

The Mine

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Part 1

THE BITE OF THE MINE

They carried him out of the mine entrance screaming, 'Oh Christ! My legs! Look at my goddamn legs!'

The four soldiers set him down on the waiting stretcher, then stood aside so the medical team could take him away.

The four-star general in charge of the project-- a man named Washington Haynes-- just watched as the injured man was wheeled out of the entry cave. He eyed the soldier's legs coldly, impassively.

The man's lower legs-- everything from the knee down, including his feet-- looked like a pair of foul pancakes: blood everywhere, every bone broken, the skin swollen black-and-blue.

The man's legs and feet had been completely and totally flattened.

General Haynes turned to the aging man by his side. 'I think we need some more expert help. Call your girl.'

DESERT OUTSIDE MEXICO CITY

Doctor Jessica Chase sat in a gigantic black leather swivel chair inside the cabin of the private jet, not knowing where it was going or why she was in it.

In front of her sat her diminutive dig partner, Kenneth W. Georgeopolous. Kenny was all of five-foot-two, with hair brushed up into an Elvis Presley pompadour. He was known about the site as 'Little Kenny G'.

On Chase's lap sat the five-page form that she and Kenny had just signed. The cover sheet read:

THIS PROJECT IS CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET

Any unauthorised disclosure of information witnessed or obtained through participation in this project is a criminal offence under Title 50 of the United States Code punishable by imprisonment for up to 75 years and fines of up to \$25 million.

Okay...

Chase was an archaeologist from the University of WA in Australia, working at unmasking the secrets of the ruined city of 'Teotihuacan' high in the Mexican desert. As such, she wasn't really accustomed to signing threatening non-disclosure agreements with the US government.

The object of her study-Teotihuacan-was one of archaeology's greatest mysteries. Comprised of a series of gargantuan flat-topped pyramids and sun-aligned temples, the desert city had been built by an unknown pre-Aztec civilisation sometime around

the first century AD. It had reached its zenith in the sixth century, before suddenly, around the year 800, it was abruptly abandoned by its inhabitants.

They just left. Vanished. Disappeared.

Leaving an enormous ghost-city in the middle of the desert.

This great desert ruin, however, was also a particular challenge for Dr Jessica Chase.

At the tender age of 27, Chase was known throughout the archaeological community for her extraordinary abilities at deciphering hieroglyphics and other ancient symbols--and in this field, Teotihuacan was Everest.

And with her lanky, athletic six-foot frame, pony-tailed red hair and beautiful smile, Jessica Chase was sellable. A former high-school gymnast, she was the poster girl of archaeology. National Geographic loved her.

Not surprisingly, the high-powered Breslin Corporation had come calling soon after she got her doctorate.

Led by its eccentric billionaire chairman, Leonard Breslin III, the Corporation was the major sponsor of over a dozen archaeological digs around the world, including Chase's Teotihuacan work.

As such, for the last six months, Chase and Kenny G-- her symbol database manager and all-round techno-genius-- had been working hard at deciphering Teotihuacan's complicated glyph systems.

And then, today, the Corporation's Lear jet had arrived, with a message from Leonard Breslin.

He wanted to see them. Now.

There is an old adage in academia: He who pays the piper, calls the tune.

And so they'd got on the plane.

It was only once it had taken off, however, that they were presented with the government non-disclosure form.

THE HANGAR

After about an hour of flying, the Lear touched down.

Exactly where it had landed, neither Chase nor Kenny knew. The shutters on the plane's windows had been fixed in place, blacked out.

The plane taxied for a short way, then jolted to a halt. The side door was opened and a set of stairs folded down.

Chase emerged from the plane...

...and found herself standing inside a brightly-lit aeroplane hangar.

The hangar's doors were closed, but they couldn't hide the slivers of white sunlight that crept in through the cracks, or the dry oven-like heat inside the building.

All right, Chase thought, we're in a desert somewhere.

But since the flight had lasted about sixty minutes, they could have been anywhere between Texas and Nevada.

A two-person reception party was waiting for them.

Leonard Breslin himself and a four-star US Air Force general, complete with a chest full of medals.

'Jessica,' Breslin said, stepping forward and kissing her on the hand. 'Delighted, as always. I'm terribly sorry for all the cloak-and-dagger precautions surrounding your arrival. Awfully rude. But it seems that the US Government needs our help, and well, they want to keep all this sort of hush-hush.'

Even Chase knew Breslin's links with the American government were strong. It was widely known that Breslin was a regular guest at the White House and a long-time friend of the President's.

'The US Government needs our help,' Chase said, deadpan. 'With what?'

THE DESCENT

'With some stone tablets we've found,' the Air Force general said, as he guided Breslin, Chase and Kenny G down a set of steel stairs that led underneath the hangar.

The general's name was Haynes, Washington Haynes, and he was the officer-in-charge of this facility.

'Mister Breslin tells me you're from Australia,' he said to Chase as they descended the stairs. 'UWA.'

