

# AZTEC GOLD

ALICIA MYLES (BOOK 1)



DAVID LEADBEATER

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# **Aztec Gold**

**(Alicia Myles #1)**

**By**

**David Leadbeater**

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Thriller, adventure, action, mystery, suspense, archaeological, military



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This one's for Amber and Jade.



# Contents

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## Other Books by David Leadbeater:

PROLOGUE

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

FIVE

SIX

SEVEN

EIGHT

NINE

TEN

ELEVEN

TWELVE

THIRTEEN

FOURTEEN

FIFTEEN

SIXTEEN

SEVENTEEN

EIGHTEEN

NINETEEN

TWENTY

TWENTY ONE

TWENTY TWO

TWENTY THREE

TWENTY FOUR

TWENTY FIVE

TWENTY SIX

TWENTY SEVEN

TWENTY EIGHT

TWENTY NINE

THIRTY

THIRTY ONE



THIRTY TWO

---

THIRTY THREE

THIRTY FOUR

THIRTY FIVE

THIRTY SIX

THIRTY SEVEN





# PROLOGUE

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*The City of Tenochtitlan,  
Mexica,  
June, 1520 AD*

The boy perched on the highest point of the highest hill, watching. His name was Acalan, meaning 'canoe'. He had no idea why a boy named so would fare particularly badly at watery pursuits nor why his parents, artisans both, had named him after a water going vessel. Even the *tiacotin*, the slaves of his household, questioned it though not knowingly within earshot.

His eyes swept the gleaming city below. The Spanish were everywhere, their conquistadors prancing in full armor atop their horses, already conquerors in mind if not in reality. And though their leader, the one called Cortés, had departed days ago, it was later said, to fight off fellow Spaniards that were coming to arrest him, there was still another in charge tonight—one they called Alvarado.

This preening deputy governor had finally consented to the Aztecs' many requests to allow them to celebrate the festival of Toxcatl, granted after the imprisoned leader of the Aztecs, Montezuma himself, made an impassioned plea. They were all down there now, almost a thousand men gathering in the Patio of the Gods, mostly lords and nobles, naked except for their glittering jewels and feathered headdresses, surrounded by singers and drummers, readying themselves for the festival's beginning.

The Spaniards watched dispassionately.

Acalan squinted harder, trying to distinguish the familiar figure of his father making ready in the square. The men all looked very much alike from this distance, the women—he was starting to realize as he progressed in years—not so much. One in particular, Chimalma, meaning shield-bearer, had already caught his eye, her sparkling flirtatious gaze the core of his dreams. He looked away from the area of the main temple, seeking her dwelling, but the white pathways were full to bursting with so many dark-haired people on this early eve that it was impossible to tell one from another.

The sun was starting to set, a fiery blaze on the horizon. Some would say a portent of bad things to come. Others—warriors and priests—would say death and slaughter were never far away from a culture that practiced human sacrifice.

The festival would soon begin. Acalan, in his curious way, was looking forward to it. This night always produced a fine spectacle. Maybe even the sly, stoic Spaniards would be impressed. The boy sat back and sniffed the air, allowing his senses to wander, the smoky reek of fire vying with the natural heady scent of fresh air. The grass rustled and the soil scraped into ruts beneath his bare feet. He dug them in hard, enjoying the sensation.

Let the men have their ceremony. All Acalan needed was this sense of freedom. The arrival of the Spanish, though at first welcomed by Montezuma and many other lords, had instilled within the community an underlying, multifaceted sense of dread. If the Spanish were indeed returning gods, then why didn't they act so and why were they insatiably greedy? If they were conquerors why didn't they fight? And where was their leader now?

Acalan stretched as the noise coming from below intensified. A caterwauling of religious admiration spread its passionate voice across the heavens, rising up on a self-centered cloud, the nobles engrossed in their worship. Acalan watched with a kind of fascinated disinterest. He saw the

men whirling in their fancy garb; saw the musicians around the outside playing furiously, the great noise beginning to swell yet again. Acalan flicked a glance over the watching Spaniards—their faces rarely changed expression and tonight was no exception. From his vantage point he could see further afield and it was he that first saw the disturbance.

