you expect, that I licked myself clean?" Jan said, holding the first book on the bottom shelf, a dusty copy of Homer's Iliad.

A sharp intake of breath was soon followed by a "Janice Covington! You didn't!"

"Uh, yes I did. Did what?"

"You bathed with the men!"

"So?"

"'So?' So... so you were naked... with the men! Don't... I... you... can't...!"

"Ah. No big deal. I know what a naked guy looks like," Janice said with a shrug.

"That's not what I meant!" Mel spluttered, turning rather red-faced.

After shoving the Iliad back into the shelf, Janice took out the next book, an equally dusty copy of Aesop's Fables and began to leaf through it. "Oh, calm down, sweetheart... Giorgos held up a towel. No one saw anything. My chastity is preserved."

When Mel didn't offer an answer, Janice turned to look at the tall southerner, discovering that Mel's face wore an expression of equal parts sublime indignation, and rampant, if suppressed, curiosity.

Chuckling, Janice returned to the dusty books.

Mel blinked a couple of times and decided to focus on the desk drawer before she said something she'd regret. "Uh... nothing out of the ordinary in the top drawer. More maps," she said, rummaging through the drawer. "A spare canteen... empty. A case for his glasses... also empty."

"He was wearing 'em," Janice added offhand.

"All right. A few letters... oh, they're from his family in... uh, in Iceland," Mel said, holding a stack of letters which was neatly folded and wrapped in a red ribbon.

Janice briefly looked at the letters, but soon went back to the book cabinet. "Take them. We can try to get 'em back to his family somehow."

"That's a good idea, Jan. I'm sure they'll appreciate that," Mel said and stuffed the letters into her pocket. "Well, that's the top drawer. Have you found anything?"

"Plenty of books, and dust, dust and more dust."

"Oh. Well, the center drawer is empty save for a notepad where the cover has been torn off," Mel said, closing the drawer and moving down to the bottom one.

When she opened the final drawer, she let out an uncharacteristic whistle as she looked into it. "Jan, dear, you better come at once. There's a pistol in here... and a holster to put on a belt," she said, adjusting her glasses.

Janice was at her partner's side in a heartbeat and the two women both looked into the bottom drawer. "It's a German 9mm Walther P38 from the war," Janice said, picking up the black gun. "It's full," she continued after ejecting and checking the clip.

"Well, should we put it back?"

"No. We'll keep it. We never know when we'll need additional firepower. Hmmm." Reaching into the drawer, Janice took the holster - made of black leather - and gave it a thorough check. Its origins were soon revealed by an imprint of a swastika on the flap.

"Damn Nazis," Mel mumbled.

"Yeah. There must be thousands of German weapons freely available. Even though the Allied forces gathered up as many as they could back in '45 and '46, the local resistance had already, uh... they had made themselves self-sufficient, let's leave it at that. The Professor was probably offered the gun the moment he set foot here."

Nodding quietly to herself, Janice put the Walther into its holster and secured the flap by moving a leather strap down over a small peg.

A sudden commotion outside made both Mel and Janice spin around and run over to the tent's entrance. The sounds of a physical struggle and a cloud of dust lingering in the air near the bathing trench quickly hinted at some kind of fight among the diggers.

"Damn! I was afraid something like that might happen. Goddammit, that was the last thing we needed! Here, Mel, take the pistol, it's yours," Janice said and shoved the Walther into Mel's hands.

"But... I don't want it, Jan! You keep it!"

"I have my trusty old Webley Six. This one's yours," Janice said, already on her way out of the tent.

Staying behind, Mel looked at the gun with a look of unease on her face.

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As Janice sprinted over to the bathing trench, she quickly established that a fist fight had broken out between Vitali Komaroff and one of the Greek diggers who was dressed only in a loincloth.

Vitali's teeth were bared in a bloody sneer and a constant stream of angry-sounding Russian words left his lips. The huge Russian's nose and upper lip were bleeding and he had assumed an aggressive stance, standing with his meaty hands wrapped very firmly around the semi-naked digger's head, almost like he was trying to squeeze the living daylights out of him.

"Hey! Calm the hell down, Vitali! I don't want no fightin' on my dig! Let him go!" Janice said, but her words had no effect on the furious man.

All around the two fighters, the Greek diggers - in various state of undress - were voicing their displeasure by shouting obscenities and occasionally throwing rocks at Vitali, something that Giorgos tried to get them to stop doing before the situation got even more out of hand.

When two of the digger's friends rushed forward to help their companion against the bruiser, Giorgos barked several commands that made them back down - just barely.

"Vitali, I won't tell ya again. Let 'im go right now or I'm gonna make ya taste my whip until ya do!" Janice said, taking her bull whip off her belt and holding it ready.

Janice's actions made the Greek diggers shout even louder, but a murderous glare from the adventurer made them quiet down. The air was so thick with tension and testosterone that it appeared to simmer, seemingly only one gas mark below an uncontrollable explosion.

Vitali finally shut up, but didn't let go of the digger's head until Janice started raising the arm that held her whip. With an angry roar, the Russian gave the digger such a violent shove that he flew forward and came to a rough, ungraceful landing on the rocky ground.

"Good. Now get the hell outta here, Vitali. Go to your tent and stay there! I'll deal with you later!" Janice growled, giving the mad Russian a hard, unwavering glare.

Vitali showed her a hand gesture that didn't leave room for misinterpretation, but he finally turned around and lumbered away from the bathing trench.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Janice hooked the whip back onto her belt and wiped her suddenly sweat-soaked brow. "Giorgos, what the hell was that all about?"

"I don't know, Doctor Covington. I think the heat is getting to them," the foreman said, trying his best to stop a few of the diggers from going after the Russian.

*'What started it? Tell me now or regret it later!'* Janice barked in Greek, taking the diggers by complete surprise.

Takis, the digger Vitali fought, stepped forward and assumed a suitably obedient pose. *'I think I, uh... urinated on his pant leg when he walked past.'*

*'You pissed on his pants? No wonder he tried to kill ya. Why did ya do that, Takis?'*

*'I... just wanted to mess with him. He's such an asshole.'*

The other diggers started to laugh, but stopped rather quickly when they noticed that Janice's face was a mask of anger.

*'Hmmm. All right. That's today's wages gone right there, Takis. I demand discipline on my digs. No discipline, no wages. Understand?'*

*'Yes, Doctor.'*

*'Good. So you took a piss in the bathing trench? Did you remember to tell your mates who were standing downstream?'* Janice said, deciding to end the situation with a little humor.

*'Uh, no, Doctor.'*

Some of the other diggers began to grumble a bit at the revelation, but Giorgos silenced them with a few choice words.

*'Well, you can work that out amongst yourselves. I'm done here.'* "Giorgos, get Takis to the medic to get his cuts and bruises sorted. I'll be in the Professor's tent," Janice continued in English.

"Yes, Doctor Covington."

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While Janice was away, Mel walked over to the tall, dusty book cabinet and continued to sift through the books. She went through book after book, but it soon became clear that Professor Isaksson hadn't hidden anything at all between or in the dusty tomes.

After checking the top two shelves thoroughly, she let out a sigh and dabbed her forehead with a handkerchief. Walking back to the desk, she sat down on the safari chair and tried to look at the tent with fresh eyes.

A few moments later, she raised herself up to remove the stack of letters from her rear pocket; the square shape had made it difficult for her to get comfortable.

Looking at the letters, a flash of inspiration suddenly raced through Mel's mind, and she unlaced the red ribbon holding the letters together. Holding her breath - and feeling like she was on the brink of a major discovery - she took out the first letter and peeked inside.

It was obvious from the uneven edges of the envelope that when the professor had originally opened it, he hadn't bothered to use a paper cutter but had simply torn it open by hand.

The letters that became visible were written in the same hand Mel had already found several examples of around the tent, and she knew she had found something valuable. She took out the letter and began to read.

"Mmmm... mmmm... Stein Isaksson... journal... mmmm! Copy... mmmm... July 27th, 1951... still found no evidence... mmmm... oh! The nasty Russian and the slimy Italian have... mmmm... greater chance further north...?" she said, mumbling out loud as she skimmed down the first page.

Flipping over the letter, she discovered that it continued on the other side, but also that it was incomplete, finishing off with a small arrow pointing to the next page. "Oh! I'll bet the rest of the journal is in the other letters... oh, how exciting! Janice must see this!" she said out loud and moved to the edge of the safari chair, working herself into quite an excited state.

She quickly went to work taking all the letters out of the envelopes, and soon, she had a small stack of pages on the desk that she proceeded to sort by date.

On the top page, dated July 19th, 1951, the professor had written '*COPY - Prof. Stein Isaksson's private log and journal for the South Platamonas Excavation, funded by Sir Alastair Brougham-Tibbett - COPY*'.

Below the introduction, the professor had written two paragraphs in ancient Greek, and the mere sight of the letters she knew so well from Gabrielle's scrolls sent a tingling buzz through her system that caused her cheeks to flush bright red.

Adjusting her glasses, she jumped out of the safari chair to get her books so she could translate the paragraphs - but at the last moment, she realized that it was far too dangerous to leave the copy of the journal unguarded.

'Hmmm'-ing out loud, Mel scrunched up her face until she came up with the perfect hiding place for the papers. Chuckling, she began to unbutton her shirt.

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Five minutes later, Mel came back into the tent, dragging an infernally heavy suitcase after her. As she walked through the entrance, she spotted Janice resting on the Professor's bunk, looking just as sweaty as she had done before she had taken the bath.

"So... glad... you're... here... help me... get this... suitcase up... on the table... please," Mel said and came to a staggering halt in front of the desk.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bunk, Janice jumped up and walked over to the desk. "Sure thing, toots," she said and grabbed hold of the handle of the suitcase.

When the adventurer tried to lift it, she almost keeled over from the weight. "Whoa! Whatcha got in here? They do have boulders here in Greece, ya know... ya didn't have to import any from the States. Take the other end, huh?"

Mel leaned down and picked up the other end of the suitcase, and soon, the two women had placed the heavy suitcase on the desk.

"Well, I know that, Janice... but what they don't have is... my books," Mel said, timing her sentence with the opening of the suitcase's lid, revealing a wide selection of - mostly self-written - books on translating ancient Greek into modern English.

"Oh... hey! You found something, didn't ya?" Janice said, punching Mel's upper arm.

"Ow! Why yes, I did find something."

"You're such a swell dame, sweetheart. Well, where is it?"

Looking back at the entrance, Mel placed her fingers on her shirt's top button, but stopped before she had opened it. "Please guard the door, Jan. I'm about to take my shirt off."

"What did you find, Mel!? Aphrodite's greatest pleasure scrolls?" Janice said in a mock growl, wagging her eyebrows.

"Not quite. How about..." - Mel unbuttoned her shirt and pulled the letters out from their hiding place at the underside of her brassiere - "a copy of the Professor's journal?" she said, wearing a beaming smile that only got wider as she showed Janice the letters.

"Oh, they were hidden in the letters, huh? That's my girl. I knew I brought you along for more than your looks, toots."

Even though Mel was determined to ignore the innuendo, her left eyebrow still crept up her forehead and she let out a slightly indignant snort that - unfortunately - went clear over the adventurer's head.

"Let's see what he says," Janice said and took the first page. "You're going to translate those paragraphs now?" she continued, pointing at the ancient Greek.

"That's the plan, yes, if you'll ever let me get on with it," Mel said, pulling the safari chair back so she could sit down. She took the first of her books and began to leaf through it until she found what she was looking for. "May I have the top page, please?"

Handing Mel the piece of paper, Janice took off her fedora and wiped her sweaty brow. "Of course. I'll just sit down right over here and watch your sexy brain cells workin' overtime, baby," she said, walking back over to the professor's bunk.

Mel shot her partner an exasperated look over the rim of her glasses, but soon got down to translating the paragraphs.

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After looking at the first line for a few minutes, Mel furrowed her brow and leaned back in the safari chair. "Jan, there's something peculiar here. The letters are ancient Greek, but the syntax isn't. It's almost like the Professor didn't know what he was doing."

Sitting up on the bunk, Janice scratched her chin as she pondered Mel's words. "That's definitely not right. Professor Isaksson knew ancient Greek like the back of his hand."

"Well, this isn't... wait a minute... that's it, Jan, I think I have it!"

"Good. Now tell me what it says," Janice said and made herself comfortable again.

"All right, here goes. Ah, he used the ancient letters but the words are English. This is verbatim: This isn't the correct dig site. Chose this place on purpose to make the two henchmen sent here by Sir Alastair lose interest. They are too stupid to understand. But they might suspect something is wrong when we do not find anything. I do not trust Sir Alastair either. He is merely a puppet. Someone is pulling his strings. Only-

Hearing the last two sentences, Janice shot up from the bunk and pointed at Mel. "The last two lines... please repeat the last two lines, Mel."

" 'He is merely a puppet. Someone is pulling his strings.' "

"Hmmm. Interesting. Very interesting," Janice said and moved over to the desk to look over Mel's shoulder as she translated the two paragraphs. "Go on."

"All right. The Professor continues: Only I do not know who. Consulted ancient scrolls. The correct dig site is either at Map Epsilon section Delta dash four, possible, or at Map Epsilon section Gamma dash five, more likely, four miles north of Delta dash four. Terrain looks better. Caution, scroll claims d-dea...! Oh, my Goodness! Jan! Death trap!"

Shocked, Mel took off her glasses and stared wide-eyed at her partner.

Janice chewed on her cheek, seemingly deep in thought. After a while, she drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Well. It confirms our suspicions. We're at the wrong place."

"Death trap, Jan! He's warning us of a death trap!"

"I know. And if Professor Isaksson said it, it's true. He'd never concoct a cockamamie story like that just to scare off the kiddies. Hmmm. This changes things."

"It does indeed. Now we know there's a death trap waiting for us...!" Mel said again, wiping the lenses of her glasses and putting them back on the bridge of her nose.

"Map Epsilon... Mel, is it any of these maps here?" Janice said and grabbed an armful of maps.

"I d-don't know... it could be. I looked at them all before, b-but I've forgotten most of it now..."

"Well, let's find out," Janice said and knelt down on the carpet. She quickly spread out one map after the other until she found the one marked Epsilon.

The greatly detailed map had been drawn in the late nineteenth century and it showed the coastline from their current position and roughly fifteen miles further north. "Got it! What was the rest...? Section Delta something?"

"Section D-delta dash four and section Gamma dash five, four miles further north."

"Delta... here," Janice said and found the fourth bar. "And dash four is here," she said as she trailed her finger down the fourth column.

Pulling up in her pants so they wouldn't get baggy, Mel knelt down next to the adventurer. "Where is that?"

"Olimpia Akti."

"Hmmm. I'm not familiar with that location."

"Me, neither. Here's section Gamma dash five," Janice said and trailed her finger further upwards along the coast to find the second spot. "Paralia."

"That's where the Professor said we were 'more likely' to find what we are looking for."

"Cecrops' emerald. And perhaps the rest of his treasure as well," Janice said quietly, biting her lip. In her mind, she was already trying to come up with a plan that would take care of their three main problems - Sir Alastair, Vitali Komaroff and Ludovico, the second henchman.

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Thirty minutes later, Janice gave the pole supporting the roof of Vitali Komaroff's tent such a hard kick that the entire structure wobbled. The Russian was on his bunk, reading an old newspaper. His cut lip and his busted nose had turned bluish-red in the meantime, giving him an even meaner appearance.

"Get on your feet, Mr. Palooka. We need to have a word," Janice said and put her hands on her hips. For safety reasons, she had strapped on her gun belt, and her whip was loose and ready to be used in case the thug decided to play games.

"You not my boss, woman. Sir Alastair my boss," Vitali said in his characteristic rumbling voice, staying flat on his back on the bunk.

"That's true to a certain extent. Of course, in most parts of the world, the revolver is everyone's boss."

When Vitali looked up to see what Janice meant, he found himself staring into the muzzle of the Webley Six.

"You crazy, woman!"

"Who, me? Naw, I'm just a little bloated and irritable. And you, Joe Schmuck, are about to get on your feet for that little talk we were gonna have."

Grumbling, Vitali put away the newspaper and sat up on the bunk.

"That's a good puppy. Now, I demand discipline on my digs. You understand? Loyalty, obedience and dedication to the work. I have seen many times what happens when men don't pull their weight because of booze or the sun, or just from being lazy assholes, and it ain't pretty. Soon, those men will be face-down wearin' a couple a' bullet holes and waitin' for the next meat wagon, you understand?"

"Yes."

"After the lunch break, I expect to see you out there, workin' hard, pullin' your weight and sweatin' along with the rest of us."

"Not my job, woman!"

"It is now, chump. You understand?"

Vitali's beady eyes shot fire and he clenched his jaw and his fists, making Janice worry that she had overplayed her tough gal attitude. After a brief period where he looked like he was about to rip her head off with his bare hands, he relaxed and nodded.

"I need to radio Sir Alastair now. He expects my call," he said, wincing when the words caused his cut lip to sting.

"With a status report, huh?" Janice said and put the Webley back in its holster. "All right, you can do that. But remember my words, Vitali. I don't want no nonsense out of you. You understand?"

"I understand."

"Good. Once you've spoken to His most esteemed Slickness, I need to have a chit-chat with him while he's on the horn. We've uncovered something that should interest him," Janice said as a parting shot.

Vitali's jaw fell down slightly and he shot up from the bunk and hurried out of the tent to catch Janice. "You found the gem?"

"Not quite."

"Then what?"

Janice turned around and looked at the beefy Russian with a cheeky gleam in her eye. "Oh, I'm sure your boss will let you know once I've spoken to him. Well... maybe he won't. See ya after the break, Mr. Palooka."

The adventurer suddenly increased the tempo of her stride and left the much larger man in her dust.

After a few steps, Vitali gave up trying to follow the feisty woman and he came to a full stop in the middle of the camp. A few seconds later, he spun around and stomped back to his tent where he immediately dug into a metal footlocker at the end of the bunk.

He quickly found what he was looking for - a firmly-wrapped oilskin that held his old sidearm from when he was a Sergeant in the Red Army, three spare clips and a sheath with a razor-sharp eight-inch hunting knife.

Scrunching up his square-jawed face, he tapped his meaty index finger on the hilt of the blade a couple of times before rolling up the oilskin and putting it back in the metal footlocker.

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### **CHAPTER 3**

Standing in the door, Janice watched Vitali put on the headset - that looked completely ridiculous on his bulbous, clean-shaven head - and turn on the short wave radio.

After fiddling with various knobs and sliders, Vitali took the transmitter and began to send out the call sign that would attract Sir Alastair's attention, '*Cecrops*'.

A scant minute later, the connection crackled to life and the nobleman's upper class accent filled the radio shack, somewhat broken up by interference.