'Yes, I am.'

'You studied under Hans Ziegler, right?'

'Yes. I was lucky. He was there as a Visiting Fellow when I was doing my doctorate.'

'Hmmm,' Haynes nodded thoughtfully, then changed the subject. 'Always wanted to go to Australia. Good skiing, they tell me. Nice old castles, too.'

'I think you mean Austria,' Chase said.

'Oh. Yeah.'

Typical Americans, Chase thought. They could build stealth bombers and neutron bombs, but they couldn't tell the difference between Australia and Austria. And this guy was a general.

The stairwell took them down into the earth.

As they approached a landing, Chase heard pained shouts coming from within. When they came to the landing in question, Haynes and Breslin just walked straight past the open doorway.

Chase, however, looked in.

And she gasped.

She saw four men lying in hospital beds, in various states of disarray.

Two were horribly bloodied and bandaged, their sheets awash with red splashes. Another man lay comatose, attached to a life-support system. The fourth man was struggling with two hapless doctors. Kicking and squirming, for a brief second, his feet protruded from underneath his sheets.

Chase held back her revulsion. The man's feet were horribly deformed-it looked as if they had been crushed flat.

Kenny had also stopped to look. 'Tell me we're not going where he went,' he said flatly.

THE TABLETS

They caught up with Haynes and Breslin on the next floor below, at a laboratory-type room.

Chase took in the room.

A few benches, some wash trays, and at the far end, a solid-looking steel door that looked like a bank safe. Nearer to Chase stood a whiteboard with hand-written messages slashed across it:

'PRE-AZTEC MINE, POSSIBLY TEOTIHUACAN...'

'VAULT STRUCTURE ON LOWEST LEVEL - OPEN IT BY USING THE TABLETS, BUT IN WHAT ORDER???'

'WHAT IS TRIGGERING THE DAMN BOOBY TRAPS!'

'7 MEN LOST: 4 WOUNDED, 3 DEAD...1 BEING A CIVILIAN.'

'WHAT IS IN THERE? HAS TO BE THE VISITOR'S STONE...'

In front of the whiteboard stood a long stainless-steel table. Chase approached it, saw what lay on top of it.

Five stone tablets.

Five glistening black stone tablets.

They were rectangular in shape, each about the size of a hardback book

But it was their blackness that seized her attention. They were more than just black-- they were jet black, black-on-black. Chase guessed that they were cut from some kind of volcanic glass, obsidian maybe.

Carved into each rectangular tablet was an image that looked something like an elongated face.



Chase picked up one of the tablets. Heavy. She turned it over in her hands. On the rear side of

the tablet there was a hollowed out section in the shape of a +.

'Is this why you brought us here?' she asked Breslin. 'To decipher these.'

'That and a few other glyphs that the general is having...trouble...with,' Breslin said.

Chase looked at her boss hard.

'I'll have to run them through the database,' she said, at last. 'And even then I'll have to make some educated guesses. But for that I'll need my laptop and our scanning equipment. They're up in the jet.'

Haynes nodded to one of the lab technicians, who dashed upstairs.

Chase said, 'Right. I think I've been more than co-operative. Now it's your turn. Blacked out jets, non-disclosure forms, men with flattened feet and ancient stone tablets. I think it's time you boys told us what the hell is going on here.'

Breslin exchanged a look with Haynes, who nodded.

'Why don't you come this way,' the Air Force general said, ushering Chase and Kenny toward the thick steel door at the far end of the lab.

He punched a code into a keypad and the big door hissed open. Haynes swung it wide.

Chase stepped through...

...and her jaw dropped.

THE MINE

She found herself standing in the entrance to a dirt-walled cave, about twenty yards square.

The earthen cavern was illuminated by a series of halogen light-stands, arrayed in a circle around a squat stone structure.

It was about the size a single-car garage, and built in the shape of a solid little pyramid...and in the distinctly Teotihuacan style.

A square entryway filled its centre, yawning wide, inviting the unwary to enter its inky black depths.

Haynes and his scientific team had encased the little structure in a Lexan-glass airlock-a giant clear-glass cube that completely covered the squat little building-creating a bizarre mix of the dusty-and-ancient and the very high-tech.

Chase stared at the little stone portal.

She'd seen structures just like it dotted all around Teotihuacan.

It was the entrance to an ancient mine.

Part 2

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Chase walked around the glass-encased mine entrance, evaluating it with a cool gaze.

'Teotihuacan structure,' she said. 'Late fifth century.'

'Correct,' Breslin said.

'Design is similar to that of some of the gold and diamond mines on the outskirts of the main metropolis in Mexico,' she said. 'I assume you've encountered booby traps.' Teotihuacan mines often featured elaborate traps as a deterrence to thieves.

'Yes, we have,' General Haynes said.

'But this baby's a long way from home...' Kenny G said.

'Yes.' Chase rounded on Haynes. 'Although it would help if we had some idea just how far from home we are.'

