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The Last Gospel

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Extract

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Prologue

24 August AD 79

The old man limped to the brink of the chasm, the firm grasp of his freedman all that prevented him from pitching forward. Tonight was a full moon, a red moon, and the swirl of vapours that filled the crater seemed to glow, as if the fires of Vulcan were burning through the thin cusp of ground that divided the world of the living from the world of the dead. The old man peered over the edge, felt the warm blast on his face and tasted the tang of sulphur on his lips. Always he was tempted, but always he held back. He remembered the words of Virgil, the poet whose tomb they had passed on the way to this place. Facilis descendus Avernus. It is easy to descend to the underworld. Not so easy to get out again.

He turned away, and drew his hood up to conceal his face. Behind them he glimpsed the dark cone of Vesuvius over the bay, the towns of Herculaneum and Pompeii glimmering like sentinels on either side. The great bulk of Vesuvius was reassuring on nights like these, when the earth shuddered and the reek of sulphur was almost overwhelming, when the ground was littered with the bodies of birds which had flown too close to the fumes. And always there were the harbingers of doom, madmen and charlatans who lurked in the shadows ready to prey on the gullible, on those who came to this lookout to gape and gawk, but who never went further. One was here now, a wild-haired Greek who leapt up from an altar beside them, hands cupped forward in supplication, flailing and foaming,

babbling about a great plague, that Rome would burn, that the sky would rain blood, that the land below Vesuvius would be consumed by the fires within. The freedman pushed the beggar roughly aside, and the old man muttered in annoyance. This was not a place where anyone needed a soothsayer to interpret the will of the Gods.

Moments later they slipped through a fissure in the rock known only to the crippled and the damned, where the old man had first been brought as a boy more than eighty years before. He still remembered his terror, standing here weeping and trembling, his head jerking uncontrollably with the palsy. There was to be no cure, but those who took him in gave him solace, gave him the strength to defy others who wanted him never to be seen in Rome again. Even now he had not shaken off the fear, and he whispered his name, steeling himself. Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus. Remember who you are. Remember why you are here.

Slowly they descended, the old man dragging his bad leg behind him, his hands leaning heavily on his freedman in front. On most nights the heavens were visible through the rent at the top of the fissure, but tonight the rock-cut steps were wreathed in a swirl of vapour that seemed to suck them down. Dark corners were lit by burning torches, and in other places orange light flickered through from outside. They reached a ledge above the floor of the crater, and the old man strained to see what he could not make out from above. Swirling gases seemed to float on a layer of emptiness above the rocky floor, an invisible poison that extinguished flames and suffocated all who fell into it. Somewhere beyond lay the entrance to Hades itself, a burning gash that split the rock, surrounded by the charred skeletons of those who had left their bodies behind on the way to Elysium. For a second he saw slits of red like glowing eyes in the rock, and then he watched a molten mass seep out and solidify, leaving shapes like gigantic limbs and torsos imprisoned in a writhing mass on the crater floor. The

old man shuddered, and thought again of Virgil. It was as if those who had chosen to leave the mortal life in this place were straining for renewal, as giants and titans and gods, yet were doomed to eternity as inchoate, Protean forms, forms that nature had begun but would never finish, forms like himself.

The scene vanished in the vapours like a dream, and they pressed on, the old man staggering and panting behind the freedman. His vision tunneled and blurred, as it did often these days, and he paused to rub his eyes and squint ahead. They reached a causeway, a raised path shrouded in yellow smoke rising from vents in the ground and hemmed in on either side by pools of boiling mud, heaving and juddering. He had been told that these were the tormented souls in purgatory pressing upwards, desperate to escape, that the hissing gas was their exhalations, like the ill humours rising from a charnel pit. The old man had seen that before, when his legionary commanders had brought him before the pits where they had flung the dead Britons, bodies that still shifted under the soil weeks after the slaughter. He grimaced, remembering his nausea, and they pressed on, past the steaming fumeroles into the gloom ahead.

Out of nowhere hands reached out towards him, and he could sense ghostly forms lining either side of the causeway, some hauling themselves up on withered limbs from the edge of the crater. His freedman walked ahead with arms outstretched, his palms facing outwards and touching theirs, creating a space behind for the old man to follow. He heard low chanting, a soloist and then many voices responding, a rustling noise like fallen autumn leaves lifted in a gust of wind. They were singing the same words, over and over again. Domine Iumius. Lord, we shall come. There was a time when Claudius would have walked among them, been one of them. But now they made the sign with their hands as they reached towards him, fingers crossed, and they whispered his name, then the name of the one they knew he had touched. His friend Pliny had seen it

too, had gone in disguise among his sailors at the naval base at the head of the bay, had seen knots of men and woman listening in dark alleyways and the backrooms of taverns, had heard talk of a new priesthood, of those they called apostoles. The great poet Virgil had foretold it, Virgil who had trodden this very path a hundred years before, who had sought his wisdom too in the message of the leaves. A boy's birth. A golden race arising. A world at peace, freed from never-ceasing fear. Yet a world where temptation lurked, where men would once again arise to place themselves between the people and the word of God, where terror and strife might rule again.