*'Platamonas, Platamonas, I read you. What's the latest?'*

"Uh... I have... uh, strange news for you, Sir Alastair."

*Pause.*

*'You found the emerald?'*

"No. The Doctor wants to speak to you. She right here now. With me," Vitali said, stressing the last words to let Sir Alastair know that he shouldn't spill any secrets.

*'Put her on.'*

"Sir Alastair, I-"

*'Now!'*

"Yes, Sir Alastair..."

Leering darkly at the grinning Janice, Vitali took off the headset and moved away from the radio. As they passed each other, he 'accidentally' bumped into her shoulder and shot her a patronizing glare. "Do you even know how to work radio, woman?"

"Oh, I don't know, Joe, let me try to twist a few knobs. Maybe I'll get lucky," Janice said and pushed her way past the brute who left in a hurry.

"Cecrops, Cecrops, this is Doctor Covington," she said as soon as she had sat down.

*'Good afternoon, Doctor, this is Sir Alastair. To what do I owe this pleasure?'*

Coming into the conversation, it had been Janice's intention to inform the nobleman that they had recovered a copy of the Professor's notes, but hearing the unbearably smug tone in Sir Alastair's voice made her realize that he knew far more about the missing notes and the Professor's accident than even she had suspected - *'But why... why did he have the Professor killed? It must be because he had worked out that Stein Isaksson was stalling and that Platamonas was worthless. I'll bet they have the original notes and I'll bet His Lordship has had them translated... but why didn't they just suggest to us to disband the camp and go further north when we arrived...?'*

At that moment, the connection started to howl and crackle, and Janice reached up and adjusted one of the knobs.

*'Doctor? Are you there?'*

"I'm here, Cecrops. There was a little technical dropout," Janice said. Taking a deep breath, she decided to go for it. "The message I have for you is that my associate and I have decided that we're in the wrong place entirely. We need to go further up the coast."

*'What do you base that on, Doctor?'*

"Intuition and twenty years of experience digging holes in the ground."

*'I see. How much further north?'*

"Hard to say exactly, but at least forty miles... maybe fifty."

*'That far...? Are you sure?'* Sir Alastair said in a puzzled voice, and suddenly Janice was less sure that he'd had the notes translated.

Behind Janice, Mel entered the radio shack and stepped up to stand behind her partner.

Feeling Mel's hand on her shoulder sent an idea flashing through her head - *'Of course! You stupid mutt! There's no way Professor Isaksson would have included the map references for the other potential dig sites in his original notes...! He even wrote that he didn't trust His most esteemed Slickness...!'* she thought, almost wanting to slap her forehead as she connected the dots.

"We're quite sure, Sir Alastair. The terrain here is all wrong. We estimate that we need to get a lot further up the coast," she said into the radio, trying to control her voice so the nobleman wouldn't know that she and Mel were onto him.

*'All right, you have my blessing to move the camp further north. Please keep me informed, Doctor Covington. Cecrops out.'*

"We will. Platamonas out," Janice said and took off the headset. Turning around, she could tell by the highly confused look on Mel's face that the tall translator wasn't with the program at all.

"Hi, Mel... you look fabulous, ya know that?" Janice said and tried to cop a feel right in the middle of the radio shack.

Letting out a brief shriek, Mel squirmed away from the adventurer's roaming hands that were presently placed firmly on her left buttock. "Oh! Jan... Jan! What are you doing?! Someone could walk in at any moment! Jan!"

"But I just wanna show that I got the hots for you, baby."

"What's happened to you in the ten minutes you were away? This is... this is... ugh! This is preposterous!" Mel said, finally managing to pry Janice's strong fingers off her rear end.

"His Ladyship has given us permission to move the camp further north."

"Oh..."

Sobering, Janice began to shut down the short wave radio and finished by unplugging the transmitter and pushing it away from the small desk. "Okay, here's what's on my mind. First, we go back to our tent and-"

"Jan Covington!" Mel spluttered, removing her glasses and rubbing her cheeks that had suddenly decided to glow deep red. "We are alone here... alone among Lord knows how many men who... who... haven't seen a wo... I...!"

Flashing a lopsided grin, Janice silenced her partner by putting a finger across her silky lips. "Well, first of all, I'm glad that you're thinkin' about the same things I'm thinkin' about, hon..."

"Mmmpf! Jan, I...!-"

"What I meant to say was that we need to go back to our tent and pack everything tonight. It's too dangerous to drive in the dark, especially since we don't have any detailed road maps. After stowing everything on the trucks, we'll grab a few hours' sleep. We'll break camp at first light."

As Mel digested Janice's words, her natural skin color slowly returned to her cheeks, but she kept an indignant look on her face. Rolling her eyes, she put her glasses back on and pushed them up her nose. "Oh... I see. For a minute there, I was worried that you... that you suggested that we... never mind."

"There's gonna be a soft bed waitin' for us at some point in our future so... hold that thought, toots," Janice said and touched the tip of Mel's nose with her index finger.

Feeling uncommonly bold, Mel leaned in and gave Janice a peck on the side of her head. "I will," she whispered, adding a sly, little wink.

As she turned around to leave the radio shack, she bumped squarely into Giorgos who had just stepped inside. The unexpected rendezvous - and thinking about what the foreman might have seen or heard - made the crimson hue return to her cheeks with a vengeance, and she hurried out of the shack with a befuddled look on her face.

"I'm, uh..." Giorgos said, feeling rather guilty for having seen more than he was supposed to. "Ahem. What's the latest, Doctor Covington?" he continued, taking off his desert cap and wringing it in his hands to hide his discomfort.

Grinning quite cheekily, Janice took off her fedora and wiped her brow on her sleeve. After putting her beloved brown hat back on her head with a soft 'plop', she put her hand on the foreman's shoulder and led him out of the radio shack. "Well, Giorgos, Sir Alastair has agreed on moving the camp. Mel and I got new information and it looks like we might have a better shot further north."

"Further north?"

"Yeah, at Olimpia Akti... or possible Paralia. Ring any bells for ya?"

Stopping in the center of the camp, Giorgos scrunched up his face at the Doctor's strange words. "I'm... I'm sorry, Doctor? Bells?"

"I meant, do those names mean anything to ya? Olimpia Akti and Paralia?"

"No. They're both close to very old cities, but... nothing apart from that, I'm afraid," Giorgos said with a telling shrug.

"Ah. Was a long shot, anyhow. Tell the workers that we'll pack the trucks tonight after dark... everything but their bunks. We'll leave before dawn. That way we should be able to get most of the way before the sun gets too hot. Okay?"

"Yes, Doctor. I'll tell them."

"Good man, Giorgos," Janice said and thumped the foreman's shoulder.

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At ten minutes past five a.m., Janice jumped off the bed of the lead truck after having made sure that the load - all the tents, most of the supports, some of the furniture and finally her and Mel's personal luggage - had been securely strapped down. Grunting, she raised the GMC's rear gate and worked all the latches to lock it in place.

Adjusting her heavy work gloves, she walked up to the right side of the cab and opened the passenger side door.

Mel was leaning against the truck's fuel tank, holding a cushion in her hand - from hard-earned experience, she knew how uncomfortable a truck seat could be.

"Are ya ready, toots?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Mel said and looked behind her. "Oh, it's so unfair that Giorgos has to spend the entire trip with that ugly brute next to him," she continued, looking past the second truck in the line - the converted Opel Blitz - and down to the other GMC CCKW.

"I agree, but Joe Schmuck don't wanna drive, so... and none of us wanted to drive the German truck, so that's how it's going to be. Place your boot here, hon," Janice said and pointed at the step on the side of the truck.

"I have done this before, you know," Mel said and swung herself up into the cab with surprising grace.

"Mmmm, I admire your style. Your long legs make it work, sweetie-pie," Janice said, standing on the step and looking straight in at Mel's aforementioned limbs.

"Oh, do behave, Jan. I trust you aren't going to act like a lecherous schoolgirl the entire way there...?" Mel said and placed the cushion under her rear end.

"Awwww, I was plannin' on doin' just that!"

Rolling her eyes, Mel gave her partner a gentle, but decisive, shove to get her out of the way and then closed the heavy door that still bore a white star courtesy of its former career in the US Army.

Janice moved around the front of the truck to check the lights and saw to her great satisfaction that everything worked. Before she got into the driver's seat, she walked back towards the other two trucks in their little convoy. After giving the driver of the Opel Blitz a thumbs-up - Takis, the Greek worker who had fought Vitali at the bathing trench - she continued back to the other GMC.

Jumping up on the step, she put her elbows on the sill of the door and peeked inside. The mood appeared to be fairly depressed as Vitali was sitting with a sour, crabby expression on his face, and Giorgos already looked quite fed up with everything before they had even moved an inch.

Janice used her index finger to push the fedora back from her face so she could get a clear view of the two men. "Giorgos, I'm going to take it slowly. No heroics. We don't know the terrain and we can't afford to lose any of the trucks... not to mention any of the men. We're gonna be doing twenty-five at the most. If you-"

"Doctor, that's miles, right?" Giorgos said, pointing at the speedo.

"Yeah... twenty-five miles per hour. I guess that's, uh, forty kilometers per hour or something like that."

From the passenger seat, Vitali let out a patronizing snort and a few mumbled words that described Giorgos' and Janice's parentage in colorful details.

Narrowing her eyes, Janice leaned into the cab and pointed a strong finger at the angry Russian. "Keep up that kinda lip, buster, an' I'm gonna make you sit on the bed when the sun's the strongest... or better yet, make ya walk! If that's what ya fancy doin', just keep talkin'," she growled.

Vitali got the message and shut up, but couldn't stop his beady eyes from shooting fire at the adventurer.

"Have a real pleasant trip, Giorgos," Janice said and patted the foreman's shoulder, earning herself a pained groan.

After walking back past the trucks, she opened the door to her own cab and crawled up into it. "Are you set, hon?" she asked with her finger hovering above the starter button.

"I guess," Mel said with a shrug.

"All righty, then. Here we go," Janice said and depressed the button. The six cylinder GMC engine rattled to life, sending a cloud of thick, black smoke out of the exhaust. Behind them, she could hear the other two trucks start their engines, and soon, their little convoy was ready to roll.

Once the rattling engine had settled down a bit, Janice honked the horn twice, selected first gear, and then set off on their journey to Olimpia Akti.

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Two hours later - which translated to thirty-eight miles - the convoy left the sun-scorched, rocky flats behind and entered an area of greener, if still desolate, pastures. Up until then, they had driven in open terrain, but now they came across a dirt road, the first sign of civilization they had seen for days.

"There must be people somewhere around here. Look, there are tire marks on the road," Mel said, pointing at a pair of deep wheel tracks in the dirt.

"Yeah. Suits me just fine. This truck is a piece of you-know-what out in the open... something's gotta be wrong with the rear axle assembly or the prop-shaft... it's sendin' out all kinds of squeaky, creaky, grinding noises," Janice said and geared down to prepare for a gentle slope that would most likely take them further down to sea level.

"Oh... is that what those sounds are? I thought it was your stomach complaining because you didn't get any breakfast," Mel said, leaning over to pat her partner's thigh.

"You know, it's not too far off, hon."

As Janice started driving down the gentle slope, she looked in the mirror to see how the other trucks were doing. At once, she caught the Opel Blitz rocking left and right, seemingly unable to stay in the tracks. She briefly wondered why that would be, but then it struck her that it was narrower than the two US-built trucks, and that meant that it wasn't able to span the grassy knoll in the center of the road the same way the GMCs could.

She craned her neck to try to look for the other Jimmy, but a sudden sharp intake of breath from Mel made her snap her attention back at the road.

"Aw, hell!" Janice said out loud as the gentle slope suddenly turned into a steep descent, making the road appear to fall off the edge of the earth. At the same time, the dirt road was reduced to a simple animal track,

and gray rocks with plenty of nasty-looking edges just waiting to carve up truck tires shot up from the ground on either side of the path. "Damn, damn, damn, this is just what we needed."

"Ohhhh!" Mel squealed and grabbed onto the dashboard, but Janice just gritted her teeth and geared down again, making the engine roar and send out a large cloud of black smoke.

Honking the horn several times to alert the trucks behind her of the imminent danger, Janice started the descent, going so slowly down the hill that she felt she could have walked faster.

It didn't take long for the axle assembly to send out new distress signals, but Janice chose to ignore it for the moment. Checking the mirrors with a steely gaze, she could see that the Opel Blitz came closer and closer to her rear end, and she began to curse under her breath when it became clear that Takis didn't know how to control his truck.

Looking ahead, she could see that they were still a good two hundred yards from the bottom of the hill. At the foot, the terrain leveled out and became sandy, eventually leading onto a beach with clean, grayish-white sand.

"Sheesh, I need a drink!" Janice said as she tried to blink the sweat out of her eyes. When it didn't work, she briefly looked at Mel who was shielding her eyes with her hands. "Hey, hon, wouldya mind dabbin' my forehead? I'm kinda sweaty here."

"Oh... ohhh... hang on," Mel said and dug into her pocket to find her lavender-laced handkerchief. With the sweat taken care of, she went back to shielding her eyes.

"Thanks, sweetheart. Won't be long befo- URGHH!"

Out of nowhere, the truck jerked forward with such force that both Mel and Janice were thrown back in their seats. The impact caused Janice to lose her grip on the steering wheel, and as she grappled to get her hands back on the rim, she let out an impressive barrage of curses.

"The next truck hit us!" Mel said in a trembling voice, looking into her side mirror.

"And he's using us as his brake, that son of a bitch!" Janice roared, frantically gearing down into first gear to stop the truck from taking off down the hill. The transmission and the axle assembly howled and groaned, but both seemed to hold up to the torture.

Carefully judging the distance to the bottom part of the trail, Janice slowly let off the gas to let the retarder slow the two vehicles that were still hooked up. Everything began to jerk and groan, and a whiff of oil smoke soon wafted through the cab, putting a dark, murderous expression on Janice's face.

"Fifty more yards and we'll be there!" Mel said, pointing ahead of her.

"With our luck, the sand will be too soft and we'll sink in to the Goddamned axles!"

Mel shot her partner an exasperated look, but soon realized that Janice was too busy to notice. Instead, she began to mouth a silent prayer to any deity who'd listen.

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When the trucks were finally down on the beach, they fanned out at once and drove up alongside each other with the engines still running.

Once they had come to a halt, Janice shot out of the cab and ran over to the Opel Blitz. Quickly climbing up the steps, she leaned on the window sill and shot Takis a very dark look that the Greek driver replied to by looking down at his hands.

*'My brakes went,'* he said in Greek, adding a half-shrug at the end.

*'You're not supposed to brake down a hill like that... you're supposed to use the engine! Where did you learn to drive a truck?'*

*'I didn't... uh, well, my cousin taught me.'*

"Yeah, right," Janice said in English and jumped off the Opel. The grill and both headlights were smashed and the bumper had been twisted slightly, but other than that, it appeared to be all right.

It was more than could be said about her own truck. Deciding it was prudent to check how much damage the rear impact had caused before they went any further, it didn't take her two seconds to spot the pool of oil staining the white sand.

As she got down on her knees, she cursed out loud when it was clear as day that the forward axle assembly was leaking oil at a ferocious rate. Underneath the truck, it smelled quite strongly of warm metal, and Janice knew that it wouldn't be long before it would seize up.

"Damn," she growled and punched the large off-road tire.

*'Jan? Jan?'* Mel said from up front, hanging out of the window.

Getting up, Janice brushed the sand off her knees and wiped her brow. "Yeah?"

*'What's going on back there? The engine is smelling quite badly of oil and exhaust fumes and I'm getting a bit queasy, dear.'*

Chuckling over Mel being Mel even in the middle of a crisis, Janice waved her hand and walked around the rear of the truck. When she saw the state of the tailgate - completely bashed in dead-center which had in turn wrecked all the latches - she grumbled a few choice cusswords.

In the meantime, the sun was slowly rising in the east, looking like a giant, crimson fireball hovering above the sea, and Janice could already feel the temperature starting to climb. "It's gonna be a hot one today. Damn. And now we're a truck short... double damn!" she mumbled to herself.

On her way back up to the cab, all kinds of possible solutions and remedies raced through her mind, but in her heart, she knew the truck was a write-off. "Baby, I'm sorry, we have to abandon ship," she said after she had climbed up into the cab.

"Oh, no. Because of the accident?" Mel said, placing a gentle hand on Janice's thigh.

"No, because the rear end is seizing up. It could happen any moment. We need to move our personal gear over to Giorgos in the other Jimmy."

"Ohhhh..." Mel whined, "why not the Opel?"

"You're afraid of Vitali?"

Adjusting her glasses, Mel nodded a few times, making a few strands of her silky smooth black hair fall out of the pony-tail she'd had tied it into. "Yes, I don't want to be too close to him if I can help it."

"Baby, it's either Vitali or thirty sweaty Greek diggers on the other truck. Is that better?"

"Oh, I... uh..."

"Naw, didn't think so. Hang on, I'm just gonna square it with Giorgos," Janice said and turned off the engine, letting it die in a series of choking, rattling coughs.

---

Half an hour later, Mel and Janice's suitcases and most of the smaller items needed to build the camp had been transferred to the other GMC, but the tents and the furniture were still on their original truck.

"Sheesh, I don't like leaving so much behind," Janice said, standing on the bed of the wrecked GMC.

"I don't think we've got much choice, Doctor Covington. The other truck can only carry two and a half tons," Giorgos said.

Taking off her hat, Janice stood up straight and looked around. "Yeah, well, I've heard stories that the GIs were able to load twice as much on 'em back in the war... but we can't risk it now, dammit!"

"How far is it to Olimpia Akti, Doctor?"

"Probably not too far. Somewhere around five to eight miles along the beach. Why?"

"Well, I was... no, forget it."

After jumping off the side of the truck, Janice pushed the fedora back on her head and walked up to her foreman. "Spill it, Giorgos."

"I was thinking... could we perhaps leave Vitali behind to guard the truck...?"

"Say, that's not a bad plan, that," Janice said, breaking out into a sly grin. "That way, we could kill two birds with one stone. He can stay here to guard the load while, you, me and Mel go onto the new camp site. Then we'll unload and flip-flop back here to get 'im and pick up the rest of the gear... excellent idea, Giorgos," she continued, taking off her hat and slapping it against Giorgos' chest.

"Who's going to tell him?"

"Oh, don't worry 'bout that. I know exactly what to say to Mr. Palooka."

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A further ten minutes on, the two remaining trucks set off along the beach, leaving a grumbling Vitali Komaroff behind to fantasize about what he would do to the Doctor and her tall associate when he got even the slimmest opportunity.