Haynes eyed her carefully, then said, 'Nevada. We're in southern Nevada.'

Kenny turned to Chase. 'Could be Xutu.'

'What's Xutu?' Breslin asked.

'It's a legendary Teotihuacan prison,' Chase said, 'reputedly built in the desert far to the north of the main city. The Teotihuacan version of Alcatraz. Legend has it that Xutu was also filled with lethal booby traps, and-at its lowest levels-was patrolled not by human guards, but by animals.'

'Animals?'

Kenny said, 'Most likely domesticated American marsupial wolves. Although-'

'The thing is,' Chase said, 'Xutu could just be a myth. Talk of it only arises from the disputed translation of a handful of glyphs in Teotihuacan.'

The lab technician arrived from upstairs with Chase's computer gear. Her laptop was connected to a device that looked like a police radar gun: Kenny's image scanner.

Chase looked expectantly at Breslin and Haynes.

'Okay. So what do you want us to do?'

Haynes said, 'We want you to go down into the mine, and using that little database of yours, open up its biggest secret.'

ENTRY

The door to the Lexan-glass airlock surrounding the mine entrance opened with a loud hiss.

Chase and Kenny stood before it, now surrounded by eight fully-armed soldiers-their escort-whom Haynes merely said 'were from Delta'. Their leader was a lieutenant named William 'Tank' Kowalski.

A long length of nylon rope was also now tied firmly around Chase's waist, connecting her to Kenny.

'Buddy system,' Kowalski had said as he'd tied the rope around her slender hips.

Chase had noticed that all the Delta men were joined together in a similar way, tied off into pairs. She wondered why.

The airlock swung open, and a knot of apprehension materialised in her throat. She swallowed it. She was frightened, but her curiosity had got the better of her. She wanted to know what lay inside this mine.

And with that, they entered the airlock, and disappeared inside the ancient mine.

THE WELL-SHAFT AND THE LONG STONE

The first thing Chase saw were four close stone walls and a hard-packed earthen floor. In the

middle of the dirt floor, however, was a dark circular hole, into which hung a knotted rope.

Following the Delta men, Haynes and Breslin, she climbed down the well, aided by the knots on the rope.

The walls of the shaft were perfectly sheer, and dripping with moisture. Every brick was set flush against the next. There was not a fingerhold to be had up its entire cylindrical length.

Which was odd, Chase thought. Most Teotihuacan mines allowed easy access to and from the digging levels.

After about sixty feet of climbing, she came to the bottom of the well-shaft, and found herself standing in a stone corridor that was perfectly square in shape.

Battery-powered lamps sat on the floor, bathing the tunnel in spooky diffused light. Kowalski stopped Chase from stepping any further down the corridor.

'Whatever you do, don't step on the long stone.'

It was then that Chase noticed the tunnel floor in front of her. It was made up of hundreds of small flat floorstones. One stone, however, stretched for the entire width of the hallway—a long, wide rectangular slab. Beyond it was a doorway leading into another passageway. If she hadn't been forewarned, Chase would almost certainly have stepped on it.

Everyone leapt over the long stone. When they were all safe on the other side, Kowalski turned to Chase. 'Want to know why?'

'Okay.'

The lieutenant raised his gun and fired a single shot into the long stone.

The bullet sparked off the stone—

--and then with shocking suddenness, a large square section of the ceiling rushed down from above them and banged down against the long stone, before retreating quickly back into the ceiling, leaving the tunnel silent once more.

Chase was stunned.

It had happened so fast! It had looked like a piledriver of some sort, an enormous stone mechanism designed to flatten the unwary soul who stepped on the long stone...or maybe just flatten that person's legs.

THE PASSAGEWAY OF ANIMALS

They pushed on, heading deeper into the ancient mine.

They entered a long extra-narrow passageway that they could only pass through single-file—indeed, it was so confined, their shoulders brushed against its uneven rocky walls.

Carved animal heads lunged out from the walls on either side of them. Sinister alligator heads, snarling snakes, and some older creatures: a woolly mammoth, a

sabre-toothed tiger. There was even one statue that looked like an enormous wrinkle-snouted rat.

'What the hell is that?' one of the soldiers said as he bumped up against the giant rat's bared fangs.

'Megafauna,' Chase said. 'Overly large prehistoric mammals. Every continent had them, but most died out with the arrival of man about 10,000 years ago. Mastodons in North America. Marsupial lions in Australia. Some species survived until quite recently. For example, this species of giant rodent-rodentus carnifex-is known to have lived in the fourth century A.D. Not surprising, really, rodents are the most resilient animals on earth.'

'A giant rat...' the soldier frowned.

'Sort of. Carnifex was six-feet-tall and partially bipedal. It was carnivorous, and in appearance, kind of like a cross between a rat and a velociraptor-long tail, powerful hind limbs, fast mover. The Teotihuacans sometimes used them as guard animals, but mainly they were used for bloodsport-they'd put two carnifexia in a pit and bet on the outcome.'