The old man kept his gaze steadfastly down, and limped on. For twenty-five years now he had lived in his villa beneath the mountain, a humble historian with a lifetime's work to complete. Twenty-five years since he, ruler of the greatest empire the world had ever known, had supposedly died by poison in his palace in Rome, spirited away one night never to return. An emperor who lived on not as a god, but as a man. An emperor with a secret, with a treasure so precious it had kept him alive all these years, watching, waiting. Few others knew of it. His friend Pliny. His trusted freedman Narcissus, here today. Yet now these others treated him with a strange reverence, hung on his every word as if he were a soothsayer, as if he were the oracle herself. The old man muttered to himself. Tonight he would fulfill a promise he had made beside a lake long ago, to one who had entrusted him with his word, his written word. It was the old man's final chance to shape history, to achieve more than he ever could as emperor, to leave a legacy that he knew could outlast even Rome itself.

Suddenly he was alone. Ahead of him the causeway disappeared into a cavernous darkness, a place where the rising heat of the pit met a chill exhalation from within, to form a shimmering mirage. He reached for the dice he always kept in his pocket, turning them round and round, trying to calm his tremor. It was said that the cave had a hundred entrances, each

one with a voice. Beside him was a low basin, and he dipped his hand in the lustral waters, splashing his face. In front of him was a low stone table, wisps of brown smoke rising from a smouldering mass spread over the surface. Eagerly he lurched over, grasping the smoothed edges of the table, his eyes tightly shut, sucking the smoke deep into his lungs, coughing and retching, holding it there. Pliny called it the opium bactrium, the extract of poppy brought from the far-off kingdom of Bactria in the east, from the bleak mountain valleys conquered by Alexander the Great. But here they called it the gift of Morpheus, god of dreams. He sucked in again, feeling the heady rush that reached into his limbs, bringing feeling back where it had almost gone, dulling the pain. He needed it more now, needed it every night. He leaned back, and felt as if he were floating, face upwards and arms outstretched. For a fleeting moment he was back again in the other place where he had sought healing, long ago beside the lake in Galilee, laughing and drinking with his friends Herod and Cyros and his beloved Calpurnia, with the Nazarene and his woman, where he had been touched by one who had known his destiny, who had foreseen this very day itself.

He opened his eyes. Something was coming from the cave, a writhing, undulating form that seemed to press against the mirage like a phoenix rising. It broke through, and he saw a huge serpent, standing upright as tall as he was, its flat head lowered and its tongue flicking in and out, swaying from side to side. Pliny had told him these were hallucinations brought on by the morpheum, but as the snake drooped down and slithered round his legs the old man felt the silky sheen of its skin, and smelled its musty, acrid odour. Then it slid away, slithering into a crack at the side of the cave, and there was another smell, overpowering the sulphur and the morpheum and the snake, a smell like a chill wind wafting through a rotting tomb, a smell of ancient decay. Something flickered, a shape barely visible in the darkness. She was here.

IX

'Clau-Clau-Claudius.'

There was a low moan, then a sound like a mocking laugh, and then a sigh that echoed through all the different passageways in the rock, before it died away. Claudius peered into the darkness, waiting, his head spinning. It was said that she had lived for seven hundred ages of men, that Apollo had granted her as many years as the grains of sand she could hold in her hands, but that the god had refused her eternal youth after she had spurned his advances. All Apollo had allowed was the voice of a young woman, so that as she shrank and decayed the voice of her youth remained to torment her, to remind her of the immortality she had forsaken. And now she was the last of them, the last of the oracles of the earth goddess Gaia, last of the thirteen. She who had held sway in her lair since before Rome was founded, bewitching all who came before her, whose riddles had brought emperors to their knees.

'S-Sibyl.' Claudius broke the silence, his voice tremulous, harsh with the sulphur, peering into the darkness. 'I have d-done as you instructed. I did what you ordered me to do for the Vestals, in Rome. And now I have been to the thirteenth, to Andraste. I have been to her tomb. I have taken it to her. The prophecy is fulfilled.'

He dropped a bag of coins he had been carrying, and they clunked out, dull gold and silver, the last batch of coins he had saved for this night, coins bearing his portrait. A shaft of light fell in front of the table, revealing the worn stone surface of the passageway beneath the swirls of vapour. On the floor were leaves, oak leaves arranged like words, the inked Greek letter on each leaf just visible. Claudius lurched forward, falling on his hands and knees and peering at the leaves, desperate to read the message. Suddenly there was a gust and they were gone. He cried out, then slowly bowed his head, his words rent with despair. 'You took my ancestor Aeneus to see his dead father Anchises. He came here after Troy, seeking the underworld on his way to found Rome. All I asked was to

see my father Drusus. My dear brother Germanicus. My son Britannicus. To glimpse them in Elysium, before Charon takes me where he will.'

There was another moan, thinner this time, then a shriek that seemed to come from everywhere at once, as if all hundred mouths of the cave were turning inwards on him.

Day of wrath and terror looming!
Heaven and earth to ash consuming
Clau-Clau-Claudius' words and Sibyl's truth foredooming!

Claudius lurched to his feet, his body shaking and jerking, convulsed with fear. He peered again at the pool of light. Where the leaves had been was now a pile of sand, the grains trickling down the sides. He watched as a final sprinkle fell from somewhere high above, a shimmer that dropped like a translucent curtain. Then everything was still. He looked around, and realized that the snake had gone, had sloughed off its skin and left it empty in front of him, had slithered down into the poison above the crater floor. He remembered the words of Virgil again, the coming of the Golden Age. And the serpents too shall die.