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As the day wore on, the beach-front camp was built and then inhabited by tired workers and managers. By nightfall, nearly all the tents had been erected, save for the mess tent, but the cook and a handful of the diggers were working hard at putting it up.

Sighing deeply from fatigue, Mel stood in the doorway to her own tent and stared at her aching hands that had been given quite a workout when she had helped unloading the truck to speed up the process. She wished she had some of her favorite ointment, but all her personal hygiene products were in her suitcases and she simply couldn't be bothered to unpack them.

Turning around, she sighed again when she noticed that the workers setting up their tent had put the bunks on either side of the center path.

"Well, how could they know when you were too scared of their reaction to tell them...?" she said quietly to herself as she tried to move the heavy bunk over to the other one so they were side by side.

She was able to get it halfway there, but then she ran out of strength and had to give up. With a shrug, she simply flopped down on it to catch her breath.

Two minutes later, she was sleeping.

The next thing she knew was that someone held something under her nose, and that the 'something' smelled like hot coffee.

Cracking open an eyelid, Mel looked around and was astonished to see that it was broad daylight, not only in the tent, but outside as well. Then she looked up and saw Janice holding a steaming mug of coffee.

"Hey," Janice said, wearing a big grin.

"Oh... I fell asleep..."

"I'll say. You looked so peaceful when I got back to the tent that I decided to let you work on your forty winks. Of course, they turned into seven-hundred and forty, but you know..."

"Uh, thank you," Mel said, wondering how it was possible that her mouth could be bone dry and her bladder quite full after only sleeping for a few minutes. Then she noticed that she was dressed in her nightshift, and she let out a brief shriek and folded her arms across her chest. "Wh-who changed my clothes?!"

"Well, I did, toots. Who else? Sheesh, you've slept all night!" Janice said and let out a loud laugh. "Hey, here's your coffee. Grab it while it's hot," she continued and thrust the mug down next to Mel's hands.

Sitting up, Mel took the mug and tried to focus, but then she realized that she wasn't wearing her glasses. "All night? I slept all night? Why didn't you wake me up?" she said, patting the bunk she was on and the one next to her to find her spectacles.

"Like I said, you looked really peaceful and I didn't want to ruin the moment. Your glasses are here, hon," Janice said and offered the translator her black frame.

"Thank you. What time is it?"

"Eight in the morning. Do you want to hear the plans for today?" Janice said and sat down on the canvas safari chair she had taken from Professor Isaksson's tent.

"Yes, please."

"I've done some scouting and it appears we're camped pretty close to a system of caves in the face of the cliffs. Some of them appear to be deep and ancient. This could be it, Mel."

"Well, Jan, don't forget... if this is Map Epsilon section Delta dash four-"

"It is, I'm sure of it."

"... then the Professor's notes said that it was only a 'possible' site to find the treasure," Mel said and took a swig of her coffee.

"I know. Anyhow, Giorgos and I are planning on going into the largest one in a little while. Could I tempt you to-"

"Oh, yes! I wouldn't miss it for the world!" Mel said, nodding so hard that her hair bobbed up and down.

"Great."

"But first... I have to go to the little girl's room," Mel added quietly, crossing her legs to underline her distress.

Grinning broadly, Janice offered her partner a hand. "How lucky that the waste pit is all good and ready, then."

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A brief while later, Mel, Janice and Giorgos came up to stand at the mouth of a cave. The opening was approximately fifteen feet wide and eight feet tall, and it wasn't possible to see the back wall of the cave, not even with the flashlights they were all carrying.

"Jan, remember what the map said about a potential death trap...?" Mel said, moving the cone of light across the dark void.

"Yeah, but that was the other location, not here."

"Are you sure?"

"Fully. Look, honey, if you don't feel right about going in there, Giorgos and me can do it just fine on our own. Right, Giorgos?"

The foreman nodded, unsure of how to react to the unusual term of endearment. Looking from one woman to the other, he decided to play it safe and ignore their banter. "Yes, Doctor. There shouldn't be a problem. We have a coil of rope with us that we'll place where we walk. That way we can always find back, if that's what you're worried about."

"Hmmm, well, it's not, really... " Mel said, trying to study her partner's face to see if the intrepid adventurer was trying to protect her by holding something back. When Janice appeared to be sincere, she shrugged and began to walk into the mouth of the cave. "But all right. We're here for a reason."

"A woman of action! That's my Mel Pappas!" Janice said and tipped her hat.

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Roughly seventy yards into the cave, they came to a three-way fork in the road that led to two medium-size paths and one that was so narrow that no person could walk through it.

"Well, we can't move straight ahead. What's it to be, left or right?" Janice said, adjusting the grip on her flashlight.

"We must be right under the hillside... fascinating..." Mel said, looking at the roof of the tunnel they were in instead of at the three branches. Reaching out to touch the rockface, she marveled at how rough its texture was under her fingertips as she let her hand glide down the wall. "It's very cold," she said almost as an afterthought.

"Oh, and here I was, hopin' we'd find a lava pocket..." Janice said with her tongue stuck so firmly in her cheek that it was practically breaking through - Giorgos just looked puzzled.

"Why yes, yes, and... Pardon?" Mel said, squinting at her partner.

Winking at Mel, Janice zipped up her jacket and turned towards the third of the branches. "Never mind. I've decided... it's the one on the right. My nose tells me that right can't be wrong."

"Very funny, Jan. I'll bring up the rear," Mel said, still busy studying the walls and roof of the tunnel they were in. After Janice and Giorgos had moved into the third branch, Mel turned around to follow them which made the cone of light dance about on the section of the rockface that was immediately above the tunnel.

Suddenly, something reflected the light, and Mel let out a short gasp when she saw what it was. "Jan! Jan! It is the right one... I... I... I mean, the one you're in is the correct one... I've just found a marker above it that simply must be man-made!"

"Where?" Janice said, having hurried back to the branch point.

"There, look... do you see it?" Mel said, shining her flashlight at an arrow that had been carved into the rock. The arrow had been drawn pointing downwards with the head resting directly on top of the roof of the third branch.

"I see it. Great job, Mel! Whoever carved that couldn't have predicted that the modern flashlights would be so powerful. If we'd had old-fashioned torches, we'd never have spotted it."

"No, but... it doesn't look like it's two thousand years old, does it?"

Janice cocked her head and tried to make the carving speak to her. "Hmmm. No, it doesn't, I'll give you that. Anyway, let's move on. Now we know we're on the right track."

---

Not long after, the branch opened up into a spacious cavern that showed clear signs of having been used as a shelter by someone. A table and a low bench, both made of a dark wood, stood at the far wall, and there were several discarded, blackened torches lying on the sandy ground.

"Hmmm," Janice said, kneeling down next to one of the torches. Letting the cone of light move around the cavern, she quickly established that there was no other way out - they had come to the end of that particular branch. "Giorgos, can you see anything that would indicate how old this is?"

Moving his flashlight around, Giorgos soon found something buried in the sand that reflected the light, but when he investigated it further, it proved to be nothing more than a battered old brass lantern.

"I don't know for sure, Doctor, but this lantern looks like it could be from the late eighteenth century... maybe early nineteenth century. Maybe later."

"Mmmm, yeah. Definitely not from Cecrops' time, that's a fact," Janice said and stood up.

Mel took off her glasses and polished the lenses that had misted up in the chilly temperatures. As she put them back on, she turned her flashlight at the foreman. "Giorgos, could the Greek resistance have used this in the war? Perhaps for storing weapons?"

"They very well could have, Miss Pappas."

Sighing, Janice pushed her fedora back on her head and scratched her forehead. "Well, whatever it is... or was, Cecrops it ain't. Let's go back, people. Looks like we have to find ourselves another cave."

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Thirty minutes later, Mel was buried in her thesis on the Lost Mariner scroll, trying to extrapolate any clues she may have missed in her earlier studies - but she wasn't particularly successful.

While that was happening, Janice was trying her damndest to plow a furrow in the Professor's old desk by tapping her fingers repeatedly in a very frustrated fashion.

When she had finally had enough, she clenched her fist and slammed it into the desktop, startling Mel quite badly. "Damn, I was so sure this was the right place... with that arrow an' all," the adventurer said.

"Oh, I had a hunch it wouldn't be," Mel said with her nose into her books.

"How so, Miss Bookworm?"

Looking up, Mel shot her partner a sly glance over the rim of her glasses. "Because there wasn't any death trap at the entrance, like the Professor's notes said there would be."

"Oh, Mel... I don't think that was supposed to be taken literally."

"Well, I think it was, Jan. Here's what the Professor said in his notes... ahem," Mel said and picked up another book. Clearing her throat, she began to read. "This isn't... mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... but they might... mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... oh, yes, here it is: Consulted ancient scrolls. The correct dig site is either at Map Epsilon section Delta dash four, possible, or at Map Epsilon section Gamma dash five, more likely, four miles north of Delta dash four. Terrain looks better. Caution, scroll claims death trap, exclamation point. And there you have it."

Getting up, Janice walked over to stand behind her partner so she could peek over her shoulder to read the document. She trailed her index finger down the words like she was expecting the gesture to give her a better understanding of any hidden meaning. Once she had read it all, she started over and paused almost at once at 'Consulted ancient scrolls'.

Tapping her finger against the sentence, she looked at Mel with a quizzical look on her face. "Ancient scroll? Which scroll?"

"Not the Lost Mariner one, I'm sure of it. There's absolutely nothing in it that could give away the location of the treasure, and certainly nothing about any potential death traps, Jan. It ends with Xena and Gabrielle walking away on a beach together with Cecrops who had been saved from the curse. He was still immortal, of course, but that was apparently less important in the grand scheme of things."

Growling in frustration, Janice took off her fedora and wiped her sweaty forehead on her sleeve. When the insight didn't come to her, she moved away from Mel and began to pace back and forth on the carpet.

"There's something we're missing, Mel. Something... it's right there, but I can't."

A sudden knock on one of the tent's support beams made Janice turn around. "Enter!" she barked, gesturing to Mel to make her put away the notes at once.

Taking off his desert cap, Giorgos entered the tent with a concerned look on his face. "Doctor Covington, Miss Pappas. I fear Vitali is planning something terrible. I heard him speak to one of the workers. I couldn't pick up all the words, but Vitali was offering the digger a lot of cash... I don't know what for."

"Oh, my!" Mel said with a gasp. "Jan, what if he comes for us while we sleep?"

Faced with the bad news, Janice scrunched up her face and began to chew on her cheek. "Maybe leaving Mr. Palooka by the truck yesterday wasn't such a good idea after all... sounds like it could have pushed him over the edge."

"What do you want me to do, Doctor? If you want me to guard your tent tonight, I will gladly do that," Giorgos said, wringing his desert cap in his hands.

"Let's talk about that a little later, okay? First of all, Mel and I need to explore the next caves in the system."

Giorgos suddenly nodded quite enthusiastically. "All right. Instead of going in with you, I could wait outside... perhaps I'll be able to stop Vitali from going ahead with his evil plan... if he's got one."

"Oh my Goodness, Jan! Maybe he's planning on trapping us forever with a rockslide... or... or... maybe he's... maybe h-he's..."

"Calm down, toots. That mad Russian ain't done nothin' yet, and we don't know if he even will. Maybe he gave the digger some moolah for giving him a butt rash, who knows?"

"A... what, Doctor Covington?" Giorgos said, looking like a giant question mark.

"I'll explain later. Mel, just relax, I can handle him. Thanks, Giorgos... go back to whatever you were doing," Janice said and waved her hand in the foreman's direction.

"Yes, Doctor."

Mel rose from the desk and began to fan herself with one of the pages of the Professor's notes. Her cheeks had turned red over the course of the conversation, and she appeared like she badly needed a shot of something strong. "Oh, Goodness me, I'm suddenly feeling quite queasy and lightheaded. Jan, once this is all over, we need to find a way to thank that nice Mr. Kalogerikou for all the things he's done for us."

"Yeah... He's very helpful," Janice said thoughtfully, assuming an unreadable expression on her face as she looked out of the tent at Giorgos crossing the camp and walking into the mess tent.

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## CHAPTER 4

After having trawled through the copy of the Professor's notes for the hundredth time, Janice gave up trying to find what it was that eluded her. Instead, she put her jacket back on and plopped her indispensable fedora on her head.

"Mel, if Vitali really is on the prowl, we better take the copy of the notes with us. I doubt Giorgos could stop him, no matter how much he thinks he could," she said as she checked her flashlight.

"Will do, dear. Do you want me to bring some fruit to go with the water?"

When Janice didn't answer, Mel turned around and shot her partner a curious glance. "Something wrong, dear?"

"No, it's just... oh, damn, I feel there's something we should be looking at, but aren't... I can't grasp it, it's just out of reach," Janice said and waved her hands in the air to underline her words.

"Does it have something to do with the system of caves?"

"No... I don't think so. Ah, never mind. It'll come to me. Are you ready?"

After working the little button on her flashlight, Mel nodded. "Yes. Did you want me to bring some fruit?"

"Yeah, couldn't hurt."

Looking at Mel's striking outfit - brown boots, high-waisted khaki pants and a long-sleeved khaki shirt - Janice couldn't help but grin at the improbability of such simple garments coming together to create a masterpiece. *Well, I guess the gorgeous, graceful, tall Southern Belle wearin' those garments has something to do with it,* she thought, pushing her hat back from her forehead.

Mel caught the crooked grin on Janice's face and answered it with one of her own, knowing full well what was on the adventurer's mind. Checking that they were alone, she closed the distance between them and leaned down to give Janice a loving kiss on the lips.

Once they separated, Janice licked her lips to savor the unique taste of her lover. "Don't forget, toots... soft bed, clean sheets. Soon," she said with a wink.

"Maybe an ice cube?" Mel said, looking down at her flashlight.

"Mmmm... maybe."

"Let's hurry up and find that emerald, Jan."

Nodding, Janice moved the curtain aside and made way for Mel to step out onto the firm part of the beach. "Glad to hear you're talkin' my language, baby," she growled for Mel's ears only.

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Walking past the crew tents, Janice could hear the workers talk amongst themselves and she was able to pick up that they were getting restless. With the camp being on sand and their target a cave instead of a hole in the ground, she realized that the workers didn't have much to do. She made a mental note to inform Giorgos that he should keep them busy so that the discipline wouldn't suffer.

Suddenly noticing that she had fallen behind her long-legged companion, Janice increased the tempo and was soon at Mel's side.

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Not long after, they found themselves standing at the mouth of another cave. Compared to the one they had explored earlier in the day, this one was quite a lot narrower and the ceiling was lower as well - roughly twelve feet across and seven feet high.

The rockface was more or less the same color as that found at the first cave, but the texture was different: it had sharper edges and it was much coarser with a higher occurrence of granite that presented itself in a multitude of little crystalline fragments that reflected the flashlights.

"I don't think we're gonna find an arrow or anything like that in here, Mel. The rock is too hard," Janice said, sweeping her flashlight over the cave's interior. The far wall appeared to be split in two; separated by an even narrower crevice that led off further into the hillside.

"No, I think you're right. Can we fit into that crevice?" Mel said, pointing her flashlight at the same crevice Janice was looking at.

"Just barely. Hey, if you don't want to risk it, you can wait out here...?"

"Oh, no, you don't. Oh, no. I'm going with you... but I better go first. If I can't fit, I won't block your exit if I get stuck," Mel said, earning herself an amused little chuckle.

Walking up to the far wall, the light from Mel's flashlight went through the crevice and lit up a wall inside the tunnel, revealing that the apparent narrowness was simply an optical illusion - in reality, the tunnel had a Z-shaped entrance and the tunnel behind it was at least three feet wide.

When Mel noticed that, her eyebrows shot upwards and she broke out into an excited little squeal. "Oh! Jan, look there! It's much wider than it appears," she said, giddily moving the flashlight from side to side to expose the illusion.

"Excellent field work, baby. D'ya still wanna go first?"

"Yes!"

"Well, off you go, then," Janice said and gave her partner a gentle push on the butt.

Mel got the message and moved through the Z, careful not to tear her clothes on the sharp edges of the rockface.

At first, she walked quite slowly, constantly shining the flashlight down at her feet so she could see where she was going in the pitch black tunnel, but after a little while, she became bolder and raised the light to shine ahead of her instead.

"See anything?" Janice said from somewhere behind her tall companion.

Still moving forward, Mel shook her head, but then remembered that Janice wouldn't be able to see it. "Not yet," she whispered "but... I think we're about to move into a cavern of some kind... yes... yes, we definitely are...!"

"Good."

"Yes, it's definitely opening up now," Mel whispered, slowing down a bit so she had better time to see where she was going. "Uh, Jan...?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think that the illusion at the entrance was the death trap the Professor was talking about?"

"Hmmm. Hard to say, Mel. It would only work once. Are we at the cavern yet?"

"Just about... two more steps and we're... yes, we're here," Mel said as they moved into a grotto-like cavern at the end of the tunnel.

"Smells funny in here. Jan, shine your lig-AAHHHHH!" Suddenly howling like a squealing pig, Mel jumped back and slammed hard into Janice who got pushed up against the rock and almost dropped her flashlight.

"What the flying...?! Mel, calm down! Will you calm down, Mel!" When the hysterically babbling translator didn't react, Janice tried to shove her out of the way so she could find out what was going on, but even that was hard work. "What's in here...? What did you see? For cryin' out loud, Mel, lemme through!"

"A sk-sk-sk-skeleton!"

"What? Where?" Janice said, finally managing to squeeze past the trembling Mel. Once she was in the clear, she quickly swept the cone of light across the cave. What she saw made her eyes pop wide open and she hurriedly pinched the back of her hand to make sure that she wasn't seeing things - there were at least five wooden sea chests in the cave, all filled to the brim with gold and silver coins, jewelry, pearls, religious artifacts and dozens of other forms of valuables.

"Oh, sweet mercy..." she whispered hoarsely, but Mel interrupted her almost at once.

Trembling badly, Mel pointed the flashlight at the ground. "Th-th-th-there! Th-there it is!"

Tearing her eyes away from the sea chests for a brief moment, Janice moved the flashlight downwards and eventually found a skeleton leaning against the back wall of the cave. Most of its bones had fallen off, but the way it was positioned had made the cranium remain on top of the vertebrae, forever frozen in a horrific, jaw-less grimace.

Mel quickly made the sign of the cross, but Janice was more interested in the object lying on the ground next to the skeleton's pelvis.

"That's the remains of a sword... or a long dagger. The poor devil was probably stabbed in the gut or the chest and crawled in here to die... damn. What an awful way to go," she said and moved her flashlight back to the sea chests.

"But why would... oh, my Word!" Mel said, catching her first glimpse of the treasures. "Is... is... that...?"

Janice rubbed her forehead and let out a sigh. "Yeah. Gold. And plenty of it."