'Basically, cockfighting with big rats,' Kenny G said.

'Oh.'

After they'd passed through the ultra-narrow passageway, Kowalski demonstrated its secret. He touched a small floor panel with his foot. There was a four second delay...

...and then suddenly the narrow passageway's floor-the whole floor, about fifteen yards of it-just dropped away on a hinge, revealing a ten-foot-deep pit beneath it filled with viciously-sharpened wooden stakes.

Kowalski pressed the floor panel again the hinged floor rose back up into place, resetting itself.

'Ouch,' Kenny whispered.

THE SPIRAL RAMP

They came to a spiralling ramp that curved downward, bending around and out of sight. A rivulet of condensation ran in a trickle down its moss-covered floor.

An imposing stone statue glared down at them from an alcove at the top of the ramp. It was basically just a seven-foot-tall head, the face of an angry god. Long lethal-looking stone spikes jutted out from the face's cheeks, nose and brows.

They headed down the slippery spiralling ramp, slowly.

Kenny G walked beside Chase. 'Did you see that whiteboard upstairs?' he whispered.

'Uh-huh.'

'See the part about the Visitor's Stone.'

'Yes.'

'What do you think?'

'It's possible. It would fit the legend.'

The legend of the Visitor's Stone was a famous one in Mexican lore. Teotihuacan myth had it that at the height of their power, the Teotihuacans were visited by a strange otherworldly individual. He bestowed upon the Teotihuacans a single gift, a sharp pointed pyramid-shaped piece of silver stone.

Legend had it that this stone-known as the Visitor's Stone-possessed incredible properties. When dipped in water, it would bestow upon that water the gift of life...eternal life. Whoever drank the water would live forever.

But the lure of eternal life proved too much for the Teotihuacans, and they descended into infighting and murder. And so the stone was taken to a most secret location-a secure place far far away from the city-and hidden there, never to be found again.

'Do you think the Stone even exists?' Kenny asked.

'I don't know,' Chase said. 'But it would seem that if it does, the American government wants it.'

THE BELLY OF THE MINE

After about three storeys' worth of downward circling, the spiralling ramp levelled out at an L-shaped corner, which opened onto a long square tunnel.

The wall facing the ramp was heavily battered and crumbling, as if it had been pounded repeatedly with a sledgehammer. Large chunks of broken stone lay everywhere.

Chase, however, didn't notice them.

She only had eyes for what lay at the end of the new tunnel that branched off to her right. At the far end of it, she saw an enormous beautifully-crafted archway.

Strangely, however, the ceiling of this tunnel was made up of a grid of wide square-shaped alcoves. A lone object leaned against the wall halfway down the tunnel-a six-foot-tall golden cage, covered in broken cobwebs.

'It's okay,' Kowalski said. 'Just don't step on the farthest edges of the floorstones.'

Chase did as she was told, careful to step only in the exact centre of each floorstone. By this stage, she didn't even want to know what surprises lurked in the shadowed alcoves in the ceiling.

When they reached the decorated archway at the end of the tunnel, she gazed out through it.

And her eyes widened.

'Oh...my...Lord...' she breathed.

THE UNDERGROUND KINGDOM

It looked like a cathedral, a spectacular subterranean cathedral.

A gigantic cavern, at least a hundred feet high.

And standing proudly in the exact centre of this enormous underground space, was a beautiful freestanding pyramid.

It was about eighty feet high, flat-topped and tiered, and it was surrounded by a wide glistening moat that was fed by a gentle waterfall at one end of the cave.

Chase's eyes, however, were drawn to a flat tier halfway up the pyramid.

While the rest of the building was made of densely mortared stone, this section was constructed of glistening black obsidian-just like the tablets.

A set of stone stairs built into the side of the pyramid led up to the black tier.

The tiny figures of Chase and Kenny, Haynes and Breslin, and their military escorts crossed the moat surrounding the pyramid via a long granite bridge. Then they climbed the great building until they came to the obsidian tier.

There they found a wide stone doorway, also constructed of glassy black rock. Even the large rectangular stone filling the doorway was a glistening black.

And on the floor in front of the doorstone, arrayed side-by-side in a neat line, lay five carved rectangular slots—each the size of a hardback book. In the middle of each slot was a raised stone carving in the shape of a + sign.

'Looks like your tablets fit here,' Chase said.

'Yes, we know,' Haynes said. 'But it would seem the order in which they are placed is crucial. That was another painful discovery.'

Chase exchanged a look with Kenny.

Leonard Breslin stepped forward. 'What we would like you to do, Jessica,' he said, 'is figure out the sequence to the tablets, and open this pyramid.'

Chase and Kenny immediately started examining the mysterious entrance.

Breslin and Haynes moved a short distance away, watching them work. Then Breslin whispered casually to Haynes: 'Once they've opened it up, kill them.'

