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Sleeping Giants

Book one of the Themis Files

Written by Sylvain Neuval

Published by Michael Joseph

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Sleeping Giants

Book One of the Themis Files

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MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Michael Joseph is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



First published in the USA by Del Rey, an imprint of Random House,
a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York 2016
First published in Great Britain by Michael Joseph 2016
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HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–18168–0
OM PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–18169–7

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À Théodore. Maintenant, on va t'apprendre à lire . . .
et l'anglais.

Sleeping Giants

PROLOGUE

It was my eleventh birthday. I'd gotten a new bike from my father: white and pink, with tassels on the handles. I really wanted to ride it, but my parents didn't want me to leave while my friends were there. They weren't really my friends though. I was never really good at making friends. I liked reading; I liked walking in the woods; I liked being alone. And I always felt a little out of place with other kids my age. So when birthdays came by, my parents usually invited the neighbors' kids over. There were a lot of them, some whose names I barely knew. They were all very nice, and they all brought gifts. So I stayed. I blew out the candles. I opened the presents. I smiled a lot. I can't remember most of the gifts because all I could think about was getting out and trying that bicycle. It was about dinnertime by the time everyone left and I couldn't wait another minute. It would soon be dark; once it was, my father wouldn't let me leave the house until morning.

I snuck out the back door and pedaled as fast as I could into the woods at the end of the street. It must have been ten minutes before I

started slowing down. Perhaps it was getting a little too dark for comfort and I was thinking about going back. Maybe I was just tired. I stopped for a minute, listening to the wind throwing the branches around. Fall had arrived. The forest had turned into a motley landscape and given new depth to the hillsides. The air suddenly got cold and wet, as if it were about to rain. The sun was going down and the sky behind the trees was as pink as those tassels.

I heard a crack behind me. It could have been a hare. Something drew my eye to the bottom of the hill. I left my bicycle on the trail and started slowly making my way down, moving branches out of my way. It was hard to see, as the leaves hadn't fallen yet, but there was this eerie turquoise glow seeping through the branches. I couldn't pinpoint where it came from. It wasn't the river; I could hear that in the distance, and the light was much closer. It seemed to be coming from everything.

I got to the bottom of the hill. Then the ground disappeared from under my feet.

I don't remember much after that. I was out for several hours and the sun was coming up when I came to. My father was standing about fifty feet above me. His lips were moving, but I couldn't hear a sound.

The hole I was in was perfectly square, about the size of our house. The walls were dark and straight with bright, beautiful turquoise light shining out of intricate carvings. There was light coming out of just about everything around me. I moved my hands around a bit. I was lying on a bed of dirt, rocks, and broken branches. Underneath the debris, the surface was slightly curved, smooth to the touch, and cold, like some type of metal.

I hadn't noticed them before, but there were firemen above, yellow jackets buzzing around the hole. A rope fell a few feet from my head. Soon, I was strapped onto a stretcher and hoisted into daylight.

My father didn't want to talk about it afterward. When I asked what I had fallen into, he just found new clever ways of explaining what a hole was. It was about a week later that someone rang the doorbell. I called for my father to go, but I got no answer. I ran down

the stairs and opened the door. It was one of the firemen that had gotten me out of the hole. He'd taken some pictures and thought I'd like to see them. He was right. There I was, this tiny little thing at the bottom of the hole, lying on my back in the palm of a giant metal hand.

PART ONE

BODY PARTS



FILE NO. 003

INTERVIEW WITH DR. ROSE FRANKLIN, PH.D., SENIOR SCIENTIST, ENRICO FERMI INSTITUTE

Location: University of Chicago, Chicago, IL

—How big was the hand?

—6.9 meters, about twenty-three feet; though it seemed much larger for an eleven-year-old.

—What did you do after the incident?

—Nothing. We didn't talk about it much after that. I went to school every day like any kid my age. No one in my family had ever been to college, so they insisted I keep going to school. I majored in physics.

I know what you're going to say. I wish I could tell you I went into science because of the hand, but I was always good at it. My parents figured out I had a knack for it early on. I must have been four years old when I got my first science kit for Christmas. One of those electronics kits. You could make a telegraph, or things like that, by squeezing wires into little metal springs. I don't think I would have done anything different had I listened to my father and stayed home that day.