"But is it Cecrops' treasure? Those remains can't be the Mariner," Mel continued, moving the flashlight back to the skeleton. "Cecrops is immortal, after all."

Groaning, Janice shone her light at her partner. "Mel... there is no such thing as immortal beings. Why won't you understand that?"

"Well, pardon me for being blunt, but what does a New Yorker know of such things...? Did you forget that we fought Ares, the ancient Greek God of War? And didn't we already discuss this?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," Janice said, grumbling. "But that's not Ares lying there, it's just a pirate, a buccaneer or whatever you want to call it."

A sudden thought flashed through Mel's mind, and she gasped loudly and put her hands to her bosom. "Oh, my! Jan... Jan, what... what if that is one of Cecrops' men...? Gabrielle mentioned specifically that he had a full crew...!"

Sighing deeply, Janice rubbed her forehead again. "It can't be, Mel. Look at these religious artifacts, they're not two thousand years old," the adventurer said and walked over to the first sea chest. Reaching into the pile of treasure, she took a crucifix - made of solid gold and adorned with a single ruby - and held it under the spotlight.

"Oh... no, you're right. I'd say they were no older than the seventeenth century. Oh, gosh darn it..."

"It's just a common pirate," Janice said and shone the light at the skeleton.

Adjusting her glasses, Mel summoned up all her courage and went over to the skeleton to take a closer look. Once there, she crouched down at a safe distance and used the flashlight to try to find any clues as to its origins. "Maybe he fought one of his shipmates... maybe this was a captain or a first mate... since the treasure is still here, I'd say that whomever he fought, the opponent was critically or fatally injured as well. If they fought out on the beach, the ocean would have reclaimed the other corpse almost at once."

"Good theory, Mel. And it could be a very detailed description of what's about to happen to us."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Gold fever. The lust for gold is the worst kind of greed."

Getting up, Mel brushed off her pant legs and joined Janice at the treasure. "I know, but... are you suggesting we leave it here? Surely not?"

"What Ares did to us back then in the tomb in Macedonia was nothing compared to what Vitali and the others are going to do to claim this treasure... if we're lucky, they'll kill us fast. And then they'll kill each other. With gold, it's always every man for himself," Janice said, scooping up a handful of gold and silver coins.

"Oh, Good Lord, Janice, please don't say things like that..."

"It's harsh reality, toots," the adventurer continued and dropped the coins back into the chest, making them go cling-clang against each other. "I've seen it once, on an expedition with my Dad. In 1934, deep in the Amazonian jungle, we found a cache of Indian gold... fifty pounds or so in fist-sized nuggets. We were fifteen when we went in... and we were three when we came out. Me, my Dad and a native guide. The rest were dead. Slaughtered. By each other, tryin' to claim the grand prize."

"Oh, how dreadful... You're right, darling. We can't risk it. We'll have to leave the workers and Vitali in the dark for now... not to mention Sir Alastair."

"Not just those people, Mel. Giorgos as well."

"But... I must object, Jan Covington! Giorgos has done nothing but sterling work for us since we met him!"

Picking up a silver necklace, Janice turned it over several times to make the metal reflect the light. "Mmmm. I want to trust him, but I'm not sure we can. Mel, we need to keep completely silent about this find until we find a way to lessen the, uh, fallout."

"Jan, if this had been Cecrops' treasure, then we would've had to tell Sir Alastair and the men... I mean, that's why we're here in the first place," Mel said and adjusted her glasses.

"I know... but this is a bonus no one could have counted on. And free money always gives everyone a kick. If they see this, they'll go gold crazy, and then we'll never get to Gamma dash five because there won't be an expedition at all."

"But... but couldn't we salvage it ourselves?"

"You gotta be kiddin', Mel, these sea chests must weigh close to two hundred pounds each... there's no way we can get them out ourselves. No way."

"Little by little, then?"

"We'd be here a week."

Sighing, Mel nodded in the darkness. "I suppose you're right, Jan. Oh, shoot."

"Mel, let's go back to the camp. Let's say that this was a dead end as well," Janice said, took her partner by the elbow and led her towards the tunnel that would take them back to the beach. "Regardless of what happens with the location at Gamma dash five, we can inform the authorities of this find. That way, we'll be at a safe distance," she continued, stepping into the tunnel.

"All right. I understand. This was a dead end. Well, for that poor soul, it really was..." Mel said and pointed the flashlight at the skeleton for the last time.

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By nightfall, the general mood in the camp had deteriorated to the point where Mel was afraid of setting a foot outside their tent. Someone had found the cook's stock of Ouzo and the bottles had been distributed among the workers; the inevitable result was a camp full of drunken, rowdy, restless men - the perfect recipe for disaster.

Patrolling the camp with one hand on her whip and the other on the hilt of her Webley Six, Janice felt and looked like a volcano about to erupt. Everywhere she checked, the workers had made a mess of the tents

and the equipment, and their dancing and loud, drunken singing were grating quite severely on her patience and her nerves.

Occasionally, two or more diggers started a fist fight that nearly always sent a man crashing to the floor, bleeding from cuts and bruises. At first, Janice had tried to stop the fights, but when three further skirmishes broke out while she was still trying to calm everyone down in the first one, she gave up and let the men kick the stuffing out of each other.

After inspecting the radio shack - the farthest point of the camp - Janice started the return trip, but she only got as far as the mess tent. Out of nowhere, two drunken rowdies stepped out of the shadows to block her path.

*'Hey, woman, why don't'cha come over and have some fun with the men? Bring your tall friend. I'm sure we could find something for you to do,'* the man on the left said in Greek, taking several deep chugs from a half-empty bottle of Ouzo.

*'Oh?'*

*'Yeah.'*

*'I don't think so.'*

*'Maybe you're one of those freaks who don't like men?'*

*'Maybe I just don't like slimeballs like you, chump.'*

Both men clenched their fists and began to move closer to Janice. *'Take that back, bitch,'* the man on the right said.

Standing her ground, Janice took a firmer grip on the Webley and nodded towards the second man. *'You... you helped me light Professor Isaksson's funeral pyre the other day. Why this crap now?'*

*'That was then.'*

*'And this is now. I get it,'* Janice said and pulled her Webley out of the holster. *'You wanna get shot? I'm crazy enough to pull the trigger. You know that.'*

*'If you shoot, they'll all come for ya, bitch,'* the first man said.

Conceding the point, Janice put the revolver away and began to do some fast thinking instead. One look at the men's drunken posture gave her an idea that she executed almost at once.

Pretending to cower, she inched towards them until she was so close that she could smell their Ouzo-laced breaths - then she suddenly ducked down and ran between them, making the two men turn towards each other while trying to reach for her.

Stopping immediately, Janice spun around, grabbed a handful of each of the two drunken men's shirts and forcibly pulled them together - the result wasn't long in coming: their heads clonked together in a literal head-on collision, creating a sound similar to that of a bowling ball scoring a perfect strike.

Groaning loudly, both men lost consciousness and slipped to the ground, looking very much like they were lying arm in arm.

"Awww, ain't that cute," Janice said out loud before checking to see if anyone had heard the commotion. With all the racket coming from the tents, no one had, and she spun around to hurry back to Mel.

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The next thing she knew was that she was face-down on the ground, choking on a mouthful of sand. Coughing and spluttering, she rolled over onto her back to see what the hell had happened.

Holding a nasty-looking, razor-sharp hunting knife, Vitali Komaroff lumbered out of the shadows and came up to stand at Janice's feet.

The Russian appeared to be quite drunk and his inebriated state had seemingly made him even meaner than usual. His already ungainly face was contorted into a gruesome, even sadistic, mask and as he came closer to Janice, his lips parted in an ice cold sneer.

"Now you die, woman," he slurred, changing the grip on the knife to get a better angle of attack.

Coiling up like a spring, Janice tightened all her muscles and jumped to her feet. "Oh yeah? Don't think so, Schmuck."

"Oh yes, you will die!" Vitali said, breaking out into something that could be interpreted as a laugh.

The grotesque sound sent a shiver down Janice's back, and she knew she had to act fast. Her hand shot down to the Webley, but before she had time to raise it fully, Vitali jumped forward and kicked it out of her hand, moving so fast that she never saw it coming.

Belying his lumbering appearance, Vitali moved with the grace and agility of a big lion, circling Janice and occasionally stabbing the knife ahead of him.

In the middle of evading a thrust with the hunting knife, Janice realized with startling clarity that she was in serious trouble, and her mind went into overdrive to come up with a solution that could get her out of there. She jerked left, then right to try to trick Vitali into going the wrong way, but he shadowed her every move with a nasty laugh.

Suddenly breaking out into a sweat, Janice's eyes grew wide as it dawned on her that it might be the end of the road for her. All kinds of thoughts flashed through her mind - especially of what would happen to Mel when she was gone - but it only helped her gain a steely determination.

Roaring loudly, Janice reached down and scooped up a handful of sand that she threw in Vitali's beady eyes, making the giant groan and clutch his brow.

Before he had time to get the sand out, Janice jumped forward and kicked out at his crotch - unfortunately for the adventurer, Vitali was able to move at the very last moment, so her boot only hit his thigh.

Enraged by the attack, Vitali began to swing the knife in wild arcs, tearing through Janice's jacket and shirt, but miraculously missing her skin.

Just when Janice thought she could escape him, Vitali jumped forward and backhanded her across the face, punching her so hard that her world exploded in a bright flash. She took a few staggering steps backwards, but she soon lost her balance and fell to her hands and knees, completely stunned.

Roaring, Vitali grabbed the opportunity and reached down for her, aiming to finish her off, but at the very last moment, Janice was able to grab his arm and pull him down, effectively throwing him over her hip.

As he landed squarely on his back with a breathless 'Ooof!', he lost the knife which clattered against a rock and flew off into the darkness, out of sight and reach of the two combatants.

Shaking her head to get the myriad of fireflies to leave, Janice staggered to her feet and tried to get away from the goon, but she only made it two steps before he had grabbed her ankle and pulled her back down on the sand - where she landed next to her Webley.

Not believing her incredible luck, she let out a triumphant whoop and grabbed it with her hand just as Vitali pulled her back towards him. Scrambling to her knees, she pressed the muzzle of the revolver against his ugly face and cocked the hammer.

The fiery look in his eyes proved that he had heard the metallic sound. The corners of his mouth began to twitch, but it didn't look like he was going to do anything stupid.

"Time to quit, Palooka! You got a fat head, but even you can't stop a speedin' bullet!"

In the intensity of the moment, the background noise seemed to fade away for Janice until it was just a distant blur, soon replaced by the sound of blood rushing past her eardrums and her heart hammering wildly in her chest.

Feeling something foreign on her cheek and upper lip, she wiped it off with the back of her free hand and soon realized that it was her own blood. "You son of a bitch," she growled, wiping more blood off her nose.

The giant laughed again and began to get up, but Janice thumped him across the brow with the barrel of the gun. "Hey, are ya stupid or something? Stay down, ya fool. Big sack of shit..."

Janice was thinking hard about what she could do to get out of the jam she had found herself in, but she hadn't yet collected her thoughts when Vitali decided to make the first play.

With a mad scream, he reached for the gun, trying to knock it out of the adventurer's hand - but all he accomplished was that Janice's index finger was squeezed up against the trigger.

The gun discharged with a deafening roar, sending a cloud of sparks - and a hot piece of lead - flying towards Vitali's face. The sparks merely blinded him, but the bullet plowed a three-inch long furrow across his brow right between his eyes, slamming his head backwards with such force that he was thrown away from Janice and onto the sand. He spasmed once and was then still.

Breathing heavily, Janice looked around with the Webley ready to fire. *'Even those drunken morons couldn't miss that...'* she thought, but no one came out to investigate.

After a short while, she holstered the gun and clambered to her feet. Glancing at Vitali, she could see blood seeping from the gunshot wound in his brow running down his forehead and pooling below him. "You shoulda listened, you big piece of shit. You only have yourself to thank for that," she said and flicked some of her own sweat and blood down on him.

---

Just as Janice staggered back to her own tent, she realized that something was wrong - she could hear voices from inside the tent; Mel and a male voice. They weren't shouting or even appearing agitated, but the unexpected situation still sent a shiver down Janice's spine.

Deciding on barging in and saving Mel, Janice pulled the Webley and ran into the tent.

The man talking to Mel was Giorgos and his eyes popped wide open when he realized that Janice had the Webley trained on him. When she thrust the muzzle of the gun towards him, he quickly put his hands in the air.

Mel jumped up and ran in front of the foreman almost like she wanted to cover him. "Jan! What are you doing? Put the gun away, Giorgos is here to help!" she said, flailing her arms madly.

"Oh, I'm sure he is."

"He is, Jan! What... what happened to you?!" Mel said once she noticed that her lover was bleeding from the nose and the busted eyebrow, and that her shirt had been sliced open, allowing a glimpse of the tanned flesh underneath.

"Long story, hon."

"It's true, Doctor Covington... I... I... I'm here to h-help. Please put the gun away," Giorgos said, still frantically reaching for the sky.

"You packin'?" Janice said, staring at Giorgos with such intensity that he had to look away.

"I'm s-sorry, Doctor... I d-don't know what that means."

"You got a gun?"

"No, Doctor."

"You sure?"

"Yes!"

"Let's see," Janice said and suddenly closed the distance between them. Holding the Webley to his chest, she began to pat him down, but after a thorough check, she finally came to the conclusion that he was clean.

"Oh, Jan, was that really necessary?" Mel said, shaking her head at her partner's apparent paranoia.

Putting the Webley back in its holster, Janice nodded grimly. "Yeah, Mel, it was. It's Tartarus incarnate out there."

"Th-that's what I wanted to warn you about, Doctor... Vitali! He is so drunk and violent... and he's got a very long, very sharp hunting knife."

Gasping, Mel put one hand to her mouth and the other on her chest - "Oh my Goodness! Jan!"

Janice's face turned so dark that it looked like a thundercloud on the horizon. "Vitali won't bother us anymore. I shot him in the head at point blank range."

Mel started to shake like a leaf and she staggered back to the canvas safari chair to sit down before she fell. "W-we heard the shot, but didn't... h-he attacked you...?"

"Yeah."

"Well, this certainly changes things..." Giorgos said, wiping cold sweat off his brow.

"Jan, wh-what are we going to do now...?" Mel said.

Janice opened her mouth to answer, but her throat was suddenly bone dry. As it dawned on her that she had just killed a man, her cheeks and chest flushed dark red and she had to take off her fedora to fan herself. "I don't know, toots. I need a moment to think. Giorgos, how much of the Ouzo did the workers get hold of?"

"All of it, I'm afraid."

"Shit. That means they'll be able to keep it going for quite a while. We're cooped up in here like a bunch a' frightened rats. And it's only just after..." - she checked her wristwatch - "... ten o'clock. Jesus! It's gonna be one hell of a night."

"Oh, Dear Lord, I wish you wouldn't say things like that, Jan..." Mel gasped, swooning back on the chair and putting the back of her hand on her forehead.

"There must be something we can do..." Giorgos said, wringing his hands.

Spinning around, Janice pointed her index finger at the foreman, a gesture that made him shy back and throw his hands in the air again. "'We' ? Who invited you, pretty boy?" she growled.

When Giorgos noticed that it was only her finger instead of her gun, he relaxed a bit, but kept his hands halfway up just in case.

"Jan! Your manners!" Mel said angrily.

With his teeth clattering like a typewriter, Giorgos began to slide over to Mel to get away from the angry adventurer, but a dark glare made him stop. "I... I c-can't stay here on my own, Doctor... you must understand that. When they f-find Vitali's b-body, they'll come for us for sure!"

"I know, dammit."

"But what are we going to dooo?!" Mel howled, emphasizing every word.

"I know what we're gonna do, we're gonna take back the Goddamned initiative is what we're gonna do," Janice said and strode over to the desk. Wiping her upper lip again, she established that her nose had finally stopped bleeding, and she took a kerchief and wiped off the rest of the blood.

"Wh-what are you saying?" Mel said, bolting upright in the safari chair.

"First I'm gonna go over to Vitali's tent and rob him blind, that dumb dick... uh, I mean, find incriminatin' evidence against him and His most Esteemed Ladyship... then we're gonna pack the essentials and, Mel, that means only the most valuable items, okay? And then we're gonna high-tail it outta here."

"How?" Giorgos said.

"Steal the other Jimmy, obviously. Load it up and drive the hell outta here," Janice said and began to scoop up those of the Professor's maps they would need.

"But where are we going to go?"

"Gamma dash five," Janice said decisively, looking directly at her partner who nodded in return.

"I'm... where...?" Giorgos said - his face had once again turned into a giant question mark.

Janice hurried over to Mel and dumped the stack of maps in her lap. "Here, hon, find map Epsilon. Then pack the most important stuff. Get ready to leave as soon as I get back."

"I... I will, but please take care, love. I couldn't live on if something happened to you," Mel said, clinging onto the front of Janice's shirt.

"Can't give you any promises, toots. I'll try."

When it appeared that Janice was moving away without a proper goodbye, Mel pulled the feisty adventurer down towards her and gave her such a resounding kiss that the angels began to sing in the far distance.

"Please take care..." she whispered once they separated.

"Phew... baby! That's my Mel Pappas!" Janice said with a crooked grin. On her way out of the tent, she turned around and blew Mel another little goodbye kiss.

After Janice had left the tent, Mel got up from the safari chair and began to put together a plan. Mumbling quietly to herself, she moved her index finger from one thing to the next to assemble a rough packing list.

A minute or so later, she noticed that Giorgos hadn't said anything at all since Janice had left, and she turned around to look at him - the foreman's cheeks were blushing quite strongly and he had a look on his face that betrayed that he wasn't entirely sure how to react to the tender scene he had witnessed between the Doctor and the translator.

"Is something wrong, Giorgos?"

"Uh... no, Miss Pappas," Giorgos croaked.

"Well, what are you standing there for, then? Come on, help me pack."

"Yes, Miss Pappas."

Finding the first of her suitcases, Mel put it on the bunk and began to stow away the clothes she had taken out only a day before. When the first suitcase was done, she tapped on the closed lid and gave Giorgos a pointed look.

"Yes, Miss Pappas," the foreman said, lifted the suitcase off the bed and placed it next to the entrance. Once he saw that Mel was packing all her books into the second suitcase, he gulped nervously and began to wring his hands again. "Miss Pappas, Doctor Covington said that we should only pack the most important items... your books..."

"My books are the most important items I own, Giorgos. I could happily leave my clothes or my belongings behind, but not my books." Looking up, Mel could see that Giorgos wasn't convinced. With a shrug and a snort, she went back to stuffing her hefty tomes into the suitcase.