Part 3

THE ORDER OF THE TABLETS

Jessica Chase stared at the five rectangles carved into the floor in front of the pyramid's

entrance-slots into which General Haynes' five stone tablets would fit perfectly.

'Let me see those tablets again,' she said.

The Delta men brought the tablets out of their packs.

Kenny G took snapshots of them with his scanner. A moment later, their images came up on Chase's screen.



The computer beeped:

DATAMAP IMAGE: 02-1476

IMAGES CORRELATE TO 0 PREVIOUSLY MAPPED IMAGES.

ANALYSING INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS.

PROCESSING...

...

INDIVIDUAL COMPONENT MATCH.

COMPONENT: 

MATCHES 3 PREVIOUSLY MAPPED IMAGES:

1. WARRIOR'S NOSE ORNAMENT (62.3%)
2. TREE (41.0%)
3. WATER BUFFALO (34.9%)

'Warrior's nose ornament,' Chase thought aloud. She turned to Kenny. 'Could be a societal hierarchy.'

She arranged the tablets based on the faces they represented-warriors, laymen, children-sliding them into the slots in the shiny black floor. The raised + sign in each slot fitted into each tablet perfectly, like keys.

The only problem was, Chase was wrong.

THE PRICE OF FAILURE

The last tablet slid into place and, instantly, Chase saw movement out of the corner of her eye.

She leapt backwards, away from the doorway.

It was lucky she did so.

In a flashing nanosecond, two large square slabs of shiny black obsidian came shooting inwards from the walls on either side of her-twin piledrivers-and banged together like a pair of gigantic cymbals in precisely the spot where her head had just been!

But it wasn't over yet.

The black stone floor beneath Chase dropped away-a trap door-and she fell, screaming, into blackness.

She fell fast, before--whack!-- her buddy rope to Kenny snapped taut. Kenny was almost yanked into the square hole after her but he just managed to garner a foothold, bringing Chase to an abrupt jolting halt.

An inch in time.

In the dim lamp-light that filtered in from the trap door above her, she saw a glistening forest of golden spikes just below her feet.

And impaled on them: a bloodied broken body, shot through with spikes. Chase saw the wide-eyed look of horror on the victim's face-↵

And then she recognised the face.

It was Hans Ziegler.

Professor Hans Ziegler. Her old hieroglyphics professor from the University of WA. The man who had taught her everything she knew.

The man Haynes had asked her about before...

The realisation hit Chase like a hammer blow.

Haynes had brought Ziegler here before her.

And it appeared that Ziegler, the esteemed professor, hadn't been able to decipher the tablets either.

And then a stark image entered Jessica Chase's mind. An image of something she had seen earlier, a sentence scrawled on the whiteboard upstairs.

'7 MEN LOST: 4 WOUNDED, 3 DEAD...1 BEING A CIVILIAN.'

One being a civilian.

Jesus.

THE SECOND TRY

The Delta men hauled Chase out of the square hole a moment before it reset itself.

'Are you okay?' Kenny asked.

But Chase was already striding back over to the tablets in the floor.

'Damn it,' she said to herself. 'Stupid. It isn't a face at all.'

She set the tablets in a new order before anybody could even think to stop her. If she was wrong this time, she was dead. She lay the tablets in the following order:



The last tablet slotted into place.
There was no cymbal-clash this time.
No dropping of the trap door beneath her.
Chase smiled.
It hadn't been a face.

It had been far simpler than that. It had been a glimpse of nature, a glimpse of life: the horizon underneath the sun and the moon; then the planting of a seed; then the seed being affected by changing weather, the sun and the rain; then the growth of a tree amid that changing weather; then finally, in the fifth and last tablet, the finished tree, standing in the original constant environment.

Life.

There came a low rumbling from within the pyramid, and then, with grave slowness, the obsidian doorstone slid smoothly and gently down into the floor, revealing a wall of murky blackness beyond it.

A GLIMPSE OF THE PRIZE

Chase just stared into the darkness beyond the doorway, her eyes adjusting to the low light.

And then, like a veil being lifted, she saw it.

'Holy sh--' she breathed, at exactly the same moment as someone grabbed her roughly from behind and tore her eyes away from the sight.

EXPELLED FROM THE GARDEN

Haynes' demeanour changed instantly.

'Coleman, Reiger,' he said to two of his men. 'Take Doctors Chase and Georgeopoulous back to that spiked pit upstairs and throw them in. We won't be needing them anymore.'

'What!' Chase said as a pair of flex cuffs-- a thick plastic strip not unlike the plastic tie one puts around a garbage bag-- were snapped into place around her wrists. Kenny was similarly cuffed.

Chase turned to Breslin. He just shrugged.

'I'm sorry, Jessica, but my bargain with General Haynes requires secrecy-- absolute secrecy. Which unfortunately means that you and Doctor Georgeopoulous can never be allowed to leave this mine alive.'

Chase was speechless.

Kenny's mouth just hung open.