Claudius felt his head clear, and saw the mirage in front of the cave drop away. He was suddenly desperate to leave, to cast aside the yearning that had bound him to this place and to the Sibyl for so long, to return to his villa beneath Vesuvius to finish the work that he and Pliny had planned for that evening, to fulfil the promise he had made by that lake so long ago. He turned to go, then felt something on the back of his neck, a touch of cold that made his hairs stand on end. He thought he heard his name again, softly whispered, but this time they were the words of an old woman, impossibly old, and were followed by a rustling like a death rattle coming closer. He dared not turn around. He began pressing forward, limping and slipping over the rock, looking around frantically for Nar-

cissus. Over the lip of the crater he could see the dark form of the mountain, its summit wreathed in flickering lightning like a burning crown of thorns. The clouds were rushing overhead, tumbling and darkening, glowing orange and red as if they were on fire. He felt a terrible fear, then a sudden lucidity, as if all his memories and dreams had been sucked out of him by the vortex ahead. It was as if history itself had sped up, history which he had kept at bay since vanishing from Rome half a lifetime ago, history which had waited for him like a coiled spring that could no longer be held back.

He staggered on. Behind him he felt a baleful presence pushing him forward, onward through the sulphurous haze towards the floor of the crater. He grasped the dice again, pulled them out of his pocket then dropped them, heard them rattle on the rocks then stop. He looked despairingly, but saw nothing. On either side spectral forms emerged from the pit, no longer in supplication but joining him like a silent army, shrouded in hot flecks of ash which had begun to fall from the sky like snow. He felt his mouth go dry, a desperate thirst. On the top of the mountain he saw a burning ring of fire, racing down the slopes towards the towns, fields of flames in its wake. Then the scene was obliterated by blackness, a swirling funnel that descended into the crater and blotted out all but the narrowing void ahead. He heard screams, a muffled roar, saw bodies ignite like torches in the darkness, one after the other. He was coming closer. Now he knew, with dread certainty. The Sibyl had kept her promise. He would follow in the footsteps of Aeneus.

But this time there would be no return.

*****

Chapter 1

Jack Howard eased himself down on the floor of the inflatable boat, his back resting on one pontoon and his legs leaning against the outboard engine. It was hot, almost too hot to move, and the sweat had begun to trickle down his face. The sun had burned through the morning haze and was bearing down relentlessly, reflecting blindingly off the cliff face in front of him, the limestone scarred and worn like the tombs and temples on the rocky headland beyond. Jack felt as if he were in a painting by Seurat, as if the air had fragmented into a myriad pixels that immobilized all thought and action, that caught him in the moment. He pushed his hands through his thick hair, feeling the heat on his scalp, and stretched out his long arms to either side. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath, took in the utter stillness, the smell of wetsuits, the outboard engine, the taste of salt. It was everything he loved, distilled to its essence. It felt good.

He opened his eyes and peered over the side, checking the orange buoy he had released a few minutes before. The sea was glassy smooth, with only a slight swell rippling the edge where it lapped against the rock face. He reached out and put his hand on the surface, letting it float for a moment until the swell enveloped it. The water below was limpid, as clear as a swimming pool, and he could see far down the anchor line into the depths, to the shimmer of exhaust bubbles rising from the divers below. It was hard to believe this had once been a place of unimaginable fury, of nature at her cruelest, of untold human tragedy. The most famous shipwreck in history. Jack

hardly dared think of it. For twenty years he had wanted to come back to this place, a yearning which had nagged at him and become a gnawing obsession, ever since his first doubt, since he had first begun to reassemble the pieces. It was an intuition which had rarely failed him, tried and tested over years of exploration and discovery around the world. Intuition based on hard science, on an accumulation of facts that had begun to point unswervingly in one direction.

He had been sitting here, off Capo Murro di Porco in Sicily in the heart of the Mediterranean, when he had first dreamed up the International Maritime University. Twenty years ago he had been on a shoestring budget, leading a group of students driven by their passion for diving and archaeology, with equipment cobbled together and jerry-built on the spot. Now he had a multi-million budget, a sprawling seafront campus on his former family estate in southern England, the place where Howards had lived for generations before Jack's father turned over the house and grounds to the fledgling institution. There were museums around the world, state-of-the-art research vessels, an extraordinary team at IMU who took the logistics out of his hands. But in some ways little had changed. No end of money could buy the clues that led to the greatest discoveries, the extraordinary treasures that made it all worthwhile. Twenty years ago they had been following a tantalizing account left by Captain Cousteau's divers, intrepid explorers at the dawn of shipwreck archaeology, and here he was again, floating above the same site with the same battered old diary in his hands. The key ingredients were still the same, the hunches, the gut feeling, the thrill of discovery, that moment when all the elements suddenly came together, the adrenaline rush like no other.

Jack shifted, pushing his diving suit further down around his waist, and checked his watch. He was itching to get wet. He glanced overboard. There was a slight commotion as Pete and Andy, the divers who had been sent down to anchor the

shotline, pulled the buoy underwater, and Jack could see it now, refracted five metres below, deep enough to avoid the props of passing boats but shallow enough for a free diver to retrieve a weighted line that hung from it as a mooring point. Jack had already dared to look ahead, had begun to eye the site like a field commander planning an assault. Their research vessel Seaquest II could anchor in a sheltered bay around the cape to the west. On the headland itself the rocky seashore dropped in a series of stepped shelves, good for a shore camp. He rehearsed all the ingredients of a successful underwater excavation, knowing that each site produced its fresh crop of challenges. Any finds they made would have to go to the archaeological museum in Syracuse, but he was sure the Sicilian authorities would make a good show of it. IMU would establish a permanent liason with their own museum at Carthage in nearby Tunisia, perhaps even an air shuttle as a package trip for tourists. They could hardly go wrong.