"Does that mean we have to bring all the Professor's books as well...?" Giorgos said, pointing at the stacks of books lying on the carpet they hadn't had time to put in the book cabinet.

"Well... I would like to, yes, but Janice would kill me slowly if we did. Ah, that shouldn't be taken literally, Giorgos," Mel added hastily after a horrified gasp by the foreman.

---

Janice used the darkness to sneak undetected into Vitali's tent. Even though she knew that the drunken workers wouldn't know up from down by now, she refrained from using her flashlight or turning on the kerosene lamp.

The air in the tent held Vitali's distinctive smell - mostly old sweat, but something else as well that Janice didn't want to know what was - and it was so messy, her first thought was that someone had already searched it.

In the darkness, the toe of her boot found the metal footlocker and she very nearly went face-first down on the ground for the second time that evening. Grumbling to herself, she moved back to see what it was she had stumbled over. Once she had recognized the square shape, she knelt down and began to feel around the edge to find the lock.

Surprisingly, the footlocker wasn't locked and she opened the lid without any problems. The first thing she found was a pair of long, shiny cavalry boots which made her pause and try to picture Vitali sitting astride a horse. Shaking her head in disbelief, she went back to the footlocker and began to search for any evidence that could point a finger at Sir Alastair.

A package wrapped in oilskin gave off a metallic clonk as she tossed it to the side, and she picked it up and began to unravel the fabric. "Ooooh, lookie here," she said out loud as the Soviet pistol and the three spare clips fell out into her hand. Grinning, she put the clips in her pocket and stuffed the gun down into the waist of her pants.

She quickly rummaged through the rest of the items, but came to the conclusion that Vitali didn't have anything that could incriminate the nobleman. Just as she closed the lid, a page from a book floated out of the locker and got stuck between the lid and the box. Looking at it, Janice could see that it wasn't just any old page, it was a page from Professor Isaksson's notes - and it was torn and stained with his blood.

Growling, she stuffed the page into her pocket and slammed the lid shut.

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On her way over to the truck, Janice passed by her tent, but came to yet another abrupt stop when she saw Mel's two jam-packed suitcases next to her own duffel bag.

Throwing her hands in the air, she made a ninety-degree turn and stomped over to the tent. "Mel... for cryin' out loud, didn't you hear me say that you should only pack the essentials...? Look at that," Janice said and pointed at the suitcases, "what the hell is that?"

"Why, the essentials, of course, Jan," Mel said, going through the final check of the tent to see if she had missed anything.

"But it's what you came with!"

"Yes. You didn't think I'd leave my books behind, did you?"

"Aw hell, I'd buy you a new set... you know that," Janice said and pushed her fedora back on her head - not just because it looked cool but also because her busted eyebrow was smarting.

"Oh, you can't buy these books, dear. They're my notes on the Xena Scrolls."

"Mel, we're supposed to be making a quick, silent exit..."

"And we still can. All done here, Jan. Let's go," Mel said and zipped her jacket. She picked up the suitcase that weighed the least and waited for Janice to take the other one.

Groaning, the adventurer relented and picked it up. "Man, I'm gonna get a hernia outta this gig... And where the hell's Giorgos?"

"In his tent, packing his essentials."

"Mel!"

"Whaaat?"

"We only got one truck, ya know!"

"I know, I know. There's no need for you to raise your voice. Although, I doubt those noisy rascals over there in the mess tent would be able to hear anything. They must be far too drunk by now," Mel said and walked out of the tent.

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Giorgos met them at the truck, carrying a small suitcase and a duffel bag very similar to Janice's.

Janice was busy stowing the luggage on the bed of the GMC CCKW, and as Giorgos gave her his, she let out a couple of very impressive blue words. "Get in, gang. We're leavin'," she said once she had pulled a leather strap tightly around the bags.

"Doctor Covington, I don't want to intrude on you and... and Miss Pappas, so I'll sit up here, if you don't mind," Giorgos said and crawled up onto the cargo bed.

"Well... all right. It's gonna be a bumpy ride, pal."

"I can handle it. Don't worry about me, Doctor."

"If you change your mind, just knock on the roof of the cab, okay?" Janice said as she jumped down.

"I will."

After giving her foreman a thumbs-up, Janice quickly went forward to help Mel into the cab and then to the rear of the truck to check the rear housing that had given them so much grief on the other GMC.

"Looks okay... but you better hold up... I don't want no nonsense out of you, ya hear?" she said, pointing a threatening index finger at the metal parts between the wheels.

When the tandem assembly didn't offer any reply, she ran around the truck, jumped up into the cab and depressed the starter button.

As the engine idled in a deep hum, Janice turned her head and locked eyes with her lover. "There's never a dull moment in our relationship, is there?"

"No. And I wouldn't want it any other way, dear," Mel said and leaned over to give Janice a little kiss for good luck.

Licking her lips, Janice let out a little whoop and selected first gear. As she let out the clutch, the truck began to move, and they were soon pulling away from the camp and the drunken, rowdy diggers inhabiting it.

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## **CHAPTER 5**

*ZZZZzzzzzz...*

"Mel...?"

*ZZZZzzzzzz...*

"Mel...? Mel...!"

*ZZZZzzzzzz...*

"Mel, wake up, you're drooling on my pants," Janice whispered, mussing Mel's hair.

*ZZZZ-*"Wha...?"

Groggy from being torn from her sleep - and annoyed for being interrupted in the middle of a wonderful, exotic dream involving hula-girls playing volleyball on a Hawaiian beach - Mel smacked her lips a couple of times and moved her head away from Janice's lap.

The moment she noticed that she was sitting in the cab of a truck, all the dramas and near-disasters of the night came flooding back to her. "Oh!" she said, glancing at Janice with a very befuddled look on her face.

"Good morning. We're here," Janice said and pointed out of the window. It was still very early in the morning, but the sun's first rays were already illuminating a half-mile long row of two-hundred feet tall, irregular cliffs that all appeared to be quite badly eroded and that all sported multiple gaps, cracks and caves scattered along their front.

Nature had placed the cliffs on a southwest-northeast diagonal, and although they were sitting directly on the rocky beach, most of them were at a safe distance from the relentless surf, save for those at the very end of the row.

"We are...?"

"Yes. Paralia, also known as Gamma dash five is right over there."

"Oh... oh!"

Janice leaned over and planted a good-morning kiss right on Mel's lips. When the gesture earned her a loving smile, she moved a few stray locks of hair away from her partner's ice blue eyes and caressed her cheek. "Yeah, it turned out to be ten miles from Olimpia Akti instead of five, but what the hey. Who's counting."

"And you're sure this is it?" Mel said and took off her glasses to polish her lenses.

"Yes. Absolutely sure. You know why?"

"No, but do tell, dear."

"While you were sleeping, I studied some of Professor Isaksson's other maps. Not far from here, about one mile inland, there's a city called Kalithea."

Mel put her glasses back on and squinted a couple of times to see if she had removed all the specks of dirt from the lenses. "I see... and...?"

"According to the maps, Kalithea was called Kalikanorou in ancient times. And in Gabrielle's scroll, Kalikanorou was the name of the village where Terai lived," Janice said with a beaming smile.

"And Terai is...? Oh...!" - in her excitement, Mel turned her head so fast that her glasses nearly flew off - "Oh my Goodness! Terai! Terai was Cecrops' beloved!"

"Exactly, sweetie-pie."

"He came back here to... to... to honor her memory...! Oh, my Word, Jan! This is it! I can feel it... can't you? I can feel the people of the ancient world talking to me right now, Jan!"

Sitting up straight, Janice shied a bit back from her partner in case Mel suddenly morphed into Xena all over again. "Uh... like back in Macedonia...?"

"What? No, no, no, no, nothing like that... no, the connection... the land... Jan, the ancient people are talking to us through the land... can't you feel it?"

"... I'm, uh... not really," Janice said and scratched her hairline.

"I can! When do we start? I'm ready to start now!"

Laughing, Janice leaned over and patted Mel's thigh a couple of times. "Calm down, sweetheart. We need the sun to be a bit higher in the sky first. There's no rush. We didn't bring the radio, so His most esteemed Slickness can't get in touch with us."

"Hmmm... what do you think is going on back at the camp now, Jan?"

"Oh, most of them will have keeled over by now. The last of the tough guys are probably still boozing. Vitali's body will have been found by now, and they'll know that we took the truck."

"But won't they follow us? I mean, won't they be able to follow the tire tracks in the sand...?"

"I guess, but I can't see them doing that. Naw, I think we're safe from them. Sir Alastair is another story, though," Janice said and wiped her weary eyes.

"How so?"

"Well, I didn't see him do it, but I assume that Vitali had time to send a radio message to His Ladyship telling him that we had arrived at Olimpia Akti."

"And?"

"With no further messages arriving, he's bound to be frustrated by now. He's rich enough to have a Bentley and two personal assistants slash goons working for him... I'm thinking he has a plane, too. Maybe even a sea plane."

"Oh... so he can-?"

"That's what I'd do, toots. Scout ahead. He knows where we were before; he knows that we were gonna look further up the coast... bingo," Janice said and pulled the lever to open the door.

"I see, but... where are you going?"

Grinning broadly, Janice climbed out of the cab but kept standing on the step. "Nature calls an' if I don't answer it, it's gonna get messy," she said and jumped down to find a suitable place to conduct her business.

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While Janice was away, Mel climbed down from the cab to stretch her back and get some of the stiffness out of her limbs. After doing an abbreviated version of her regular morning warmup - involving stretching, shaking and squatting - she walked around the rear of the truck and set her sights on climbing up onto the bed to get to the suitcase where she kept all her notes and books.

After a few aborted attempts, she was finally able to clamber up on the bed using a combination of sheer determination and the mountaineering skills she had gathered trekking the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Tip-toeing across the bed so she wouldn't disturb the peacefully snoring Giorgos, she quickly found the correct suitcase, but when she wanted to loosen the leather strap holding it in place, she couldn't get it to release.

Tugging harder and harder, her face eventually turned beetroot red from the exertion, but the strap finally relented and became slack with only a few seconds to spare before she would have let out a Gorilla-like roar.

Mel took several deep breaths to reclaim control of herself, grabbed the suitcase and tip-toed back to the rear end of the truck. Once there, she stared at the seemingly mile-long drop onto the sand, but she just shook her head and took the leap.

The landing wasn't exactly picture perfect, but it worked, and she was soon kneeling down next to the truck and putting the books she would need in two piles.

Finding Professor Isaksson's notes and her own thesis on the Lost Mariner scroll, she folded her legs up underneath her and began to read them for the umpteenth time. "... though it's never been quite like this before..." she whispered to herself, looking at the sand, the surf and the seagulls hovering some distance above her.

---

Whistling one of Kay Starr's hits and feeling in a much better mood after escaping the camp and Sir Alastair's scrutiny - not to mention Vitali breathing down their necks all the time - Janice came strolling back across the beach with her hands deeply buried in her pockets.

At the halfway-point between the dune and the truck, she stopped and turned around to look at the imposing cliffs. She wished she had a pair of binoculars with her to get a more detailed view, but even with the naked eye, she could see that the rough, weather-beaten formations were extraordinary and quite spectacular.

She had to admit, grudgingly, that there was something in those cliffs that called out to her - even pulled her toward them, though she couldn't understand what it might be.

When she realized where her thoughts were taking her, she laughed out loud for succumbing to Mel's nonsense about the ancient people speaking to them. Shaking her head, she turned back and continued towards the truck, chuckling all the way there.

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Up on the bed of the GMC, Giorgos made his presence felt by yawning so loudly that he scared the seagulls away.

Down on the sand next to the truck, Mel chuckled and waved at Janice who was just returning. "Did we take care of mother nature's urgencies, dear?" the translator said with a sly smile.

"We certainly did, dear. There's no one around for miles and miles, so if you need some relief, there's plenty of opportunity to do so," Janice said and pushed her fedora back on her head.

"Good, I might take advantage of that a little later. Jan?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Why do you do that all the time... push your hat back? In my opinion, it makes you look rather oafish and uneducated."

Pretending to be hurt beyond belief, Janice clutched her heart and took a staggering step backward. "Shoot, hon, are you kiddin'? Sinatra... Bogie... Superman... they all do it! It's a sign of coolness! Hipness! With-it-ness!"

"Well, I just think it looks oafish," Mel said and got up from the sand. After brushing off the seat of her pants, she took her book and the map marked Epsilon and walked up to the front of the truck so she could see the cliffs.

"No, hon, you must be kiddin'! Are you saying that I, Janice Covington, ain't cool? You can't be. It's against the law," Janice said and bumped shoulders with her lover.

Leaning in, Mel whispered: "Darling, you're in a category all of your own."

"Yeah... don't I know it," Janice whispered back.

"Mmmm. I suggest we try that cave over there as the first one," Mel said out loud, pointing at a gap in the face of the cliff that was located roughly halfway to the surf.

"Works for me, toots. Hey, you want some crackers? I stole some from the cook last night."

"Why, Janice Covington! You're quite the scoundrel!"

"I know. That's what you love the most about me, ain't it?"

Blushing, Mel buried her face in the map, far too busy studying it to answer Janice's question.

Chuckling, Janice walked back around the truck and jumped up on the bed to get the roll of hard crackers from her duffel bag. Unpacking it, she offered a few to Giorgos who happily accepted them.

Taking a healthy bite out of a cracker, Janice squatted down next to where the foreman was sitting. "Giorgos, Mel and I are going to go into the first cave soon... I want you to stay out here while we do. Not that I am expecting problems, but we might need you to bail us out."

"Yes, Doctor Covington. I'll be ready."

"Good." Getting up, Janice looked around as she brushed the crumbs off her jacket. "It's too bad we don't have any camouflage netting. We could definitely use it. Olive green against pale gray... damn, the Jimmy sticks out like a sore thumb. If someone comes a-lookin', they'll spot us at once."

Giorgos got on his feet and began to look at the line of dunes some one-hundred and fifty yards away to the west. Scrunching up his face, he pointed at the sandy dunes that were reaching down towards the beach like weeping willows. "Doctor, how about I moved the truck over to those dunes? They're green as well, though not as dark as the truck."

"Hmmm. Good plan, Giorgos. All right, you do that. It's gonna take us ten minutes to get ready, anyhow," Janice said and moved to get down. At the last moment, she stopped and looked back at the foreman. "Hey... I'm sorry I didn't trust you before. You're okay."

"Thank you, Doctor. Professor Isaksson was my friend. He helped me find work when I needed it the most... and I feel I need to repay some of that kindness."

Nodding, Janice jumped down and went up front to give Mel a cracker and to tell her the latest.

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While Giorgos drove the truck slowly over to the dunes, Mel and Janice were standing on the step on the passenger side, quite literally hitching a ride. Janice stood in front, holding onto the window sill, but her firm grip was nothing compared to the vice-like, terrified grip Mel had around Janice's waist.

"Okay, Giorgos, slow down... this is a good spot," Janice said, waiting for the foreman to slow the Jimmy. Once it was fully stopped, Mel jumped off and began to walk towards the cave - on slightly wobbly legs - but Janice kept standing at the window sill for a few moments. "After you've parked the wheels, come over to the first cave and wait for us."

"I will, Doctor."

"Good man," Janice said and jumped down. A short while later, she had caught up with Mel and together, they watched Giorgos drive off to hide the truck below the dunes.

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The mouth of the first cave they wanted to explore was even narrower than the ones they had visited at Olimpia Akti - it was only six feet tall and four feet across, and the rockface appeared to be somewhat unstable with plenty of small cracks all around the entrance. Here and there, small piles of debris had been formed on the ground, no doubt from the sides of the cracks grinding against each other over the millennia.

Feeling slightly worried over the crumbled state of the entrance, Janice put on her heavy work gloves even though the temperature had already climbed to the point where she would have been skinny-dipping with Mel in their pool if they had been back home.

Working like an automaton, she checked her boots, her jacket, her gloves, the rope she had tied between herself and Mel and finally her indispensable hat.

"All set," she said, nodding appreciatively when she observed Mel go through the same checklist.

"I'm ready, too," Mel said, tying her hair into a ponytail.

Janice cocked her head and let out a 'hmmm'-ing sound.

"Is something wrong, dear?"

"No, it's just... hmmm. A ponytail doesn't really work for ya, hon. You're much sexier with your hair down," the adventurer said and bumped hips with Mel.

"Well, this isn't about being sexy. This is a mission of exploration," Mel said with an insulted snort.

"True, very true. Okay, let's do it."

Taking the lead, Janice stepped into the entrance of the cave, mindful of the piles of loose debris on the floor and the jagged edges on the walls.

"Careful, baby, low rock ahead..." Janice said, ducking down to get past a particularly nasty-looking jagged rock.

"I see it. Goodness me, this is treacherous," Mel said and practically crouched down to get under it.

"Yeah. Time to turn on the flashlights."

Doing just that, Janice shone the cone of light at the tunnel they were in. The rockface surrounding them was a strange color; dark green, something that confused her greatly. "Mel, look at this... doesn't it almost appear man-made...?" she said, shining the light at the section of the tunnel that was between them.

"It can't be, Jan."

"I know, but it certainly looks that way, doesn't it? Looks like... like... the roofs of the huts found in the Viking settlements on Iceland and Greenland."

"I think it's moss. Yes, I'm almost sure it is," Mel said, touching the wall.

"Well, if it is, there's water somewhere near here. Probably seeping through the cracks. That's why there is so much debris on the floor."

"I agree."

After a further forty steps, they came to a passage that was so narrow they would only be able to continue if they went through it sideways. Janice tried to shine the flashlight into the tunnel beyond the passage, but could only see the same kind of dark green rock stretching on indefinitely. A good twenty-five feet further into the tunnel, it began a gentle slope downwards that carried on beyond what the flashlight could illuminate.

Narrowing her eyes, Janice began to chew on the inside of her cheek. After a brief pause, she leaned towards the wall to give Mel a chance to look ahead. "Mel, can you see ahead of me?"

"Yes."

"I think we have to turn back. I have a bad feeling about this tunnel. There's something not right here."

"Jan, remember some of the scrolls Gabrielle wrote for Hercules?"

"Vaguely."

"Maybe we've stumbled upon one of the passages to the Underworld...?"

Chuckling, Janice turned around to look at Mel. Shining the flashlight down so it wouldn't blind any of them, she poked the tall translator in the gut. "Underworld, huh? Next thing you'll be tellin' me is that Hades himself is gonna drop in on us in his chario-"

Janice never had time to finish the sentence because out of nowhere, the tunnel was filled by a slight rumble that grew stronger with each passing second. A moment later, the rumble had turned into a series of terrifyingly loud creaks and groans that sent debris raining down from the roof of the tunnel.

"Oh!" Mel said, grabbing hold of the walls to keep herself erect.