They were marched down the steps of the pyramid, flanked by two armed Delta commandos.

'What the hell did you see in there?' Kenny asked.

Chase recalled the image she had seen. She'd never forget it.

She'd seen a pedestal in a dark stone room. And on that pedestal stood a glorious silver ornament cut in the shape of an isosceles triangle.

'It was the Visitor's Stone,' she said.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Suddenly, things began to make sense.

Leonard Breslin--multi-billionaire, close friend to the President, sponsor of archaeological digs all over the globe. What would someone like Breslin want more than anything?

The ability to stay alive indefinitely.

And the US Government?

No doubt, only a small elite knew about the discovery of this mine. A small elite--including Breslin, the President, Haynes, and maybe a few others-- who would share the power of the Stone, and make a killing doing so.

As Chase was led back over the moat, she turned to look at the enormous underground pyramid.

She saw the military men up on the obsidian tier-- saw four of the Delta soldiers, led by Kowalski, enter the pyramid.

'Greedy bastards.'

She reached the archway, beheld the square floorstones of the tunnel beyond it-- the tunnel featuring the shadowed honeycombed ceiling.

She remembered the key to this tunnel. Don't step on the front edge of the square floorstones.

The front edge...

And then it hit her.

NOT A MINE

Memories of the mine and its booby traps shot through her brain at high speed.

The well-shaft near the surface-- perfectly sheer, with no fingerholds. Odd for a mine.

The piledriver near the well-shaft-- it came down only when you stepped on the wide trigger stone.

The trap-door in the ultra-narrow passageway-- it had only operated, after a momentary delay, when Kowalski had touched a floor panel at its innermost end.

And this tunnel-- its traps went off only when you touched the edge of the floorstones that

was nearer to the main cavern.

'Oh no...'

Chase turned to see one of the Delta men emerge from the pyramid, holding the Visitor's Stone in a clear-plastic specimen jar. He handed it over to Breslin.

'Kenny, get ready to run.'

'What? Why?'

'Because this mine isn't a mine. It's a vault. My guess, a converted prison-- Xutu prison, most likely-- that was converted into a resting place for the Stone. And remember what guarded Xutu's lower levels--'

'How do you know?'

'Because the booby traps have been going off behind us as we've moved inward. Kenny, those traps aren't designed to keep intruders out. They're designed to keep someone-- or something--in.'

Just then, as if right on cue, there came a shrill, ear-piercing scream from the obsidian tier.

It came from inside the open doorway, and was followed by a short burst of automatic gunfire which stopped almost as soon as it had begun.

Then suddenly--shockingly-- a ragged round object came tumbling out of the pyramid's doorway, bouncing end-over-end like a soccer ball.

It rolled right past Haynes and Breslin before it thudded clumsily down the stairs behind them.

Chase and Kenny saw it clearly, and their blood went cold.

It was a severed human head.

It was Tank Kowalski's head.

'I think this is going to be painful,' Chase said.

She was right.

WHEN ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE

The creatures came storming out of the pyramid's dark obsidian entryway like bats out of hell.

They moved like lightning, propelling themselves forward off powerful hind limbs while grabbing onto the floor in front of them with clawed forelimbs--a method of movement that was part-kangaroo, part-gorilla.

They were big, too-- man-sized-- and hairy, covered in black-brown fur, that spiky brackish fur of rodents the world over.

But it was their heads that provided the most frightening image. Evil black eyes glared down sneering weasel-like noses. And their teeth-- all canines and carnassials-- betrayed seriously carnivorous intentions.

They honestly looked like a cross between rats and velociraptors.

Rodentus carnifex.

The Central American giant rodent.

And the guardians of the lower levels of the legendary Xutu prison.

The first creature to emerge from the obsidian entryway launched itself at Haynes. It clasped its thumbed foreclaws around his skull and sank its teeth deep into his throat, cracking his neck with one horrific bite.

Blood sprayed everywhere.

RUN FOR YOUR LIFE

From their position over by the archway, Chase and Kenny didn't have time to ask stupid questions like how the hell does something like that survive for over a thousand years inside a

subterranean pyramid?

They just stared in stunned silence as the creatures-- dozens of them, hordes of them-- burst forth from the ancient structure en masse, like demons set free from the bowels of the earth.

They could see Leonard Breslin and the three Delta soldiers who had been up on the obsidian tier dashing down the stairs on the side of the pyramid, heading for the bridge over the moat, closely followed by the army of hairy black monsters.

One of the Delta men tripped and fell, and a cluster of the creatures fell upon him. He screamed, but only briefly.

Two creatures, however, actually overtook Breslin's group.

They had seen Chase's gang standing in the archway, and had taken it upon themselves to go after them.

They moved with shocking speed, covering the distance between the bridge and the archway in seconds.

The two Delta men standing with Chase and Kenny bolted, charged off down the tunnel.

Chase and Kenny-- still cuffed at the wrists and tied together by their rope-- took off after them.