Jack peered down, checked his watch again, then noted the time in the logbook. The two divers were at the decompression stop. Twenty minutes to go. He cupped his left hand in the sea and splashed it over his head, feeling the water trickle through his thick hair and down his neck. He leaned back, stretched his long legs down the boat, made himself relax and take in the perfect tranquility of the scene for a moment longer. Only six weeks earlier he had stood by the edge of an underwater cavern in the Yucatán, drained but exhilarated at the end of another extraordinary trail of discovery. There had been losses, grievous losses, and Jack has spent much of the voyage home ruminating on those who had paid the ultimate price. His boyhood friend Peter Howe, missing in the Black Sea. And Father O'Connor, an ally for all too brief a time, whose appalling death had brought home the reality of what they were ranged against. Always it was the bigger stake that provided the solace, the innumerable lives that could have been lost had they not relentlessly pursued their goal. Jack had

become used to the greatest archaeological prizes coming at a cost, gifts from the past that unleashed forces in the present few could imagine existed. But here, he felt sure of it, here it was different. Here it was archaeology pure and simple, a revelation that could only thrill and beguile any who came to know of it.

He peered into the glassy stillness of the sea, saw the rocky cliff face underwater disappear into the shimmering blue. His mind was racing, his heart pounding with excitement. Could this be it? Could this be the most famous shipwreck of all antiquity? The shipwreck of St Paul?

'You there?'

Jack raised his foot and gently prodded the other form in the boat. It wobbled, then grunted. Costas Kazantzakis was about a foot shorter than Jack but built like an ox, a legacy of generations of Greek sailors and sponge-fishermen. Like Jack he was stripped to the waist, and his barrel chest was glistening with sweat. He seemed to have become moulded to the boat, his legs extended on the pontoon in front of Jack and his head nestled in a mess of towels at the bow. His mouth was slightly open and he was wearing a pair of wraparound fluorescent sunglasses, a hilarious fashion accessory on such an unkempt figure. One hand was dangling in the water, holding the hoses that led down to the regulators at the decompression stop, and the other hand was draped over the valve of the oxygen cylinder that lay down the centre of the boat. Jack grinned affectionately at his friend, who meant far more to him than his official role as IMU's chief engineer. Costas was always there to lend a hand, even when he was dead to the world. Jack kicked him again. 'We've got fifteen minutes. I can see them at the safety stop.'

Costas grunted again, and Jack passed over a water bottle. 'Drink as much as you can. We don't want to get the bends.'

'Good on you, mate.' Costas had learned a few comi-

cally misplaced catchphrases in his years based at the IMU headquarters in England, but the delivery was still resolutely American, a legacy of years spent at school and university in the States. He reached over and took the water, and proceeded to down half the bottle noisily.

'Cool shades, by the way,' Jack said.

'Jeremy gave them to me,' Costas gasped. 'A parting present when we got back from the Yucatán. I was truly moved.'

'You're not serious.'

'I'm not sure if he was. Anyway, they work.' Costas pulled them down again, passed back the bottle then slumped back. 'Been touching base with your past?'

'Only the good bits.'

'Any decent engineers? I mean, on your team back then?'

'We're talking Cambridge University, remember. The brightest and the weirdest. One guy took a portable blackboard with him everywhere he went, and would patiently explain the Wankel rotary engine to any passing Sicilian. A real eccentric. But that was before you came along.'

'With a dose of good old American know-how. At least at MIT they taught us about the real world.' Costas leaned over, grabbed the bottle again and took another swig of water. 'Anyway, this shipwreck of yours. The one you excavated here twenty years ago. Any good finds?'

'It was a typical Roman merchantman,' Jack replied. 'About two hundred cylindrical pottery amphoras, filled with olive oil and fish sauce on the edge of the African desert, in Tunisia due south of us. Plus there was a fascinating selection of ceramics from the ship's galley. We were were able to date it all to about AD 200. And we did make one incredible find.'

There was a silence, broken by a stentorian snore. Jack kicked again, and Costas reached out to stop himself from rolling overboard. He pushed his shades up his forehead and peered blearily at Jack. 'Uh huh?'

'I know you need your beauty sleep. But it's almost time.'

Costas grunted again, then raised himself painfully on one elbow and rubbed his hand across his stubble. 'I don't think beauty's an option.' He heaved himself upright, then took off the sunglasses and rubbed his eyes. Jack peered with concern at his friend. 'You look wasted. You need to take some time off. You've been working flat out since we returned from the Yucatán, and that was well over a month ago.'

'You should stop buying me toys.'

'What I bought you,' Jack gently admonished him, 'was an agreement from the Board of Directors for an increase in engineering personnel. Hire some more staff. Delegate.'

'You should talk,' Costas grumbled. 'Name me one archaeological project run by IMU over the last decade where you haven't jumped on board.'

'I'm serious.'

'Yeah, yeah.' Costas stretched, and gave a tired grin. 'Okay, a week by my uncle's pool in Greece wouldn't go amiss. Anyway, sorry. Was I dreaming? You mentioned an incredible find?'

'Buried in a gully directly beneath us now, where Pete and Andy should have anchored the shot-line. The remains of an ancient wooden crate, filled with sealed tin boxes. Inside the boxes we found more than a hundred small wooden phials, filled with unguents and powders including cinnamon and cumin. That was amazing enough, but then we found a large slab of dark resinous material, about two kilogrammes in weight. At first we thought it was ship's stores, spare resin for waterproofing timbers. But the lab analysis came up with an astonishing result.'