"We need to get the hell outta here! Go back! Go back!" Janice shouted, giving Mel a hard shove to make her understand that it was high time to leave.

Letting out a brief shriek, Mel spun around and moved back to the entrance as fast as she dared to go, skipping over the largest piles of debris and trying to dodge the falling rocks.

'...octor! ...ctor! ...re you all ri...' someone shouted from seemingly a million miles away, but the voice was all but drowned out by the incessant groaning.

"Faster, Mel! Come on!"

"Watch the low rock, Jan!" Mel said and threw herself under the rock that was close to the entrance to the cave. Once they were past that, they set off in a sprint and raced out onto the beach where Giorgos was waiting for them.

Tearing out of the cave, they had barely made it onto the beach before a cloud of pale brown rock dust exploded out of the entrance with such force that all three found themselves pelted by a veritable hailstorm of small rocks.

"Aw shit, I got a crapload of dust in my eye!" Janice said, clutching her right eye that had taken the brunt of the storm.

"I'll get some water for you, Doctor," Giorgos said and hurriedly ran over to the truck to get a canteen.

Nursing her aching shoulder that had been the target of a particularly large piece of rock, Mel moved over to the adventurer to see if there was anything she could do to help. "Please move your hand, darling, I need to look at your eye."

"Jesus, Mel, your fingers... your hand is bleeding!" Janice said, getting a severe case of the shivers from the sight of bright red blood running freely down her partner's left arm. The sleeve of Mel's khaki shirt was already soaked with blood and it had begun to seep through in several places, drawing gruesome red patterns on the sand.

"Oh... darn. I must have... I must have torn it on the rockface. Oh... blood... I'm not... good with... blood..." Mel said and began to sway back and forth like a giant bulrush. Moments later, her face turned white and her eyes rolled back in her head, and if Janice hadn't caught her, she would have fallen down like a sack of potatoes.

"Aw hell, baby," Janice said, carefully lowering the fainted Mel onto the sand. Acting swiftly, she tore off a large piece of Mel's right sleeve and tied it around her left hand to try to stop the bleeding. "That should do it," Janice continued, gently caressing Mel's pale face.

"Here's some water for you, Doctor," Giorgos said, huffing and puffing from the run.

Getting up, Janice took the offered canteen and quickly unscrewed the cap. "Thanks Giorgos. Wouldya mind keeping an, uh, eye on Mel while I rinse out the damn dust? You can use my hat to fan her," she said and gave Giorgos her fedora.

"I'll stay right here, Doctor."

"Good man," Janice said and moved a bit away so she wouldn't accidentally splash any water on Mel.

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Ten minutes later, Mel had recovered enough to sit up, and she took several deep chugs from the canteen to recharge her batteries.

"Mel, this is exactly the type of situation where a cheroot would have improved my day by leaps and bounds... not to mention my mental stability," Janice said, tying a new knot on the makeshift bandage around Mel's hand.

"Well, you're very welcome to smoke if you have any."

"Oh, really? That's funny, 'cos I seem to recall you saying that if I didn't give up smoking, you'd stop kissing me because you thought I tasted like an ashtray...?"

"That still stands."

Assuming a suitably horrified face, Janice pretended to take a staggering step backwards. "That's blackmail! You know I can't live without your lips touching mine on a regular basis!" she whined breathlessly.

"You just have to weigh the pros and cons, dear," Mel said with a wicked gleam in her eye.

"Unfair," Janice said, leaning in to place a gentle kiss on Mel's forehead.

Having caught the Doctor and the translator in a tender situation for the umpteenth time, Giorgos took off his desert cap and began to wring it in his hands. "Um, Doctor...?"

"Yes?"

"There's something you should see. Something very interesting. Over by the cliffs," the foreman said and pointed over his shoulder.

Getting up, Janice brushed off her pants and looked in the direction Giorgos was pointing. In the intervening minutes, the cloud of dust had dissipated enough to see the cliffs, and she was able to spot what he was talking about almost immediately.

The rockslide had caused a part of the eastern-most section of the cliffs to collapse into the sea, revealing a pathway that led from the beach and up the inside of the cliff - the pathway was most decidedly man-made, consisting of a series of large steps carved into the rock. The steps continued upwards for approximately twenty yards before disappearing into a section of the cliff that hadn't collapsed.

"Jesus! Mel! Look... look at that!" Janice said and pulled Mel to her feet so she could see it for herself.

Adjusting her glasses, Mel nodded enthusiastically and gave her partner a good squeeze. "That could be it... that could very well be it!"

"All right, let's stay calm. We need to get everything organized before we throw ourselves at it. We need our flashlights, we need more rope, we need something to... to... to put the emerald in... if it's there of course," Janice said, rubbing her brow to concentrate on the task. "Giorgos, please get some more rope from the truck. The entire coil, we don't know how long that pathway is."

"Yes, Doctor," Giorgos shouted, already on his way over to the truck.

Furrowing her brow, Mel began to edge closer to the cliff formations. In her heart, she could feel something - or someone - pulling her towards them, but she couldn't articulate that feeling. "Jan, this is it. I can hear them," she said, growing ever more agitated. "They're speaking to me... it's as clear as day! Can't you hear them?"

"Hear who? What in the holy hell are you talking about, hon? Did you hit your head?"

"No! Listen! Stop... and listen!"

Janice stopped what she was doing and stared at the cliffs. Closing her eyes, she could hear - feel - something at the very farthest reaches of her senses, seemingly calling for her, luring her towards the cliffs, but the strange sensations stopped as soon as she opened her eyes again. "I... I did hear something," she said quietly, once again breaking out into the shivers.

"D-do you know what this reminds me of, Jan? The Sirens. They lured sailors towards their island... I can't remember the name of it... but this is just like that...!" Mel said, chewing on her fingernails.

"The Sirens were bad, Mel. The sailors were lured to their death."

"The Professor did say there was a death trap waiting for us..."

Putting on her work gloves, Janice took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "There's only one way to find out."

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Standing on top of a huge boulder at the entrance to the pathway, Mel mouthed a silent prayer before tightening the rope that had been tied around her waist.

She closed her eyes and tried to apply her scientific skills to the strange, otherworldly sounds that were echoing through her head, but she soon gave up and simply accepted that they weren't alone any longer.

Unbeknownst to Mel, Janice had a very similar epiphany at much the same time, finally shrugging when she realized that when it came to the ancient worlds in general - and the Xena Scrolls in particular - everything was possible.

"Are you ready, sweetheart?" the adventurer said, tugging on the rope to test its strength.

"Yes."

"Let's do it."

Steeling her resolve, Janice began to move up the stairs, going quite slowly at first, but soon becoming more confident in the structure's rigidity. They were soon at the point where the pathway disappeared into the cliff, and Janice turned around to look down at the beach.

"We're lucky that the rockslide... or whatever it was... made the roof of the tunnel collapse down into the sea. If it had fallen down onto the pathway, it would've been blocked forever," she said, waving at Giorgos who was standing a good twenty yards below them.

"Yes. Goodness me, it's dark in there, isn't it?" Mel said, looking ahead at the dark tunnel they were about to enter.

"Thank God for Eveready," Janice said and turned on her flashlight.

Resuming their journey of exploration, they ventured into the dark tunnel that continued to climb for a further ten yards but then leveled out into a smallish cave where the floor was so smooth it was difficult for them to keep their balance.

"What is this...? Why is it so slippery in here, Jan?" Mel said, trying to figure out the mystery by shining her flashlight everywhere inside the small cave. "Oh...! Look at the walls... they've been polished... no, they're made of marble! Green marble! And the floor, too!"

"Mel, that's totally, completely impossible," Janice said and shone the flashlight down on the ground in front of her.

"Impossible it may be... but it's also undeniable, Jan."

"Hmmm. I'll be... you're right, Mel. This is marble... What the hell?"

The two cones of light came together and illuminated a marble statue in the corner of the cave. Shaped like a Satyr, it appeared to have been designed to work as a fountain, but the cobwebs draped over it proved that it hadn't seen water for a very long time.

Letting out a slightly disappointed 'hmmm', Janice shone her light at the far wall of the cave. "Damn... it ends here. That wall is solid rock, Mel."

"No... it... no, there must be a way through. There simply must!" Mel said and hurried past the adventurer. She began to pat the wall from the roof of the cave to the floor to search for a hidden passage or trigger, but eventually, she had to admit defeat.

"I'm sorry, Mel. I don't thi-

"No! No, Jan Covington, we're not leaving until we find that emerald!"

Taking off her fedora, Janice wiped her forehead and let out a deep sigh. "Well, it's not in here, baby. And we can't get any further. We and Professor Isaksson were duped. That's how it goes sometimes... you know that. It's not the first time and it won't be the last."

"Well, we're not leaving just yet. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve... torn off though they may be," Mel said and stomped over to the Satyr.

After brushing off the cobwebs, she patted it down from top to toe; shook it left then right; tried to pull it up and push it down; tried to shove it to all four sides - but nothing worked.

"Oh gosh darnit, why can't we ever catch a break... can you tell me that, Jan?" Mel said and gave the statue a frustrated slap on the back of its head.

Suddenly, a section of the back wall started moving upwards, creaking and groaning as it ran on its ancient chains. Underneath the ever-rising wall, sunlight began to seep through the gap, and soon, Mel and Janice found themselves looking at an incredible spectacle.

"Oh. My. Flippin'. God!" Janice said out loud, staring so hard that her eyes bugged out on stalks.

"I knew it had to be here. I just knew it," Mel mumbled, wiping a few tears from her cheeks.

Once the wall had moved all the way up, Janice shuffled forward and put her hand on the edge of the hidden door. Sniffing, Mel moved up to stand next to her.

"Behold... Cecrops' vault," Mel said in a hoarse voice.

The room beyond the hidden door was circular and of mammoth proportions; at least one hundred and thirty-five feet across, the entire room was built around a chasm that was so deep it seemed bottomless.

At the very top of the room, several yards above the doorway, a jagged hole in the ceiling allowed the sun's rays to shine down into the chasm, creating an eerie light show out of the many dust particles that had been kicked up by the moving door.

A narrow ledge - less than twenty inches wide - ran along the outside of the chasm, spiraling down as far as they could see. For every eighteen feet, a small alcove had been carved into the rockface... and every alcove was filled with untold treasures.

Rendered speechless, Janice found a small rock that was lying at her feet. When she threw it out of the anteroom and down into the chasm, they couldn't hear it hit the bottom.

Gulping loudly, Mel put a trembling hand across her mouth and leaned in to whisper in Janice's ear: "I think we just found the death trap..."

Janice nodded and drew a deep breath. "Yeah. Do you want to go down the ledge?"

"Yes... yes, I think we should."

"All right." Turning around, Janice put her hands around her partner's waist and pulled her close. "Mel, please be careful. Okay? I love you," she continued and stood up on tip-toes to place a loving kiss on the Southern Belle's lips.

"Love you, too, Jan. Let's find that emerald and go home."

---

Edging out onto the dangerously narrow ledge, they began creeping downwards, inch by terrifying inch. Janice felt it took forever and a day to even get to the first alcove, but once they were there, they quickly established that there was no sign of the emerald.

"John D. Rockefeller, eat your heart out..." Janice whispered as she laid eyes on the incredible treasures that were stored in the first alcove alone. "Three... four... five chests full of pearls. Gold, silver... everything. A woman could get very rich in here, Mel."

"It isn't ours, Jan."

"Oh, I know. Still..." Janice said, shaking her head. Sighing, she resumed creeping downwards, headed for the second alcove.

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When they reached the ninth alcove, they had already seen enough riches to buy the world, but Janice was slowly growing frustrated over the fact that they hadn't yet encountered the emerald.

"Mel... Mel, I need a break. The next alcove, I'll try to crawl up into it, okay? My legs and my fingers are killing me."

"That's a good plan, dear. My legs are quite wobbly as well. How deep do you think this chasm is?"

"I don't know and I don't wanna think about it," Janice said, daring to steal a quick peek down into the pitch black, bottomless hole. Looking up, she could see that they had descended roughly one hundred and sixty feet, which translated to three complete tours on the spiraling ledge.

"Here we are, Mel. It's... uh, there's a wooden box in there. Can't see what's in it at the moment."

"Let's take this niche, I'm cramping up."

"I hear ya," Janice said and took a deep breath. Using both hands, she pulled herself up into the alcove and quickly pushed the wooden box to the side to make room for Mel.

As the box bumped into the rear side of the alcove, it nearly tipped over, and as a result, a scroll fell out of it.

Once Mel was safely inside the alcove, Janice reached behind her to stretch her arms. Touching the scroll, she looked back and immediately recognized the familiar shape. "Mel, did you bring a scroll with you?"

"Of course not, Jan, don't be silly... Oh!" Mel said and picked up the scroll. Unrolling it, she let out a surprised sound that was a cross between a snort and a grunt, and she immediately covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh, m-my Goodness... Jan! Jan, this is... this is... a Xena Scroll!"

"What?! It can't be... are you sure?" Janice said and shone the flashlight at the ancient parchment.

Pointing at the distinctive letters, Mel began bopping up and down inside the alcove. "I'm not only sure, I'm positive! Look!"

"What does it say? Can you read it?"

"I'm... I'm trying... give me a second. Mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... Prince... no, make that Lord Belach, mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... son of Borias... centaurs... Xenan, something. Goodness me, are there other scrolls in that box, Jan? This is a new one!"

Turning around, Janice pulled the wooden box back towards them and flipped open the lid. "I think we can say 'yes' to that question, Mel..." - the box was filled to the brim with scrolls.

"My Word! Who needs gold and silver... or emeralds... this... this is far more important, far more valuable than all the other treasures put together, Jan! Do you understand what we've found here? This is magnificent!" Mel shouted; her voice echoing through the chasm. Beaming, she reached over and placed a sloppy, wet kiss right on Janice's lips.

Grinning, Janice pushed her fedora back on her head. "Whoa, I wish we'd found 'em earlier..."

"Oh! It's the scrolls! The scrolls were calling for us, Jan! It must be... they're connected to us somehow... or more to the point, we're connected to them!"

"Well, uh-"

"Let's keep them here. We need to come past this alcove on our way back, after all," Mel said and pushed the box away so there wouldn't be any risk of it tipping over and falling down the chasm.

"All right. Mel, we're getting tired. I think we should only explore two or three more alcoves. It's simply becoming too dangerous. Sooner or later, our luck will run out, and I prefer it to happen while we're standing out on the beach instead of in here."

"But the emerald...?"

"If we don't find it, we don't find it. End of story. Look at what we did find," Janice said and patted Mel's thigh.

"Well... all right. Let's do it."

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The next two alcoves didn't hold anything of interest - apart from a gold nugget that had to weigh at least ninety pounds - but in the third and final one, they hit the jackpot. Priceless gemstones of all kinds were piled up to the roof of the small niche, appearing like they had been thrown in there rather haphazardly.

Mel and Janice could hardly believe their eyes when the flashlight illuminated rubies, diamonds, amethysts, opals, sapphires, topaz of all colors and finally the largest emerald either of them had ever seen, sitting all by itself at the far end of the alcove.

"Look at that... that's gotta be it, Mel," Janice said, trying in vain to reach into the alcove to get the gemstone. After several aborted attempts, she thumped her fist down onto the rocks. "Dammit, I can't reach it... I need your long arms, hon."

"All you had to do was ask, dear," Mel said and effortlessly reached into the niche to take the emerald. "Here you go... wait a minute... what are we going to do about it? We aren't really going to give it to Sir Alastair, are we?"

Snorting loudly at Mel's suggestion, Janice reached down to pat her hand. "No, are you kiddin'? Of course we ain't. I have a plan, but... once we're outta here, I'll tell you all about it."

"Well... all right. I take it we're going back now?"

"Yes, please!" Janice said emphatically, looking down into the pitch black, bottomless chasm. After fumbling a bit, she opened one of her breast pockets, put the emerald in there and then closed the pocket again. "All set, let's go."

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Carrying the wooden box of scrolls in one hand and guiding herself along with the other, Mel inched back up the narrow, spiraling ledge. Sweat was pouring off her forehead, the rope around her waist gnawed at the skin on her tummy and her arms and legs felt like lead.

The return trip was more strenuous than she had expected and she had become quite badly winded. No matter how much she tried to control her breath, she didn't seem to be able to get it under grips, but she knew that Janice would get angry with her if she requested another break, so she didn't.

Behind Mel, Janice was trying to control both flashlights, but found it very hard going. The lights were too large for her to hold in one hand, but if she didn't have a hand on the wall to pull herself upwards, she constantly felt like she was about to fall.

In between huffing and puffing from the exertion and from the strain on her nerves, Janice suddenly let out a faint chuckle. "Gotta... hand it... to that... Cecrops fella. He sure... knows how... to build... a vault. He could teach... those guys... at Fort Knox... a thing or two..."

"Yes, I-"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" - Suddenly and without warning, Janice let out a terrified scream that nearly tore the heart and soul from Mel's body. A split second later, the rope became so taut that Mel was almost pulled down into the bottomless chasm, but she just managed to hold on at the very last moment - even so, the incredible pull of the rope against her hips forced her down into a half-crouch.

Staring wide-eyed at the empty space where Janice had just been, Mel put down the box with the scrolls and held onto the rope with both hands. "Jan?! Jan?! Are you all right?!" she groaned through clenched teeth.

"JESUS CHRIST! GET ME UP, MEL! GET ME UP!" Janice shrieked from somewhere below the ledge that had crumbled under her feet.

"I'm try... trying!" Pulling with all her strength, she was able to move the rope upwards, but it took far too long for her liking. She suddenly realized that the sound of something being rasped was the rope chafing on the edge of the ledge, and she redoubled her effort to get her partner up.

After a superhuman effort by Mel, Janice was eventually so close to the edge that she was able to grasp it with her fingertips - but then the box with the priceless scrolls began to tilt towards the chasm.

"Oh, God, no!" Mel said, staring at the wooden box that was quite literally teetering on the brink of disaster.

"Save the scrolls, Mel... forget about me!" Janice said in a trembling voice. She put her elbow up on the ledge and tried to pull herself up, but it was too narrow for her to do so.

"Never! I love you too much...!" Mel said through clenched teeth, pulling with all her might to get Janice up on the ledge.

Suddenly getting a bright idea, Janice clambered left along the ledge so she was underneath the tilting box. Grabbing it with one hand, she used the other as leverage. "I got it, Mel! Pull!"

"What do you think I've been doing until now!"

"Pull!"

"I'm pullllllling...!" With an almighty heave-ho, Mel pulled Janice up on the ledge where they both promptly collapsed backwards against the wall; both panting so hard that they sounded like a pair of steam locomotives chugging up a mountain pass in the Rockies.