Nothing major—just a change in pace and raised voices. It came from over by the Spanish compound, impacting Acalan’s awareness more than if it had come from anyplace else. The conquistadors were forming together, amassing into a unit and their captain, Alvarado, was shouting them.

Acalan wanted to smile. Perhaps a thief existed in their midst, or a rebel. It could be that they were getting a dressing down, but Acalan’s parents had taught him to always be wary and trust very little, and thus he wasn’t surprised, just alarmed when the men formed into lines and began to march out of the compound’s gates.

Having no concept of politics, but knowing violence when he saw it in the set of a man’s shoulder and the way of his walk, Acalan bounced to his feet and set off down the hill like a bolt of lightning. His parents were at the Patio of the Gods, as was most everyone else. On this night they would have no warning of the approaching menace.

Acalan’s feet whispered through the tall grass, swishing their way through the clumps like scythes with the speed of his passage. At one point he lost his balance, falling head over heels for a few moments, and the scene vibrating up from the square below assailed his vision like a tumbling kaleidoscope. He fancied he could hear the march of the men, the dull clunk of their weapons, even the sly sibilance of their murderous breaths. He fancied he could hear the tuneful lilt of his mother’s voice, the intonations remembered from a happy childhood of sweet songs, and the thudding in his heart rose until he could no longer bear it.

He caught himself, arrested the fall, then stood and screamed. “*They are coming! Beware. They are coming!*”

But of course the chanting and the music drowned him out. The people were ear-splittingly ecstatic in their celebration of the festival of *Toxcatl*, oblivious to all else.

Acalan despaired.

He ran on. The soldiers approached the square, their leader taking point. Acalan expected them to stop and shout, to halt proceedings, to gesture and accuse and march somebody off to captivity. He expected a dangerous stand-off, the Aztecs outraged at the interruption and the Spaniards forcibly trying to drive their collective will home.

What he didn’t expect was the heart-stopping suddenness with which the Spaniards drew their swords, the violent vigor with which they charged forward, the happy abandon with which they began to chop down his people.

Acalan cried out as he ran, an entreaty to the gods. Even from this distance he could see the blood flow, the bodies collapse as they were hacked apart. A cry went up from the square, a cry to arms, but the Aztec warriors would not arrive in time to save their brethren.

A mass of people poured away from the massacre. The Spaniards let them go, concentrating their murderous efforts against the Patio as if seeking some kind of retribution. Several townsfolk went to the aid of their lords, but were treated none the less ruthlessly.

Now it seemed, only now, the Spaniards were showing their true colors. They laughed as they slaughtered, stabbed helpless men time and again in a form of torture, chopped a man’s head clean off and then kicked it around between them. They did worse to the women, leaving none alive.

Acalan sped down beyond the bottom of the slope, mercifully losing sight of the massacre and

threading the streets toward his parents' abode, heart heavy and pounding, desperately, staggeringly hopeful that they'd made it out alive. Screams and the sounds of death and dreadful laughter now infused the night air.

Acalan came around the final corner.

His mother's arms were open, her face the epitome of relief. His father's face was grim.

"This is the first night of their destruction," he said. "If Montezuma won't help us, we will help ourselves."

\*

*Following the events referenced during the night above, the Aztecs laid siege to the Spanish compound until Cortés returned and even elected a new leader. Following the Spanish captain's triumphant reappearance, having subdued and indeed gained even more followers during his time away, the imprisoned king, Montezuma himself, was killed and Cortés decided the Spaniards' best chance was to break out of the city at night.*

*During this night—later called 'La Noche Triste', the Night of the Long Sorrows, the Spaniards, under cover of a rainstorm, broke out along a narrow causeway. A battle of ferocious intensity ensued. Hundreds of canoes appeared alongside the causeway, filled with warriors. Weighed down by plundered gold and equipment, the Spaniards stumbled along, some losing their footing and drowning, sinking into the mud below so burdened were they with treasure that was not theirs to take.*

*Thousands died that night. Even native women, cooks and housekeepers that had been given to the Spaniards, died amidst the rage of battle.*

*Unknown to the Spaniards, and little documented since, were the actions of the Aztecs during the weeks following the original massacre at the Patio of the Gods and the return of Cortés. They took firm action. Whilst the Spaniards under Alvarado were besieged in their compound, the Aztecs amassed the majority of their remaining wealth—a great treasure trove of jewels and gold coins, the largest monetary treasure ever assembled. Even the buildings were stripped of their gold and gems.*

*It is said that seven caravans set out, following a northern course.*

*Writings tell of the caravans traveling for a long time, but no one knows where they ended up or the actual treasure location . . .*



Alicia Myles gripped the monster between her thighs, holding on tight as it bucked and weaved under her.