The two hairy creatures stormed into the tunnel a second later, squealing with rage.

Chase-- running last of all--looked over her shoulder as she ran, and in a fleeting instant, she knew.

They had her.

And as she turned, wide-eyed, for a final glance, she saw the first creature move in close behind her and launch itself into the air, its jaws bared wide, and all Chase could do was shut her eyes and wait for the—

Part 4

THE JAWS OF DEATH

As the creature launched itself at Chase, there came an almighty CLANGGGG! followed by a

squeal of rage from the animal.

Chase opened her eyes.

She'd forgotten about the booby trapped ceiling of this tunnel.

As it had thrown itself at her, the creature must have stepped on the near edge of one of the square floorstones-causing a heavy old cobwebbed cage made entirely out of gold to rush out from one of the shadowy alcoves in the ceiling and thunder down on top of the animal, stopping it in mid-leap, trapping it inside the cage!

'Whoa,' Chase breathed. 'Close.'

At the same moment, the second creature crash-tackled one of the Delta guys, sending both of them sliding across the floor.

Instantly, another six-foot cage shot out from the alcoved ceiling and clanged down around them, encasing both of them inside it!

The creature mauled the soldier mercilessly, a captive meal.

Chase saw the soldier get rammed up against the bars, saw his K-Bar knife on his belt. She reached through the bars, grabbed the knife, then used it to slit her and Kenny's rope and flex-cuffs. She also saw something else dangling from the soldier's belt and grabbed it, too.

'Come on,' she said. 'We've got an obstacle course to run if we want to get out of this place.'

BRESLIN

For a 52-year-old billionaire, Leonard Breslin could run pretty fast.

He entered the cage-dropping tunnel on the fly, the two Delta men with him firing their guns at the horde of hairy monsters behind them.

Breslin saw Chase and the others at the far end of the tunnel, about to head up the spiralling ramp.

'Come on!' he yelled.

UP THE RAMP

Up ahead, Chase, Kenny and their surviving Delta man dashed the moss-covered spiralling ramp.

But the Delta guy slipped and fell, hitting the sloping floor hard-and abruptly the section of floor beneath him dropped a fraction.

A trigger stone, Chase realised.

It must have just been stuck with age. All it had needed was a bit of extra weight to set it off.

But nothing happened.

Strange...

The Delta man scrambled to his feet, and now alongside Chase and Kenny, hurried with them up the ramp.

Then, suddenly, Chase heard it.

Boom...

Boom...

Boom...

Getting faster.

Boom...boom...boom...

Faster.

Boom-boom-boom...

And then she saw it-- saw the huge seven-foot statue carved in the shape of a head that had been at the top of the ramp-- come bouncing down the curving slope toward them!

The statue thundered down the curved ramp, consuming nearly half the width of the tunnel.

'Left!' Chase yelled, and they all dived away as the statue thundered past them.

The statue continued on its rampaging run down the ramp, reaching the base just as Breslin and his two Delta men arrived there.

They scattered instantly, avoiding the oncoming statue by inches.

A snarling rodent that arrived there right behind them wasn't so lucky.

The spiked statue hit the animal with tremendous force, pinning it against the opposite wall. The rodent just exploded under the enormous weight-- splattering everywhere in a star-shaped blast of blood and gore.

The statue itself didn't last much longer. When it hit the wall, it shattered into pieces--pieces that looked just like the large chunks of rock that already littered the floor at the base of the ramp.

Breslin clambered to his feet, charged up the ramp with one of the Delta men.

The other soldier never made it. As he made to stand, a hairy black claw grabbed his ankle and sucked him-- screaming-- back into the tunnel.

THE PASSAGEWAY OF ANIMALS

Chase, Kenny and their Delta man came to the ultra-narrow passageway, the one with the carved animal heads protruding from its close stone walls.

They leapt over its floor panel and hurried in single-file down the passageway's tight fifteen-yard length.

They were almost through when it happened.

The floor just dropped away beneath them .

Suddenly.

Without warning.

The Delta man fell fast, and--shluck!-- was impaled on the wooden stakes positioned ten feet below the false floor.

Chase and Kenny had had better reflexes.

When the floor had dropped, they'd both lunged at the nearest carvings. Now Kenny clung to the carved stone head of a woolly mammoth, clutching it in a full hands-and-feet bear-hug, while Chase-- ironically-- hung from the carving of the giant rat head.

It was then that she saw Leonard Breslin, standing at the inner end of the passageway, his foot next to the trigger panel that had activated the floor.

Then Breslin hit the floor panel again and the passageway's floor swung back up into place.

OF RATS AND MEN

Breslin and the last Delta man charged down the ultra-narrow passageway-the Delta man with his gun up, Breslin with the Visitor's Stone tucked under his arm.

'Don't move,' Breslin said as he and the Delta man squeezed past them, the gun trained on their noses. 'If you follow us, you will be shot.' The two men then disappeared out the far end of the passageway.