'Go on.'

'What the ancients called lacrymae papaveris, tears of the poppy, papaver somniferum. The sticky milky stuff that comes from the calyx of the black poppy. What we call opium.'

'No kidding.'

'The Roman writer Pliny the Elder writes about it, in his Natural History.'

'The guy who died in the eruption of Vesuvius?'

'Right. When Pliny wasn't writing he was in charge of the Roman fleet at Misenum, the big naval base on the Bay of Naples. He knew all about the products of the east from his sailors, and from Egyptian and Syrian merchants who put in there. They knew that the best opium came from the distant land of Bactria, high in the mountains beyond the eastern fringe of the empire, beyond Persia. That's present-day Afghanistan.'

'You're kidding me.' Costas was fully alert now, and looked incredulous. 'Opium. From Afghanistan. Did I hear you right? We're talking the first century AD here, not the twenty-first century, right?'

'You've got it.'

'An ancient drug runner?'

Jack laughed. 'Opium wasn't illegal back then. Some ancient authorities condemned it for making users go blind, but they hadn't refined it into heroin yet. It was probably mixed with alcohol to make a drink, similar to laudanum, the fashion drug of Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The seed was also pounded into tablets. Pliny tells us it could induce sleep, cure headaches, so they knew all about the pain-killing properties of morphine. It was also used for euthanasia. Pliny gives us what may be the first-ever account of a deliberate Class A drugs overdose, a guy called Publius Licinius Caecina who was unbearably ill, and died of opium poisoning.'

'So what you found was really a medicine chest,' Costas said.

'That's what we thought at the time. But a very odd find in the chest was a small bronze statue of Apollo.'

'Apollo?'

Jack nodded. 'I know. When you find medical equipment it's more commonly with a statue of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. A few years later I visited the cave of the Sibyl at

Cumae, on the edge of the active volcanic zone a few miles north of Misenum, within sight of Vesuvius. Apollo was the god of oracles. Sulphur and herbs were used to ward off evil spirits and maybe opium was added to it. I began to wonder whether all those mystical rites were chemically assisted.'

'It could have been smoked,' Costas murmured. 'Burned like incense. The fumes would have been quicker than a draught.'

'People went to those places seeking cures, to the Sibyl and other prophets,' Jack said. 'Organized religion at the time didn't provide much personal comfort, often excluding the common people and fixated on cults and rituals that were pretty remote from daily concerns. The Sibyl and her kind provided some kind of emotional comfort, psychological relief. And the Sibyls must have known it, and played on it. All we hear about from ancient accounts is the message of the oracle, obscure verses written on leaves or issued as prophetic pronouncements, all sound and fury and signifying God knows what. But maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe some people really did find a cure of sorts, a palliative.'

'And a highly addictive one. It would have kept the Sibyl in business. Cash offerings from grateful clients would have kept the supply rolling.'

'So I began to think our little ship wasn't carrying an apothecary or doctor, but a middleman traveling with his precious supply of opium for one of the oracles in Italy, maybe even procured for the Sibyl at Cumae herself.'

'A Roman drug dealer.' Costas rubbed his stubble. 'The godfather of all godfathers. The Naples mafia would love it.'

'Maybe if they found out it would teach them a little respect for archaeology,' Jack said. 'Organised crime is a huge problem for our friends in the Naples archaeological superintendency.'

'Doesn't your old girlfriend work there? The one you told me about?'

'Elizabeth hasn't been in contact with me for years. Last I heard she was still an inspector, pretty low down on the food chain. I never really worked out what happened. She finished her doctorate in England before I did and then had to go back, part of her contract with the Italian government. She swore to me that she'd never return to Naples, but then it happened and she completely shut down communication with me. I suppose I moved on too. That was almost fifteen years ago.'

'Ours is not to reason why, Jack.' Costas shifted. 'Back to the opium. Procured from where?'

'That's what worried me.' Jack rolled out a laminated small-scale Admiralty chart of the Mediterranean over the equipment on the floor of the boat, pinning its corners under loose diving weights. He jabbed his finger at the centre of the chart. 'Here we are. The island of Sicily. Bang in the middle of the Mediterranean, the apex of ancient trade. Right?'

'Go on.'

'Our little Roman merchantman, wrecked against this cliff with its cargo of north African olive oil and fishsauce. It does the trip to Rome three, maybe four times a year, during the summer sailing season. Up and down, up and down. Almost always within sight of land, Tunisia, Malta, Sicily, Italy.'

'Not a long-distance sailor.'

'Right.' Jack stabbed his finger at the far corner of the chart. 'And here's Egypt, the port of Alexandria. Fifteen hundred miles away to the east of us, across open sea. Everything points to the drug chest coming from there. The wood's Egyptian acacia. Some of the phials had Coptic letters on them. And the opium was almost certainly shipped to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea ports of Egypt, a trade in exotic eastern spices and drugs that reached its height in the first century AD.'

'The time of St Paul,' Costas murmured. 'Why we're here.'

'Right.' Jack traced his finger along the coastline of north Africa from Egypt. 'Now it's possible, just possible, that the opium was shipped along the African coast from Alexandria

to Carthage, and then went north to Sicily in our little merchantman.'