Anyway, I graduated from college and I kept doing the only thing I knew how to do. I went to school. You should have seen my dad when we learned I was accepted at the University of Chicago. I've never seen anyone so proud in my life. He wouldn't have been any happier had he won a million dollars. They hired me at the U of C after I finished my Ph.D.

—When did you find the hand again?

—I didn't. I wasn't looking for it. It took seventeen years, but I guess you could say it found me.

—What happened?

—To the hand? The military took over the site when it was discovered.

—When was that?

—When I fell in. It took about eight hours before the military stepped in. Colonel Hudson—I think that was his name—was put in charge of the project. He was from the area so he knew pretty much everyone. I don't remember ever meeting him, but those who did had only good things to say about the man.

I read what little was left of his notes—most of it was redacted by the military. In the three years he spent in charge, his main focus had always been figuring out what those carvings meant. The hand itself, which is mostly referred to as "the artifact," is mentioned in passing only a few times, evidence that whoever built that room must have had a complex enough religious system. I think he had a fairly precise notion of what he wanted this to be.

—What do you think that was?

—I have no idea. Hudson was career military. He wasn't a physicist. He wasn't an archaeologist. He had never studied anything resembling anthropology, linguistics, anything that would be remotely useful in this situation. Whatever preconceived notion he had, it must have come from popular culture, watching Indiana Jones or some-

thing. Fortunately for him, he had competent people surrounding him. Still, it must have been awkward, being in charge and having no idea what's going on most of the time.

What's fascinating is how much effort they put into disproving their own findings. Their first analysis indicated the room was built about three thousand years ago. That made little sense to them, so they tried carbon-dating organic material found on the hand. The tests showed it to be much older, somewhere between five thousand and six thousand years old.

—That was unexpected?

—You could say that. You have to understand that this flies in the face of everything we know about American civilizations. The oldest civilization we're aware of was located in the Norte Chico region of Peru, and the hand appeared to be about a thousand years older. Even if it weren't, it's fairly obvious that no one carried a giant hand from South America all the way to South Dakota, and there were no civilizations as advanced in North America until much, much later.

In the end, Hudson's team blamed the carbon dating on contamination from surrounding material. After a few years of sporadic research, the site was determined to be twelve hundred years old and classified as a worship temple for some offshoot of Mississippian civilization.

I went through the files a dozen times. There is absolutely nothing, no evidence whatsoever to support that theory, other than the fact that it makes more sense than anything the data would suggest. If I had to guess, I would say that Hudson saw no military interest whatsoever in all this. He probably resented seeing his career slowly wither in an underground research lab and was eager to come up with anything, however preposterous, just to get out of there.

—Did he?

—Get out? Yes. It took a little more than three years, but he finally got his wish. He had a stroke while walking his dog and slipped into a coma. He died a few weeks later.

—What happened to the project after he died?

—Nothing. Nothing happened. The hand and panels collected dust in a warehouse for fourteen years until the project was demilitarized. Then the University of Chicago took over the research with NSA funding and somehow I was put in charge of studying the hand I fell in when I was a child. I don't really believe in fate, but somehow "small world" doesn't begin to do this justice.

—Why would the NSA get involved in an archaeological project?

—I asked myself the same question. They fund all kinds of research, but this seems to fall outside their usual fields of interest. Maybe they were interested in the language for cryptology; maybe they had an interest in the material the hand is made of. In any case, they gave us a pretty big budget so I didn't ask too many questions. I was given a small team to handle the hard science before we handed everything over to the anthropology department. The project was still classified as top secret and, just like my predecessor, I was moved into an underground lab. I believe you've read my report, so you know the rest.

—Yes, I have read it. You sent your report after only four months. Some might think it was a little hasty.

—It was a preliminary report, but yes. I don't think it was premature. OK, maybe a little, but I had made significant discoveries and I didn't think I could go much further with the data that I had, so why wait? There is enough in that underground room to keep us guessing for several lifetimes. I just don't think we have the knowledge to get much more out of this without getting more data.

—Who is we?

—Us. Me. You. Mankind. Whatever. There are things in that lab that are just beyond our reach right now.

—Ok, so tell me about what you do understand. Tell me about the panels.

—It's all in my report. There are sixteen of them, approximately ten feet by thirty-two feet each, less than an inch thick. All sixteen panels were made around the same period, approximately three thousand years ago. We . . .