Once they had regained their breath, they began to inch up the narrow ledge, eager to get to safety before the law of averages would catch up with them.

Gulping, Janice wiped her sweat-soaked forehead with a trembling hand. "Thank you, b-baby. I owe you one," she whispered hoarsely.

"You're welcome, darling," Mel replied in an equally strained voice.

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After what seemed like an eternity, they finally found themselves in the marble room. Despite her wobbly legs, Mel immediately went over to the statue of the Satyr and slapped the back of its head, making the hidden door rattle to a close - unfortunately, it also made the marble room very dark.

Using the last few seconds of sunlight, Janice held up the rope that had saved her life, and stared at the spot where it had been chafing against the rock; it had almost burned through.

Wiping her forehead again, she moved her beloved fedora back on her head. "I'm sorry for losing both flashlights, Mel..."

"My love, I'd much rather have you back than the flashlights," Mel said and pulled Janice into a warm, heartfelt embrace. "We know the way out of here. It shouldn't be a problem."

"Mmmm... Jesus, I watched one of them disappear down into the black hole... I could just see the cone of light go down, down, down, down... then it was gone. But I couldn't even hear a crash..."

"It's a portal to the Underworld, Jan. Like I told you."

"I don't know what the hell it is, but I do know that it's the worst torture I've ever had to endure," Janice said and pulled back from the hug. "Hey, I don't want to spend another second in here. Whaddaya say we skip ahead in this little adventure of ours and try to find a way home?"

Sighing, Mel pulled her partner back into a new hug. "Sounds good to me, Jan. Sounds very, very good to me..."

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## CHAPTER 6

Moving out into daylight was a welcome return to the real world for Janice and Mel, and they were soon on their way down the many steps on the partially collapsed pathway.

As soon as they had walked onto the beach at the bottom of the pathway, Janice reached into her breast pocket and took out the emerald. The sun made the green gemstone sparkle like it was on fire, and she was astounded to see that it was so big that she could hardly hold it in one hand. "Look, Mel... ain't it great?"

"It's much more than just 'great', Jan. It's magnificent. We could buy the Empire State Building for what it's worth."

"Yeah, but where would we put it?"

"Silly!"

Juggling with the emerald, Janice broke out into a wide grin. "This baby is so important... not to mention valuable... that... that people at large should be allowed to see it. Like that other gemstone... what's it called...? The one with the curse?"

"The Hope Diamond," Mel added offhand while she was looking at the sorry state of the palms of her hand - both had suffered severe rope burn from pulling Janice back to safety, and the wound on the back of her left hand had begun to bleed again.

"Yeah. In museums in Athens, Paris, London, New York, San Francisco..."

Adjusting her glasses, Mel looked at Janice with a surprised look on her face. "Oh...! So... so, that's your plan? To give it to a museum?"

"Uh-huh. I sincerely hope ya didn't expect me to give it to his Most Esteemed Lardship, did ya, hon?"

"Well, uh..."

"Oh, there's Giorgos. We better let him know we're all right," Janice said and waved at her foreman.

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A few minutes later, Janice tied a new knot on Mel's wound and helped her up into the truck's cab. "Hey, catch some shuteye, baby. You look exhausted," Janice said, standing on the step of the GMC CCKW and shoving the wooden box of scrolls into the footwell. Once that was secure, she leaned in and gave Mel's thigh a little squeeze that held a firm promise of pleasant things to come.

Nodding, Mel scratched her hairline. "I do feel rather tired, actu-" - *YAWN!* - "... actually. I think I'll rest my eyes. Please wake me up if anything exciting happens."

"Oh, don't worry, I will," Janice said with a laugh. After closing the door very quietly, she jumped down and moved back to Giorgos who was busy pulling the leather strap around the luggage.

All done, Giorgos jumped down from the bed, took off his gloves and put out his hand. "Doctor, I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you again."

Shaking Giorgos' hand, Janice let out a brief chuckle. "Thanks. It did get kinda hairy in there."

"Uh... hairy?"

"Tough. Dangerous."

"Oh... anyway, we're all set to leave. Where are we going?"

"Well, first of all, we need to find a way off the beach, but we're going to Thessalo-"

Janice's keen hearing suddenly picked up a familiar sound - a propeller-driven airplane. Looking out over the ocean, she soon spotted a dark green, pontoon-equipped DeHavilland Beaver sea plane flying directly towards them. The plane was practically skimming the waves, no more than thirty feet in the air. "What the hell...?" she said out loud, moving around the truck to get a better view.

"That's the third time it's been here," Giorgos said, shielding his eyes from the sun.

"The same one?"

"Yes, Doctor, no question."

"Damn. Gotta be His most esteemed Slickness. Just what we needed."

The DeHavilland Beaver was soon upon them, climbing at the very last moment to clear the truck and dunes behind it. As the plane screamed past, Janice was able to see that the pilot was the only person onboard. The plane climbed steadily and began to circle around at a much greater altitude, making its engine howl as it was given more to do.

Punching her fist into her open palm, Janice spun around and ran up to the driver's side door of the Jimmy. "Giorgos, get in. We're leavin' at once. How far is it to Thessaloniki?"

"Almost a hundred and fifty miles, Doctor! I'd... I'd rather get back up on the bed... I don't want to intrude on your and Miss Pa-"

"Naw, you're coming in with us. You're the only one who knows the roads. I'll ask Mel to shuffle into the center."

"But..."

"You do know the road, don't you?" Janice said, hanging out of the window sill.

"Well... yes."

"Like I said, get in, son. We ain't got much time."

"Yes, Doctor," Giorgos said and ran around the truck to get to the other door.

Starting the truck, Janice leaned over and patted Mel's knee. "Hey, hon, wakey-wakey... it's about to get excitin'!"

Stirring, Mel broke out into a wide yawn. "Whut... huh?"

"We got company. One of His Ladyship's hired goons in a metal bird... oh, and I told Giorgos to come in and sit with us," Janice said and selected first gear, making the transmission creak.

"Oh... uh..."

"So you better slide your patootie over here to me, babycakes... just like in my old Hudson back when we were first datin', huh?" Janice said with a telling wink.

Mel instantly blushed fire engine red, remembering several occasions where the bench seat in Janice's '37 Hudson Custom Eight had seen action its designers had probably never envisioned.

Admiring her lover's blush, Janice put out her hand and pulled the tall translator with the glowing cheeks closer. "Yeah, I shouldn't have sold that Hudson. I love my motorbike, but it can't quite replace a bench seat, you know?"

Once Mel was glued onto Janice's right thigh, Giorgos stepped up into the truck and sat very quietly in the farthest corner of the cab, folding his hands in his lap and looking straight ahead.

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"How far, Giorgos?" Janice said, using a fingernail to tap on the fuel gauge.

"Ten miles until we reach the Thessaloniki city limits. Where are we going, exactly, Doctor?"

"The British Consulate," Janice said and geared down to get past a donkey cart carrying vegetables travelling on the paved coastal road they had found. It was a two-lane road, but it wasn't particularly wide, so Janice had to drive with the left-hand wheels over the center line which created a few close calls with the traffic going the opposite way.

"The British Consulate?" Mel echoed, wearing a very puzzled expression.

"Yeah."

"Doctor, I don't know where that is... but I'm sure it must be in the central part of the city. We can't get the truck in there," Giorgos said, sitting up straight.

"Damn. I shoulda thought about that. We're running out of fuel, too. All right... hmmm..."

"Why the British Consulate, Jan?" Mel said.

Before she could answer, Janice overtook another donkey cart, this time one loaded with boulders which made it go extra slowly. "Well, that's where Professor Isaksson was given his visa and temporary work permit."

"Oh... but what does that have to do with anything?"

"I was thinking... if we handed the emerald over to the Consul, we'd know it was in safe hands. And it would be out of Sir Alastair's oily grip."

"Oh. Good thinking, dear."

"Yeah, I thought so. Giorgos, is there anywhere between here and Thessaloniki where we can dump this crate and get a new set of wheels?"

"I'm sorry... dump the crate?"

"Dump the, uh... abandon the truck and get a new means of transport," Janice said with a wide grin on her face.

"Oh... I've only been here once before, so..." Giorgos said and leaned back in the seat, tweaking his mustache. After a little while, he licked his lips and leaned forward again. "Hmmm, well, I think there's a gas station somewhere on this road, but I'm not sure. If there is, perhaps we could rent a car there?"

"A gas station... would they carry diesel, too?"

"Not always, Doctor."

"Well. Let's hope it's not too far away," Janice said, once again tapping the fuel gauge with her finger.

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A good fifteen minutes later, Janice let the GMC CCKW come to a rolling halt at the side of the road - its diesel tank completely dry save for the sludge at the bottom that the fuel pump couldn't pick up.

"Hmmm. Okay. Shit," Janice said and put the transmission into first gear so the truck couldn't roll off.

"Now what?" Mel said, looking at the empty road ahead of them.

"We just went past a couple of houses... maybe we'll get lucky and they have a car we can borrow. Or something."

Sighing, Mel scratched her eyebrow, a surefire sign that she was frustrated. "Well, I'm not carrying my suitcases five miles down the road to Thessaloniki, that's for sure... and that's just to the outskirts. The Consulate might be several miles beyond that!"

"Doctor, Miss Pappas... let me try. Maybe my uniform will impress the people living in the houses," Giorgos said and opened the door.

Rubbing Mel's thigh to get her to calm down, Janice leaned forward and gave the foreman a thumbs-up. "All right, try that. It's definitely worth a shot."

---

Ten minutes later, Giorgos drove up to the truck and the two waiting women in the new set of wheels he had rented at the cost of several hundred Drachma - a single-horse open wagon equipped with truck tires instead of wooden rims.

Janice exploded in a loud belly laugh at the unusual sight, but Mel's face just turned dark red, and at first, she flat-out refused to set foot on such a primitive vehicle.

After a little cajoling - and the promise of adding a deep massage to a much needed warm bath - Janice was finally able to transfer the reluctant Mel Pappas and their luggage to the wagon, and the trio was soon able to continue towards Thessaloniki.

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Turning a corner in the central part of Thessaloniki, Giorgos was met by a policeman holding up his hand. The narrow streets weren't built for horse-driven wagons, so a queue of cars quickly gathered behind them, leading to a cacophony of car horns all being honked at the same time.

'*What's the problem, Officer?*' Janice said in Greek.

'*You can't drive this big thing in here.*'

'*How far is it to the British Consulate?*'

'*Three hundred yards in that direction,*' the officer said and pointed over his shoulder. '*You have to go back and park it where it won't cause congestion. Now.*'

'*Yes, Officer,*' Giorgos said and put out his arm to signal that they were turning around. The chestnut mare they had rented whinnied a couple of times, but eventually turned around and clip-clopped back down the street.

While they were turning, Janice - who was sitting next to Giorgos - caught a glimpse of a large, dark car parked next to a house at the corner of an alley a bit further up the street, and for a split second, she thought she recognized Sir Alastair's dark green Bentley. When she looked again, she could only see a dark blue bread van, so she just shook her head and blamed it on the horse's flatulence.

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Walking back up the narrow, cobbled street to get to the Consulate, each member of the trio carried their own luggage, but Janice helped her partner carry the heavy suitcase with all her priceless books - which had

become even more priceless with the discovery of the new Xena Scrolls since they were all stored inside the books.

"Jan, dear, I think we have a problem," Mel suddenly said, using her free hand to close her jacket so people passing them on the street wouldn't be alarmed at the bloody, torn state of her shirt.

"Hon, if we only had 'a' problem, I'd be a very happy woman indeed."

"What about our weapons?"

"Well, I have a permit for my Webley."

"But we certainly don't have one for the Soviet weapon you took from Vitali, nor for the Nazi pistol we found in Professor Isaksson's drawer. I have a rather strong suspicion that if we were searched in the Consulate, holding something adorned with a swastika wouldn't help our case at all," Mel said and slowed down.

"Hmmm, not a bad thought, that..."

Putting the luggage down on the street, Janice pushed her hat back on her head only to spot a slightly scornful raised eyebrow on Mel's forehead. Grinning, she pushed it back to the front and dusted off her hands. "Ahem. Sorry. Anyway, the consulate is right over there," she said pointing at a large, white building protected by a tall fence, "so if we want to do something about 'em, it needs to be now."

"Give them to me," Giorgos said. "I can sell them on the black market."

"Mmmm?"

"Don't forget, Greece is very close to several Soviet states. We have Albania and Yugoslavia to the northwest and Bulgaria to the north and northeast. Some people feel a need to defend themselves from the communists."

"Yeah, sure, but the war ended six years ago."

"We have peace in Europe now, but who knows what may happen in five or ten years' time, Doctor. Maybe one day, Comrade Stalin wants to have some souvlaki and a shot of Metaxa for his lunch and he sends his tanks down here to get it."

"Well, I certainly hope that war won't return to Greece in the foreseeable future," Mel said and adjusted her glasses. "So much was destroyed and so many lives were lost in the last one... but mankind never learns."

"There will always be war, I'm afraid, Miss Pappas," Giorgos said, nodding solemnly.

Crouching down, Janice opened the duffel bag and found the oilskin with the gun she took from Vitali. After a bit of quick fiddling with the various items, she managed to wrap the oilskin around the Walther P38 and its holster as well, and as she stood up, she gave the package to Giorgos.

"Here. Don't flash it."

"Uh, pardon, Doctor?"

"Don't show it off."

"I won't. Doctor Covington, Miss Pappas, I'm afraid this is goodbye. I hope I've helped you," Giorgos said and put out his hand.

"Hi de ho, fella. Yeah, you have. It's been interesting, that's a fact," Janice said and shook his hand.

"Jan! Your manners!" Mel said out of the corner of her mouth while she pulled Giorgos into a hug. "Mr. Kalogerikou, we appreciate what you've done for us over the last few days. Are you going home to your family?"

"Yes, I think so. I haven't seen them in a while. I need to return the horse and wagon first, but then I'll travel south."

"Oh, I can definitely understand that," Mel said and sought out Janice's hand to give it a little squeeze.

Taking a step back, Giorgos took off his desert cap and bowed deeply to Mel. *'It's been an honor working with you, Ladies,'* he said in Greek, smiling at Mel and Janice.

*'Thank you, Giorgos,'* Janice answered in Greek.

After saluting them, the foreman turned around and walked back down the street, headed for the seedier parts of the city to sell the weapons.

"What a nice man," Mel said and grabbed the suitcase.

Taking the other end, Janice let out a brief groan as the weight was transferred to her. "Yep. Come on, let's get to that damn Consulate... before my arm falls off."

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Feeling her nape hairs stand on edge, the last thing Janice did before she and Mel walked through the gate in the tall fence protecting the Consulate was to look up and down the street.

Roughly forty yards to their right, a man smoking a cigarette was loitering at the corner of an alley and the street they were on.

Janice quickly put down her end of the suitcase and pretended to be doing something to her cuffs. Even though she was looking down, she was able to peek at the man out of the corner of her eye.

The man appeared to be in his late thirties, and he was wearing a charcoal gray flat cap and a pale suit in a fancy cut. Janice wasn't able to make out his face as such, but she thought she could see that the lower part of it was covered by a five o'clock shadow.

As she was watching, the man took the cigarette out of his mouth and knocked off the ash, making a gold ring gleam in the sunlight.

"Are you coming or what, Jan Covington?" Mel said in the tone of voice she used when she was getting fed up with her partner.

"Yeah, yeah..." Janice said, still looking up the road.

"What is it? Do you see anything...?"

Shrugging, Janice picked up the suitcase and began to walk up the path that led to the front door of the Consulate. "Maybe. Ah, I don't know. Maybe I'm seeing ghosts in broad daylight. But we were followed by the DeHavilland Beaver while we were out on the coastal road. I watched it a couple of times, but then it disappeared."

"So?"

"Well, perhaps His most Esteemed Lewdship knows where we are. We never got to see his other henchman, what was his name... something Italian. It could have been him I saw just now."

"Ludovico."

"Right."

Arriving at the door, Mel put down her end of the heavy suitcase. "I do believe we're supposed to ring the door bell, dear."

"It's all yours, dear."

Snorting, Mel rang the bell.

A few moments later, the door was opened to reveal a woman in her late twenties dressed in a tight, gray skirt and a deep red blouse - the woman was a rather pretty redhead with delicate features, Janice noticed, looking around Mel's shoulder.

The young woman stared gap-mouthed at the two bedraggled travelers for a few seconds, but soon regained her professionalism and stepped aside. "Oh, Good Lord, what's happened to you?" she said in a charming English accent.

Pushing her fedora back on her head, Janice shot the young woman her most winning smile, the one that had always worked wonders when she was a fox on the prowl back in New York City. "That's a long story, Miss. Is the Consul in?"

"Oh dear, I'm afraid not, Miss...?"

"Doctor Janice Covington. This is my associate Melinda Pappas," Janice said, pointing at Mel.

"How do you do. Please come in," the young woman said and moved aside to let Mel and Janice in.

The three women walked into a large, very elegant hall where their footsteps echoed off the bare, white walls. The floor was laid out in a colorful mosaic depicting the British Isles, and all four corners of the room saw a tall, off-white alabaster pillar stretching towards - but not quite reaching - the ceiling.

A pair of sublimely carved oakwood doors led off to the left, and a large, majestic staircase led upstairs to a landing.

"Doctor Covington, Miss Pappas, I'm Audrey Dickinson, the Consulate's aide and secretary. I'm also the advisor for legal documents," the young woman said and put out her hand.

"How do you do, Miss Dickinson," Mel said, earning herself a shy, little smile.

After giving Audrey's hand a thorough shake, Janice put her hands in her pockets. "Hi de ho. Well, the Consul...?"

Wringing her hands, Audrey looked at the two American women with a very apologetic expression on her face. "I'm terribly sorry, but he's only here in Thessaloniki when there's an official function. Otherwise, he's stationed in Athens."

"Oh... rats," Janice said and felt like slapping her forehead.

"Who's in charge of the Consulate while the Consul is away?" Mel said, shifting her weight to her other foot.

"The Vice-Consul, Sir Lawrence Philpott, but he isn't here either," Audrey said. "Oh, where are my manners. Please come into the waiting room. Would you like some tea?" Walking over to the double-doors, Audrey opened them and put out her arm to invite Mel and Janice into the next room.

"Yes, please. And some sandwiches, we haven't eaten all day. Cucumber if you have it," Mel said and took the suitcases.

"You wouldn't happen have a shot of Rum to go with the tea, would ya?" Janice said as they walked past Audrey and entered the waiting room, but she was instantly shushed by Mel.