Costas shook his head. 'I remember the navigational advice in the Mediterranean Pilot from my stint in the U.S. Navy. Prevailing onshore winds. That desert coastline between Egypt and Tunisia has always been a deathtrap for sailors, avoided at all costs.'

'Precisely. Ships leaving Alexandria for Rome sailed north to Turkey or Crete and then west across the Ionian Sea to Italy. The most likely scenario for our opium cargo is one of these ships, blown south-west from the Ionian Sea towards Sicily.'

Costas looked perplexed, then his eyes suddenly lit up. 'I've got you! We're looking at two overlapping shipwrecks!'

'It wouldn't be the first time. I've dived on ship's graveyards with dozens of wrecks jumbled together, smashed against the same reef or headland. And once that idea clicked, I began to see other clues. Take a look at this.' Jack reached down into a crate beside him and picked up a heavy item swaddled in a towel. He handed it across to Costas, who sat up on the pontoon and took the item into his lap, then began carefully lifting the folds of toweling away. 'Let me guess.' He stopped and gave Jack a hopeful look. 'A golden disk covered with ancient symbols, leading us to another fabulous lost ancient city?'

Jack grinned. 'Not quite, but just as precious in its own way.'

Costas raised the last fold and held the object up. It was about ten inches high, shaped like a truncated cone, and weighed heavily in his hands. The surface was mottled white with patches of dull metallic sheen, and at the top was a short extension with a hole through it like a retaining loop. He eyed Jack. 'A sounding lead?'

'You've got it. A lead weight tied to the end of a line for sounding depths. Check out the base.'

Costas carefully held the lead upside down. In the base was

a depression about an inch deep, as if the lead had been partly hollowed out like a bell, and below that was a further depression in a distinctive shape. Costas raised his eyes again. 'A cross?'

'Don't get too excited. That was filled with pitch or resin, and was used to pick up a sample of seabed sediment. If you were heading for a big river estuary, the first appearance of sand would act as a navigational aid.'

'This came from the wreck below us?'

Jack reached across and took back the sounding lead, holding it with some reverence. 'My first ever major find from an ancient shipwreck. It came from one end of the site, nestled in the same gully where we later found the drug chest. At the time I was over the moon, thought this was a pretty amazing find, but I assumed sounding leads were probably standard equipment on an ancient merchantman.'

'And now?'

'Now I know it was truly exceptional. Hundreds of Roman wrecks have been discovered since then, but only a few sounding leads have ever been found. The truth is they would have been expensive items, and only really of much use for ships regularly approaching a large estuary, with a shallow seabed for miles offshore where alluvial sand could be picked up well before land was sighted.'

'You mean like the Nile.'

Jack nodded enthusiastically. 'What we're looking at here is the equipment of a large Alexandrian grain ship, not a humble amphora carrier.' He carefully placed the lead back in the crate, then pulled out an old black-bound book from a plastic bag. 'Now listen to this.' He opened the book to a marked page, scanned up and down for a moment and then began to read:

But when the fourteenth night was come, as we were driven to and fro in the sea of Adria, about midnight the sailors sur-

mised that they were drawing near to some country; and they sounded, and found twenty fathoms; and after a little space, they sounded again, and found fifteen fathoms. And fearing lest haply we should be cast ashore on rocky ground, they let go four anchors from the stern, and prayed for the day.

Costas whistled. 'The Gospels!'

'The Acts of St Paul, chapter 27.' Jack's eyes were ablaze. 'And guess what? Directly offshore from where we are now the bottom slopes off to deep water, but diagonally to the south there's a sandy plateau extending about three hundred metres out, about forty metres deep.'

'That's a hundred and twenty feet, twenty fathoms,' Costas murmured.

'On our last day of diving twenty years ago we did a recce over it, just to see if we'd missed anything,' Jack said. 'The very last thing I saw was two lead anchor shanks, unmistakably early Roman types used to weigh down wooden anchors. By the time of our north African amphora wreck, anchors were made of iron, so we knew these must have been lost by an earlier ship that had tried to hold off this coast.'

'Go on.'

'It gets better.'

'I thought it would.'

Jack read again:

And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea, at the same time loosing the bands of the rudders; and hoisting up the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach. But lighting on a place where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the foreship struck and remained unmoveable, but the stern began to break up by the violence of the waves.

'Good God,' Costas said. 'The drug chest, the sounding lead. Stored in the forward compartment. What about the stern?'

'Wait for it.' Jack grinned, and pulled out a folder from the bag. 'Fast-forward two millennia. August 1953, to be exact. Captain Cousteau and Calypso.'

'I was wondering when they were going to come into it.'

'It was the clue that brought us here in the first place,' Jack said. 'They dived all along this coast. Here's what the chief diver wrote about this headland. 'I saw broken amphoras, concreted into a fold in the cliff, then an iron anchor, concreted to the bottom and apparently in corroded state, with amphora sherds on top.' That's exactly what we found here, the Roman amphora wreck. But there's more. On their second dive, they saw 'des amphores grecques, en bas profound.'

'Greek amphoras, in deep water,' Costas murmured. 'Any idea where?'

'Straight out from the cleft in the rock behind us,' Jack said. 'We reckoned they hit seventy, maybe eighty metres depth.'

'Sounds like Cousteau's boys,' Costas said. 'Let me guess. Compressed air, twin hose regulators, no pressure gauge, no buoyancy system.'

'Back when diving was diving,' Jack said wistfully. 'Before mixed gas took all the fun out of it.'

'The danger's still there, just the threshold's deeper.'