—If I may. I take it you do not subscribe to the cross-contamination theory?

—As far as I'm concerned, there's no real reason not to trust the carbon dating. And to be honest, how old these things are is the least of our problems. Did I mention the symbols have been glowing for the last seventeen years, with no apparent power source?

Each wall is made of four panels and has a dozen rows of eighteen to twenty symbols carved into it. Rows are divided into sequences of six or seven symbols. We counted fifteen distinct symbols in total. Most are used several times, some appear only once. Seven of them are curvy, with a dot in the center, seven are made of straight lines, and one is just a dot. They are simple in design but very elegant.

—Had the previous team been able to interpret any of the markings?

—Actually, one of the few sections of Hudson's report left intact by the military was the linguistic analysis. They had compared the symbols to every known writing system, past or present, but found no interesting correlation. They assumed each sequence of symbols represented a proposition, like an English sentence, but with no frame of reference, they couldn't even speculate as to their interpretation. Their work was thorough enough and documented at every step. I saw no reason to do the same thing twice and I declined the offer to add a linguist to the team. With nothing to compare this to, there was logically no way to arrive at any sort of meaning.

Perhaps I was biased—because I stumbled onto it—but I felt drawn to the hand. I couldn't explain it, but every fiber of my being was telling me the hand was the important piece.

—Quite a contrast from your predecessor. So what can you tell me about it?

—Well, it's absolutely stunning, but I assume you're not that interested in aesthetics. It measures 22.6 feet in length from the wrist to the tip of the middle finger. It seems to be solid, made of the same metallic material as the wall panels, but it's at least two thousand years older. It is dark gray, with some bronze overtones, and it has subtle iridescent properties.

The hand is open, fingers close together, slightly bent, as if holding something very precious, or a handful of sand, trying not to spill it. There are grooves where human skin would normally fold, others that seem purely decorative. All are glowing the same bright turquoise, which brings out the iridescence in the metal. The hand looks strong, but . . . *sophisticated* is the only word that comes to mind. I think it's a woman's hand.

—I am more interested in facts at this point. What is this strong but sophisticated hand made of?

—It proved nearly impossible to cut or otherwise alter by conventional means. It took several attempts to remove even a small sample from one of the wall panels. Mass spectrography showed it to be an alloy of several heavy metals, mostly iridium, with about 10 percent iron and smaller concentrations of osmium, ruthenium, and other metals of the platinum group.

—It must be worth its weight in gold?

—It's funny you should mention that. It doesn't weigh as much as it should so I'd say it's worth a lot more than its weight, in anything.

—How much does it weigh?

—Thirty-two metric tons . . . I know, it's a respectable weight, but it's inexplicably light given its composition. Iridium is one of the densest elements, arguably the densest, and even with some iron content, the hand should easily weigh ten times as much.

—How did you account for that?

—I didn't. I still can't. I couldn't even speculate as to what type of process could be used to achieve this. In truth, the weight didn't bother me nearly as much as the sheer amount of iridium I was looking at. Iridium is not only one of the densest things you can find, it's also one of the rarest.

You see, metals of this group—platinum is one of them—love to bond with iron. That's what most of the iridium on Earth did millions of years ago when the surface was still molten and, because it's so heavy, it sunk to the core, thousands of miles deep. What little is left in the Earth's crust is usually mixed with other metals and it takes a complex chemical process to separate them.

—How rare is it in comparison to other metals?

—It's rare, very rare. Let's put it this way, if you were to put together all the pure iridium produced on the entire planet in a year, you'd probably end up with no more than a couple metric tons. That's about a large suitcaseful. It would take decades, using today's technology, to scrounge up enough to build all this. It's just too scarce on Earth and there simply aren't enough chondrites lying around.

—You lost me.

—Sorry. Meteorites; stony ones. Iridium is so rare in Earth rocks that it is often undetectable. Most of the iridium we mine is extracted from fallen meteorites that didn't completely burn up in the atmosphere. To build this room—and it seems safe to assume that this is not the only thing they would have built—you'd need to find it where there are a lot more than on the Earth's surface.

—Journey to the center of the Earth?