Chase and Kenny released their grips on their carved stone heads.

'Great,' Kenny said. 'Now we're stuck between two sets of rats. What do we--'

A sniffing sound made them turn.

They spun to see one of the creatures step slowly and menacingly into the passageway from the other end, thirteen yards away.

'At least we have a chance against Breslin,' Chase said.

'I agree,' Kenny said. 'Run!'

THE RACE

Chase and Kenny ran-- ran for all they were worth.

They came to the long stone with the rodents close behind them, jumped over it like hurdlers.

The knotted rope still dangled from the well-shaft.

Chase and Kenny grabbed the rope and started climbing. A second later, they heard the resounding bang! of the piledriving mechanism.

The rodents had discovered the long stone.

Chase could see Breslin and his Delta bodyguard halfway up the well-shaft, climbing the rope.

The bodyguard fired down at them one-handed-- but after a single shot, his gun went dry. He'd used up his bullets downstairs.

But they still had the upper hand.

Breslin would almost certainly cut the rope once he was safely at the top of the well, letting Chase and Kenny drop back--

There came a sudden tug on the rope.

Chase looked down.

The creatures were climbing the rope!

'Hey, Miss Former Gymnast,' Kenny said. 'Think you can climb this rope in record time?'

'Right...' Chase said grimly.

And she started climbing--fast-- hand over hand, gymnast-style, all arms, no feet.

THE MINE ENTRANCE

Leonard Breslin stepped out of the well-shaft--still holding the Visitor's Stone-- closely followed

by his Delta bodyguard.

'Cut the rope,' he ordered.

The Delta man unsheathed his knife, brought it to the edge of the well-shaft-- just as a female hand reached up out of the hole, grabbed his wrist, and yanked him down into the well!

The Delta man wailed all the way down, just missing Kenny as he sailed past him.

Up in the small mine entrance, Breslin tried to make a break for the airlock door, but Chase was too fast. She swung herself up out of the well-shaft and dived at his legs, tackling him rugby league style.

The two of them hit the floor hard, just outside the squat stone entrance to the mine. The Visitor's Stone tumbled to the floor.

Kenny emerged from the well-shaft shouting, 'They're coming!'

As the first creature's claws appeared on the rim of the well-shaft, Breslin clambered for the Stone, crawling through the dirt.

Chase and Kenny just ran for the airlock's doorway.

Breslin grabbed the Stone, and he smiled-- just as he was sucked violently back across the floor by one of the creatures!

'No!' he shouted as he was yanked back inside the dark mine entrance, the Visitor's Stone dropping from his grasp.

Kenny dashed through the airlock's Lexan doorway. Chase, however, paused in it.

'Jessica, come on,' Kenny urged.

Chase was gazing at the Visitor's Stone on the ground in the entryway to the mine.

'There's one more thing to do,' she said, as she pulled from her pocket the second object she had taken from the mauled Delta man down in the cage-dropping tunnel.

It was a grenade.

She pulled the pin and tossed the grenade toward the mine entrance. It rolled to a stop next to the Visitor's Stone, right in the doorway to the mine.

Chase then ducked through the airlock doorway and sealed it shut behind her.

The grenade detonated.

The cube-shaped airlock spontaneously filled with rapidly-expanding smoke as the mine entrance was blasted into a thousand pieces.

Chunks of rock slammed into the superstrong Lexan-glass, while clouds of dust billowed up against its clear-glass walls.

When the dust eventually settled, there was no longer any mine entrance-- just a pile of rubble, packed solid, completely covering the well-shaft.

The Visitor's Stone-- so close to the grenade blast-- had been completely destroyed.

DEPARTURE

The hangar complex was now deserted.

It had been three hours since Chase and Kenny had arrived and Breslin's corporate jet had long since departed. The medics and the wounded men in the infirmary were also gone.

Chase and Kenny emerged from the hangar into brilliant desert sunshine. The complex

around them looked old and decrepit-- deliberately made to look disused.

The dull-brown Nevada landscape stretched away from them in every direction.

They walked for several miles down a pitted dirt road until they came to a gate. Beyond that they found a highway where they thumbed a ride.

As she sat in the back of a pick-up truck, swaying with every jolt, Chase reflected on the past few hours.

The tablets-- the booby traps-- the subterranean pyramid-- the Visitor's Stone-- and of course, the rampaging hairy creatures.

She snuffed a laugh.

The creatures. How had they survived for so long inside the subterranean pyramid?

Haynes and Breslin had never known, just as they would never know if the Visitor's Stone could do all it was claimed.

But Chase knew.

Because of what she had seen during her brief glimpse of the interior of the pyramid, when she had seen the Stone on its pedestal.

For in that moment, she had also seen something else.

She'd seen a trickle of condensation dripping down from the ceiling of the dark stone room, a steady drip-drip that had been landing right on the Visitor's Stone and which had formed a puddle on the floor around its pedestal.

A puddle that any animal would drink from.

The End

For now...