'Twenty years ago I volunteered to do a bounce dive to find those amphoras, but the team doctor vetoed it. We only had compressed air and were strictly following the U.S. Navy tables, with a depth limit of fifty metres. We had no helicopter, no support ship, and the nearest recompression chamber was a couple of hours away in the U.S. naval base up the coast.'

Costas gestured pointedly at the two mixed-gas rebreathers on the floor of the boat, and then at the white speck of a ship visible on the horizon, steaming towards them. 'State of the art deep-diving equipment, and full recompression facilities on board Seaquest II. Modern technology. I rest my case.' He waved at the battered old diary Jack was holding. 'Anyway, Greek amphoras. Isn't that before our period?'

'That's what we assumed at the time. But something was niggling me, something I couldn't be sure of until seeing those amphoras with my own eyes.' Jack picked up a clipboard from the crate and passed it over to Costas. 'That's the amphora typology devised by Heinrich Dressel, a German scholar who studied finds from Rome and Pompeii in the 19th century. Check out the drawings on the upper left, numbers two to four.'

'The amphoras with the high pointed handles?'

'You've got it. Now, in Cousteau's day, divers identified any amphora with those handles as Greek, because that was the shape of wine amphoras known to have been made in classical Greece. But since then we've learned that amphoras of that shape were also made in the areas of the west Mediterranean colonized by the Greeks, then later under the Romans when they conquered those areas. We're talking southern Italy, Sicily, north-west Spain, all major wine producing regions first developed by the Greeks.' He passed over a large black and white photograph showing high-handled amphoras leaning against a wall, and Costas peered at it thoughtfully.

'A wine storeroom? A tavern? Pompeii?

Jack nodded enthusiastically. 'Not Pompeii, but Herculaneum, the other town buried by the eruption of Vesuvius. A roadside bar, preserved exactly as it was on 24 August AD 79.'

Costas was quiet for a moment, then squinted at Jack. 'Remind me. What was the date of St Paul's shipwreck?'

'Best guess is spring AD 58, maybe a year or two later.'

'Put me in the picture.'

'A few years after the death of the emperor Claudius, in the reign of Nero. About ten years before The Romans conquer Judaea and steal the Jewish menorah.'

'Ah. I'm with you.' Costas gave Jack a tired smile, then narrowed his eyes again. 'Nero. Gross debauchery, throwing Christians to the lions, all that?'

Jack nodded. 'That's one take on the history of the period.

But it was also the most prosperous time in ancient history, the height of the Roman Empire. Wine from the rich vineyards of Campania around Vesuvius was being exported in those Greek-style amphoras all round the known world. They've even been found in the furthest Roman outposts in southern India, traded for spices and medicines like the opium in that chest. And they're found in Britain. They're exactly what you'd expect to find on a large Alexandrian grain ship of this period. According to the New Testament account in Acts of the Apostles, there were more than two hundred and seventy people on board that ship with St Paul, and diluted wine would have been their staple drink.'

'Last question,' Costas said. 'The big one. From what I remember, St Paul's shipwreck was supposed to be in Malta. How come Sicily?'

'That's why it never clicked twenty years ago. Then I did a bit of lateral thinking. Geographically, I mean.'

'You mean you had a way-out hunch.'

Jack grinned. 'It's like this. All we have to go on is the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles. There's no other account of St Paul's shipwreck, no way of verifying the story. Right?

'It's all about faith.'

'In a way, that's the nub of it. The Gospels, the New Testament, were a collection of documents chosen by the early Church to represent the ministry of Jesus, or perhaps their view of the ministry of Jesus. Some of the Gospels were written soon after Jesus' life, by eyewitnesses and contemporaries, others were written later. None of them were written as historical documents as we would understand the term, let alone geographical ones. To those who put together the texts, it was probably a matter of little consequence which island Paul was actually wrecked on.'

'I had all this drummed into me by my Greek Orthodox family. Acts was written by a survivor of the wrecking, by Paul's companion Luke.'

Jack nodded. 'That was what everyone was taught. Acts tells us that Paul was accompanied by two companions, Luke from Asia Minor and another guy, a Macedonian from Thessaloniki.'

'Aristarchos.'

'I'm preaching to the converted,' Jack grinned. 'You should be telling this.'

'I can only give you the bare bones,' Costas said. 'After Paul was arrested in Judaea they joined him on the voyage north from Caesarea to Myra in southern Turkey, where they transferred to an Alexandrian ship destined for Rome.'

'That's what we're told,' Jack said. 'But we need to stand back from the detail. It goes back to what I said about reading the Gospels as history. That wasn't their primary purpose. Some scholars now think Acts was composed several decades later by someone else, maybe based on an eyewitness account. And then there are questions over textual transmission. The Gospels went through the same process as all the other classical texts, all those except the fragments we've actually found in ancient sites. Sieved, purified, translated, embellished with interpretations and annotations which become part of the text, censored by religious authorities, altered by the whim or negligence of the individual copyist.'

'You're saying take the details with a pinch of salt.'

'Be circumspect.'

'A favourite word of yours these days.'

Jack grinned. 'The earliest surviving fragment we have of Acts dates to about AD 200, almost 150 years after Paul, and it only contains the first part of the story. The earliest version with the wreck dates several hundred years later. It gets translated from Greek to Latin to medieval languages, to 17th century English, goes through numerous scribes and copyists. It makes me very cautious, circumspect, about a detail like the word Melita, whether it even means Malta. Some ancient versions even render it as Mytilene, an island in the

Aegean more familiar to Greek copyists of the Gospels.'