—Jules Verne is one way to go. To get this type of metal in massive quantities, you'd either have to extract it thousands of miles deep or be able to mine in space. With all due respect to Mr. Verne, we haven't come close to mining deep enough. The deepest mines we

have would look like potholes next to what you'd need. Space seems much more feasible. There are private companies right now hoping to harvest water and precious minerals in space in the very near future, but all these projects are still in the early planning stages. Nonetheless, if you could harvest meteorites in space, you could get a lot more iridium, a whole lot more.

—What else can you tell me?

—That pretty much sums it up. After a few months of looking at this with every piece of equipment known to man, I felt we were getting nowhere. I knew we were asking the wrong questions, but I didn't know the right ones. I submitted a preliminary report and asked for a leave of absence.

—Refresh my memory. What was the conclusion of that report?

—We didn't build this.

—Interesting. What was their reaction?

—Request granted.

—That was it?

—Yes. I think they were hoping I wouldn't come back. I never used the word "alien," but that's probably all they took out of my report.

—That is not what you meant?

—Not exactly. There might be a much more down-to-earth explanation, one I just didn't think of. As a scientist, all I can say is that humans of today do not have the resources, the knowledge, or the technology to build something like this. It's entirely possible that some ancient civilization's understanding of metallurgy was better than ours, but there wouldn't have been any more iridium around, whether it was five thousand, ten thousand, or twenty thousand years ago. So, to answer your question, no, I don't believe humans built these things. You can draw whatever conclusion you want from that.

I'm not stupid; I knew I was probably putting an end to my career.

I certainly annihilated any credibility I had with the NSA, but what was I going to do? Lie?

—What did you do after you submitted your report?

—I went home, to where it all began. I hadn't gone home in nearly four years, not since my father died.

—Where is home?

—I come from a small place called Deadwood, about an hour northwest of Rapid City.

—I am not familiar with that part of the Midwest.

—It's a small town built during the gold rush. It was a rowdy place, like in the movies. The last brothels were closed when I was a kid. Our claim to fame, besides a short-lived TV show on HBO, is that the murder of Wild Bill Hickok happened in Deadwood. The town survived the end of the gold rush and a few major fires, but the population dwindled to about twelve hundred.

Deadwood sure isn't thriving, but it's still standing. And the landscape is breathtaking. It's sitting right on the edge of the Black Hills National Forest, with its eerie rock formations, beautiful pine forests, barren rock, canyons, and creeks. I can't think of a more beautiful place on Earth. I can understand why someone would want to build something there.

—You still call it home?

—Yes. It's part of who I am although my mother would probably disagree. She appeared hesitant when she answered the door. We barely spoke anymore. I could sense that she resented the fact that I never came back, not even for Dad's funeral, that I left her all alone to cope with the loss. We all have our way of dealing with pain, and I suppose that deep down my mother understood that this was just my way, but there was anger in her voice, things she would never dare to speak out loud but that would taint our relationship forever. I was OK with that. She had suffered enough; she was entitled to re-

sentment. We didn't talk much the first few days, but we quickly settled into some form of routine.

Sleeping in my old room brought back memories. When I was a child, I often snuck out of bed at night and sat by the window to watch my dad leave for the mine. He would come to my room before every night shift and have me pick a toy to put in his lunch box. He said he would think of me when he opened it and come spend his lunch break with me in my dreams. He didn't talk much, to me or to my mother, but he knew how important little things can be for a child and he took the time to tuck me in before every shift. How I wished my dad were there so I could talk to him. He wasn't a scientist, but he had a clear view of things. I couldn't talk to my mother about this.

We'd been having short but pleasant discussions for a few days, which was a welcome change from the polite comments about food we'd been exchanging since I arrived. But what I did was classified and I did my best to steer our conversations away from what was on my mind. It got easier with every week that went by, as I found myself spending more time reminiscing about childhood mistakes than I did thinking about the hand.

It took nearly a month before I hiked to the site where I'd first seen it. The hole had long since been filled. There were small trees starting to grow back through the dirt and rocks. There was nothing left to see. I walked aimlessly until nightfall. Why did I find the hand first? Surely there must be other structures like the one I fell in. Why did no one find them? Why did it happen on that day? The hand had been dormant for millennia. Why did it happen then? What triggered it? What was present twenty years ago that hadn't been for thousands of years?

Then it hit me. *That* was the right question to ask. I had to figure out what turned it on.