The waiting room was lavishly decorated with hand-woven, traditional Greek carpets on the floor, net curtains covering the windows and tall, dark drapes in front of that. To the right of the room, a complete set of Chesterfield furniture had been placed in front of an old-fashioned fireplace, and at the far end, a dark, wooden desk was placed next to another pair of double doors - Audrey's workplace.

"I'm afraid I don't, Doctor Covington. Please have a seat, the tea and sandwiches will be here shortly," Audrey said on her way down to her desk where she quickly pulled on a cord hanging down from the ceiling.

It only took a scant minute for a servant to enter the room and take their orders. Once he left, Audrey picked up the receiver and held her finger ready above the dial. "I'm calling the Vice-Consul to see if he's available. What may I say your business here is?"

Adjusting her glasses, Mel sat down in one of the Chesterfield armchairs to rest her weary legs. "Well..." she said, looking at Janice. "We have something that needs to be entered into the diplomatic mail."

Putting down the receiver before she had dialed the number, Audrey looked wide-eyed at the two women. "Oh... I'm... the diplomatic mail?"

"Yes. It's of extreme value."

"Of course... Please wait while I call the Vice-Consul," Audrey said and put the receiver to her ear.

"You betcha, toots," Janice said and sat down with a bump, earning herself a 'tut-tut' from Mel.

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Twenty minutes later, commotion at the door heralded the Vice-Consul's arrival. Moments later, the double doors swooshed open and a distinguished looking gentleman in his early sixties wearing dark shoes, a pale gray suit and a matching Borsalino entered the waiting room.

Audrey was at his side at once and whispered a few words in his ear. Taking the Vice-Consul's hat, she led him over to Mel and Janice who both stood up.

"Vice-Consul Philpott, this is Doctor Janice Covington and Miss Melinda Pappas from the United States of America. They need to speak with you on a delicate matter."

"Thank you, Miss Dickinson," the Vice-Consul said in a rich voice that held a strong upper-class accent. Shooting a curious look at Janice's leather jacket and the fedora on the chair, he took Mel's left hand and wanted to kiss it, only to see that it was bandaged quite heavily.

"Oh dear, have you been in an automobile accident?"

"No, that's about the only thing we ain't done on this trip," Janice said with a chuckle. She put out her hand and waited for the Vice-Consul to shake it - he did so, somewhat reluctantly.

"Jan!" Mel whispered out of the corner of her mouth. "Vice-Consul Philpott, you have to excuse my companion. She's originally from New York City," Mel said, almost like she was expecting it would explain everything.

"Oh, I see. Interesting. Pappas? Surely you must be of Greek origin?" the Vice-Consul said and led them over to the next pair of double-doors.

"Yes, but my family has lived in South Carolina for many generations now."

"I see. Audrey, please bring us some tea."

"Oh, we've already had tea, Vice-Consul," Mel said and adjusted her glasses.

"Please, Miss Pappas, you may call me Sir Lawrence," the Vice-Consul said with a charming smile.

"Thank you, Sir Lawrence," Mel said, returning the smile. Janice just grinned, recognizing all the signs of an attempted pass at Mel.

Opening the double doors, Sir Lawrence ushered Mel and Janice inside. "Miss Dickinson, I'll take the tea in my office," he said just before he closed the doors again.

"Yes, Vice-Consul Philpott," Audrey said and pulled the cord for the servant.

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"Goodness me, this is a fascinating story. Do go on, Miss Pappas," Sir Lawrence said, moving forward on the edge of his armchair. He held his tea cup in his hand and it tilted more and more as he became engrossed in the story.

Where the waiting room had been lavishly decorated, the office was positively luxurious. The floor of the rectangular room was covered by a carpet that reeked of class, and there were glass display cases presenting artifacts from ancient Greece lining the entire length of the wall opposite the windows to the street. A huge, shiny mahogany desk had been placed at the end of the room, taking up more than half the distance between the two walls.

Mel and Janice were sitting in a pair of identical Chesterfield armchairs, but the chair the Vice-Consul was using was even more grandiose.

Clearing her throat, Mel shuffled around and crossed her legs the other way. "Well, Sir Lawrence, my companion and I managed to escape with our lives, but it was a close call. The Russian, Mr. Komaroff, had decided to take out his frustrations on Doctor Covington, and he attacked her with a hunting knife."

"Good Lord, how did you get out of that, Doctor?"

Janice just patted the holster for her Webley.

"Oh... I see. Please continue, Miss Pappas."

"Oh, we don't want to bore you with the minutiae, Sir Lawrence. Suffice to say that our expedition was a success. Isn't that right, uh, Doctor Covington?"

"Very right, Miss Pappas."

"So... you were able to find Cecrops' emerald...?" Sir Lawrence said, moving even further forward on his chair.

Beaming, Mel nodded enthusiastically. "We were indeed. Doc... uh, Jan, let's see the gemstone."

Digging into her duffel bag, Janice pulled out a small package wrapped in a cotton cloth. Doing it slowly to build up the excitement, she unwrapped it until the green emerald was resting in the palm of her hand.

"My... God..." Sir Lawrence said hoarsely. "I can't... I can't believe the size of that thing...!"

"Believe it," Janice said and handed the emerald to Mel who put it down on the Vice-Consul's mahogany desk.

His eyes shining of awe - and just a tiny amount of greed - Sir Lawrence reached for the gem to observe it closely. Holding the priceless artifact very gently, he turned it in all directions to get all its facets.

"Remarkable craftsmanship... does history record the name of the master jeweler who created it...?"

"I'm afraid not, Sir Lawrence. The first we hear of it is when the bard Gabrielle finds it among Cecrops' treasure on his ship. We believe it's originally from Athens," Mel said.

The Vice-Consul carefully put it down on the cotton cloth and leaned back in his seat. "... and you want to send it to the London Museum via diplomatic mail?"

"Yep," Janice said, shuffling around in her chair to find a spot that suited her rear end better.

"A grand gesture, indeed," the Vice-Consul said. He folded his hands in front of his mouth, almost looking like he was praying - or thinking hard about something. "Well, it shouldn't be too hard to organize. But first, let's deal with this Sir Alastair fellow, shall we?"

"What do you have in mind, Sir Lawrence?" Mel said.

"You'll see." Pressing a button on the telephone on his desk, the Vice-Consul leaned forward and spoke into a small intercommunication system. "Miss Dickinson, please call Lieutenant Stavro Antonakis at the Hellenic Gendarmerie and ask him to pay us an urgent visit. Thank you."

'Yes, Sir Lawrence,' Audrey's disembodied voice said from the intercom.

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A few minutes later, Janice's keen hearing picked up a strange sound from the waiting room - it had sounded very much like a muffled cry.

When the sound wasn't repeated, she turned her attention back to Sir Lawrence who was trying his damndest to charm the pants off Mel.

"... well, I must say that your quest for finding the Xena Scrolls is quite remarkable, Miss Pappas. I've only been stationed here since the end of the war, so I'm not fully aware of the archeological discoveries that were made earlier, but I do find it terribly fascinating that a beautiful, charming woman such as yourself would risk life and limb in such inhospitable..."

As the Vice-Consul spoke on, Janice thought to herself: *'Blah, blah, blah... just forget it, old coot. She's not even remotely interested.'*

The sound Janice had heard before was repeated, only much louder. Snapping her head around, she was about to get up from the chair to investigate when the double doors swooshed open.

"What the Devil...!" the Vice-Consul said, jumping up from his armchair.

In the doorway, Audrey was standing with a large, male hand wrapped around the lower part of her face. The hand belonged to the man Janice had seen earlier; the one wearing a flat cap and a pale gray suit in a fancy cut.

Janice narrowed her eyes when she heard a rhythmic tap-tap-tap approach the Vice-Consul's office, knowing exactly who was about to make an entrance.

"Oh, good afternoon, Doctor Covington, Miss Pappas. What a pleasant surprise," Sir Alastair Brougham-Tibbett said on his way into the office. When he waved his free hand, the brute manhandled Audrey into the room and slid the double doors shut behind him.

Mel gasped loudly and put her hands to her bosom, but a quick touch by Janice calmed her down somewhat.

Clenching his fist, Sir Lawrence slammed it down onto the desktop, making several items dance about. "What the Devil do you think you're doing? This is the British Consulate!"

"Oh, I'm well aware of that. I only came for what is mine. The emerald," Sir Alastair said and took off his Panama hat. After slicking back his hair with a dapper flick of the wrist, he walked up to the mahogany desk to lay claim on the gemstone.

"You got a lot of balls comin' here," Janice growled, looking at the goon who was still holding Audrey in a vice-like grip. "Who's your greasy friend?"

"Oh, that's right, you haven't met Ludovico yet, have you? Well, please allow me to introduce Ludovico Ricci, formerly a Lieutenant in the Italian Army."

"That's funny, I coulda sworn we beat those guys silly up and down Italy," Janice growled.

"Now, now, Doctor Covington, let's not ruin the day by acting unfriendly towards each other," Sir Alastair said, repeating a phrase he had used against Janice earlier.

Moving surprisingly quickly, Sir Lawrence picked up the emerald, threw it into one of the desk drawers and broke the key in the lock, earning himself an appreciative nod by Janice. Once he had completed the task, the Vice-Consul stood up straight and put his hands on his lapels. "I should inform you, Sir, that my secretary has already called the Gendarmerie. They'll be here shortly!"

Staring at the empty piece of cloth on the desk, Sir Alastair sighed and moved back to Ludovico and Audrey. "Vice-Consul, you shouldn't have done that. Now, we will have no choice but to snap your darling, little secretary's neck. Ludovico, when you're ready."

Hearing that, Audrey let out a scream underneath the hairy hand and began to wiggle about, prompting Mel to gasp even louder and Janice to pull her Webley.

"You do that, you rotten bastard, and you'll be the next to die!" she said, aiming the revolver at Sir Alastair.

Hidden behind Audrey, Ludovico also drew a pistol he had in a holster on his belt.

"No, no, no, this is madness... madness! I... I... I have a spare key! Take the emerald!" Sir Lawrence said and began to fiddle with the lock in the desk drawer to get the broken key out.

Growling, Janice cocked the Webley's hammer. "Don't bother, pal. Those bastards are gonna kill us all anyhow. Ain't that right, Your Ladyship?"

Sir Alastair sneered at the insult and repeatedly tapped the tip of his hardwood cane into the lavish carpet to get his emotions back under control. "I told your tall friend a few days ago that your tongue would eventually get you in trouble... it just has. Well, Doctor," - Sir Alastair spit out the last word - "you have just signed a death warrant for your friend. It shall be my pleasure to put a bullet in her heart."

Janice knew it was just bluster and didn't react to the threat, but Mel's face slowly scrunched up into an angry mask.

Finally pulling the drawer open, Sir Lawrence reached into it and took the emerald. "Here! Here's your bloody emerald! I hope you choke on it!" he said and slammed the gemstone down on the cloth.

Smiling like a cat about to feast on the canary, Sir Alastair put his Panama hat back on and waved his hand at Sir Lawrence. "Temper, temper, Vice-Consul. Mind your language, please, Sir. Don't forget there's a lady present," he said and poked his cane into Audrey's gut. "But all right. Now, I want her to give it to me," he continued, pointing his cane at Mel.

"You come up here an' get it yourself, pretty boy," Janice growled.

"No. Miss Pappas."

Mel sighed and turned around to take the emerald. Holding it in the palm of her right hand, she began to walk very slowly towards the two villains. As she went past Janice, she winked at her, silently telling the feisty adventurer to get ready for fireworks.

Mel looked from Sir Alastair to Ludovico and back again, finally setting her sights on the Italian bruiser. Pretending to give the emerald to the nobleman, she had already put out her hand when she suddenly snapped her arm back and fired off a baseball throw that sent the emerald hurtling towards Ludovico's face with tremendous speed.

Then everything happened at once - the gemstone hit Ludovico across the bridge of his nose, making him cry out and take several staggering steps backwards. Even while he was doing that, he started to raise the pistol at Mel, but Janice fired from the hip and shot it out of his hand.

Released from the goon's grip, Audrey clutched her head and began to scream, but Mel jumped forward and shoved the hysterical secretary into the Vice-Consul's waiting arms.

Letting out a unbridled roar, Sir Alastair jumped forward and began to swing his hardwood cane at Mel in a series of vicious attacks. She was able to dodge most of them, but one hit her across the shoulder, and she let out a brief yelp and staggered into one of the display cases that nearly tipped over.

Seeing that as her cue, Janice entered the fray and gave the nobleman such a hard shove away from her lover that he ended up on his rear on the lavish carpet - but she didn't have time to gloat because Ludovico came flying at her, fists forward.

His first punch connected squarely on her jaw with a loud *CRACK*, sending her into a pirouette, but she soon snapped out of her daze and went in deep, dishing out a series of punches to his gut that made all the air rush out of him.

To get a respite from the onslaught, Ludovico decided to fight dirty, grabbed a handful of Janice's hair and yanked her head backwards. Intending to headbutt his opponent across the brow, he never saw Mel coming at him in a flying dropkick, but he definitely noticed when both her boots hit him in the throat and the chest, punching his lights out in a highly efficient manner.

While all that was going on, Sir Alastair had crawled over to Ludovico's pistol, and he quickly worked the action and fired a round into one of the glass display cases that shattered in a thousand pieces.

The sound of the shot and the breaking glass made Audrey scream again, but once her scream had died down, the room was filled with a pregnant silence.

"I want that emerald!" Sir Alastair shouted in a growly voice, training the weapon at the Vice-Consul and the secretary. "And I still want the tall bitch to give it to me!"

"It's closer to you than it is to us, chump," Janice said, rubbing her scalp where Ludovico had grabbed her hair.

"Do it, or I'll kill both those pitiful, crying wimps up by the desk!"

"J-Jan...?"

"All right, do it, baby," Janice said and put a calming hand on Mel's arm.

The term of endearment made Sir Alastair part his lips in a disgusted sneer and let out a disdainful snort. Using his cane, he clambered to his feet and shuffled away from the broken glass.

Suddenly feeling curiously strong and at peace, Mel shot the supposed nobleman a steely, ice blue gaze and calmly walked over to the emerald. Wiping off Ludovico's blood on her already ruined shirt, she stood up straight and put out her hand. "Here," she said in a dark, velvety voice that made Janice furrow her brow.

"Now get back to the others!" Sir Alastair commanded.

Mel turned around and moved past the broken display case. Unnoticed by any of the others, she picked up a large shard of glass and held it away from Sir Alastair's line of sight.

Moving with God-like speed, she spun around and threw the shard with incredible precision at Sir Alastair's hand that held the gun - a split second later, the shard tumbled end-over-end through the air and slashed across the back of his hand, almost severing his index finger.

The nobleman began to scream in pain, and he dropped both the pistol and the gemstone and clutched his hand that had already begun to bleed profusely.

Janice stood gap-mouthed and just stared at her lover's actions, but she soon returned to the real world and ran over to Sir Alastair. Reaching down, she secured the pistol and the gemstone, all the while staring wide-eyed at Mel who seemed to be somewhat confused - even befuddled - at the drastic turn of events.

If that wasn't enough already, the double doors were suddenly thrown wide open and a contingent of Gendarme ran into the office, holding weapons and shouting in Greek.

Just to be on the safe side, Mel and Janice put their arms in the air, but the Vice-Consul put the shaking Audrey down on his chair and quickly stepped forward to explain the mess to Lieutenant Antonakis who was commanding the operation.

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Ten minutes later, Sir Alastair and Ludovico were led away by the Gendarme, leaving Mel and Janice standing in the middle of a chaotic mess of broken glass, overturned furniture and pools of blood.

Sir Lawrence was sitting in his chair, drinking a stiff Sherry. "Amazing! Boys' Own stuff! ... Amazing!" he said, taking another healthy chug.

Janice just chuckled and reached for the decanter with the Sherry, but Mel took pity on the trembling Audrey and walked over to where the secretary was sitting. Crouching down next to her, Mel took the secretary's hands in her own and gave them a comforting, little squeeze.

"I h-have never seen anything like it...!" Audrey whispered, staring wide-eyed at Mel. "And I was a nurse in France following the invasion! Miss Pappas... h-how did you do that? How did you throw that shard?"

Taking a deep breath, Mel tried to find the words that would explain it to the young woman, but after a few aborted attempts, she gave up and settled for shrugging.

Chuckling, Janice drained her Sherry and put the glass down on the desk. "Yeah, Mel, how did you throw that piece of glass? It was positively out of this world," she said, trying to coax a smile out of her partner.

"I must have had an angel on my shoulder," Mel said, shooting Janice a knowing, sly grin.

*'More like a Warrior Princess in your body,'* Janice thought, but chose not to say anything.

"Oh! I have just had the most marvelous idea!" Sir Lawrence said and shot up from his armchair. His cheeks had turned rosy and he had to support himself by putting a hand on the edge of the desk - the Sherry had already begun to have an effect on him.

"Miss Dickinson, uh... once you have recovered enough... please call our regular travel agency and book four tickets for the Orient Express! Regal class, obviously. Departure tomorrow at noon... at the latest," he continued with a slight slur to his voice.

"The Orient Express?" Janice echoed, narrowing her eyes.

"Yes! I have decided that we shall bring the emerald to England in person and present it to King George ourselves... at Kensington Palace! The diplomatic mail is rather unreliable, you understand. Sometimes, it's via Zurich, and... oh, I won't bother you with that. It's such a dull story. The Orient Express will fit our needs perfectly!"

Hearing the name of the legendary train, Mel's eyes lit up like little candles and she clapped her hands together in an enthusiastic fashion. "Oh, Jan, I'd just love to travel on the Orient Express. Oh, the romance... the history... the traditions!"

"The Orient Express...?" Janice said again, this time a bit more flatly, already dreading the prospect of spending several days and nights cooped up in a cramped - if luxurious - compartment and hob-nobbing with the High and Mighty while guzzling Champagne and eating lobsters, oysters and venison in the dining car.

"Oh, Jan, dear, please say yes!" Mel said, taking off her glasses and polishing the lenses with her slightly filthy lavender-laced handkerchief.

"You should, Doctor, it'll be marvelous. In the meantime, I'll put the emerald under lock and key in the Consulate's safe. I promise you it'll be very safe... in the safe...!" the Vice-Consul said. Moments later, he began to chuckle over the unintended joke, and it didn't take long before he had to sit down in his chair to battle an impressive bout of the giggles.

His laughter was contagious, and soon, Audrey and Mel were laughing along with him, both looking almost giddy with excitement over the coming, highly extravagant train ride.

Only Janice kept silent, remembering something she had read in Professor Isaksson's notes: *'I do not trust Sir Alastair either. He is merely a puppet. Someone is pulling his strings.'*

"Hmmm. All right. The Orient Express it is," Janice said and took the decanter to pour herself a new glass of Sherry.

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**THE END (for now).**