'Treasure-hunting 101,' Costas said solemnly. 'Always authenticate your map.'

'St Paul's shipwreck is just about the first time in history that we can hunt a known wreck, but like so many wreck accounts it's fraught with pitfalls. You have to stand back from it, open your mind to all the possibilities and let them fall into place, not force them towards a foregone conclusion. I think that's what I've been doing over the years since I last dived here, since the idea first began to dawn on me.'

'That's why you're an archaeologist, and I'm an engineer,' Costas said. 'I don't know how you do it.'

'And that's why I leave robotics and submersibles to you.' Jack grinned at Costas, then looked towards the eastern horizon. 'There's nothing else in Acts to corroborate Malta as the location, and all that happens on the island is that Paul heals some local man. Sicily makes a lot more sense. It's in the right neck of the woods, a far more likely landfall for a grain ship blown off course in the Ionian Sea by a north-east wind. Acts even mentions Syracuse, just round the headland from us, where Paul and his companions spent several days on their eventual trip to Rome after the wrecking. According to Acts they hitched a lift on another grain ship which had overwintered in Malta, but I believe that was far more likely to be a ship in the Great Harbour at Syracuse itself.'

'So two thousand years of Biblical scholarship is wrong, and Jack Howard has a hunch and is right?'

'Careful reasoning based on an accumulation of evidence, pointing …'

'Pointing unswervingly to one conclusion,' Costas finished. 'Yeah, yeah. A hunch.' He grinned at Jack, then spoke with mock resignation. 'Okay. You've sold me. And now that I look at it, that cleft in the cliff face beside us, your marker for the wreck site. Have you noticed how it also looks like the Greek letter Chi? Like a cross?' Costas grinned. 'While we're

on the subject of leaps of faith, don't tell me you're above a little sign from on high.'

Jack squinted at the rock, then grinned. 'Okay. I'll go with that. Twenty years on, you see things with different eyes.' He leaned back on his elbows, and shook his head. 'I can't believe it's taken me so long to put all these pieces together.'

'You've had a few other projects on your mind.'

'Yes, but this could be the biggest of them all.' Jack sat up and leaned towards Costas, his face ablaze with excitement. 'Anything, anything at all, that identifies this shipwreck with St Paul would make it a treasure trove like we've never seen before. Nobody has ever found anything so intimately linked with the lives of the evangelists, with the reality behind the Gospels. We're looking at a time when a few people truly believed in a Kingdom of Heaven on earth, a dream that pagan religion didn't offer the common people. A time before churches, before priests, before guilt and confession and inquisitions and holy wars. Strip away all that and you go back to the essence of what Jesus had to say, what drew so many to him.'

'I never knew you were so passionate about it.'

'It's the idea that individuals can take charge of their own destiny and seek beauty and joy on earth. That seems to be about as uplifting as you can get. If we can find something that will draw people back to that, take them back to the essence of the idea and make them reflect on it, then we'll have done humanity a service.'

'Holy cow, Jack. I thought we were just treasure hunters.'

Jack grinned. 'Archaeology isn't just about filling up museums.'

'I know. It's about the hard facts.'

'A shipwreck could be a time capsule of the period like Pompeii and Herculaneum, only with a direct connection to the most potent figures in western history. It would capture the imagination of the world.'

Costas shifted and stretched. 'We still have to find it yet. And speaking of excitement, we've got company.' He jerked his head towards the cascade of bubbles now erupting on the surface, and they watched as the two divers came into view a few metres below them. They surfaced simultaneously and both gave the OK signal. Jack noted down the time in the log and then glanced at Costas. 'This place was a fulcrum of history,' he continued. 'Whatever we find, we'd be adding to a story that's already pretty fantastic. In 415 BC the Athenians landed at this spot to attack Syracuse, a key event in the war with Sparta which almost destroyed Greek civilisation. Fast-forward to another world war, July 1943, Operation Husky. My grandfather was here, chief officer of the armed merchant ship Empire Elaine, just inshore from the monitor HMS Erebus as she bombarded the enemy positions above us with fifteen inch shells.'

'This place must be in your blood,' Costas said. 'Seems like a Howard was present at just about every famous naval engagement in British history.'

'If many English families knew their background, they'd be able to say the same.'

'Anything left to see?'

'The Special Raiding Squadron, an offshoot of the SAS, parachuted onto the cliff above us and forced the Italian coastal defence battery to surrender, throwing their arms into the sea. When we first dived here the site was strewn with ammunition.'

Costas rubbed his hands. 'That's what I like. Real archaeology. Beats bits of old pot any day.'

'Let's keep our eyes on the prize. You can play bomb disposal later.'

Costas grinned, and held up the feed hose from his rebreather. 'Lock and load.' He clicked it home, then watched Jack do the same.

'Done.' Jack angled his neck down to check his equipment,

then eyed Costas. ‘You up for it?’ he said. ‘I mean, going deep?’

Costas raised his eyes, then gave an exaggerated sigh. ‘Let me see. Our last dive was in an underground passageway beneath the jungles of the Yucatán, being swept towards some kind of Mayan hell. And before that it was inside a rolling iceberg. Oh, and before that, an erupting volcano.’

‘You saying you’ve had enough, or can manage one more?’

Costas gave his version of the thousand-yard stare, then gave a haggard grin and began pulling up his diving suit. ‘You just say the words.’

‘Time to kit up.’

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