*Damn British roads aren't made for bikes,* she thought. *Too many unrepaired potholes.*

The Ducati rumbled as she laid it down around the next curve, engine growling like a restrained predator.

Its rider, the same kind of animal, allowed her mind to wander as the road finally straightened out. Her new boss, Michael Crouch, had gathered a new team together after the devastation of his old unit, the Ninth Division, and his subsequent exit from the British Army. Objectives changed, but loyal contacts didn't, and Crouch already knew he could rely on dozens of well-placed, well-financed, highly-influential connections to help him succeed in his new venture.

But first he needed a world class team.

Hence the recruitment of Alicia.

Crouch's new HQ was situated somewhere in Windsor, UK, and it had taken her many hours of confined air travel from Washington DC to get here. The Ducati was an indulgence; rented near to Heathrow airport it was a tribute to a former friend.

The road unfolded before her, a blank empty canvas, an endless journey with hazards around every corner, the way her life was lived.

At that moment a raucous noise interrupting her thoughts. The shrill, cantankerous tones had become more than a constant companion, more a never ending nightmare since they'd left DC, and filtered through her Bluetooth headset even now whilst they rode on separate bikes.

"This *ain't* how I remember London. Goddamn trees and shit. And *tractors*. Every bloody bend—always another tractor."

"Quit yer whining," Alicia breathed back. "Before I leave you twitching in a hedgerow."

"Yeah, yeah," the voice said. "Y'know, I'm starting to think with you it's bark worse than bite."

Alicia raised her eyebrows, unseen beneath the helmet. Her companion was known as Laid Back Lex and was a member of the biker gang Alicia had briefly joined several months ago. Following the gang's near-annihilation at the hands of the dreaded Blood King and the death of Lomas, its leader and Alicia's boyfriend, the gang had drifted apart. Lex remained the only member that had clung to Alicia, heart-warming at first, not so much many months later when his incessant droning had begun to flay her nerves like a leather-jacketed hunting knife.

"Is that what you think?" she breathed. "Man, do you have a lot to learn about me."

The place Crouch had described was approaching on the right, confirmed by a beep from the satnav. Black iron gates stood open. Alicia slowed her bike, allowing the machine to drift to a stop right outside the entrance, and stared down the long, winding path that led to the house.

Another unknown road. From leaving home she had followed some kind of road, content to let it lead her wherever it so chose. From the Army to questionable military allegiances to Matt Drake and his SPEAR team; then to Lomas and the Slayers, back to SPEAR and now here. The path wound ever on. It meandered, it twisted harshly, but it never brought her any kind of solace.

She sighed. Lex was at her side, staring. "What the fuck are you doing?"

She took her helmet off and gestured that he should do the same. She shook out her blond hair. "How old are you, Lex?"



“Thirty. Ish.”

“Any regrets?”

“Course not. Life’s too short for that shit.”

“And the future? What does it hold for you?”

Lex appeared confused. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

Alicia slapped her forehead with her hand. “Of course not! All I’m saying is this—we can’t keep on running forever.” She gunned her bike, opening the throttle, and roared down the path.

Trees swayed and rustled around her, the wind whipping through them before striking her face. Ahead, the path curved and a stately house appeared, large enough to house an army. Alicia pulled up in between a Mini Cooper S and a blue Mitsubishi Evo. Not the best sign. The Mini was okay and probably belonged to Crouch but the Evo no doubt belonged to some young upstart.

She hadn’t joined a new team to be the resident babysitter.

Lex pulled in beside her. “Shit, man, move over. Can’t get a goddamn space.”

Alicia had had enough. With all the recent traumas and the long trip her patience was wearing thin. She rounded on the biker. “Christ, Lex, give it a rest. Do I look like a man to you?”

Lex eyed her leathers. “Dunno. Be happy to take a look though.”

Alicia struck faster than the biker could blink. One minute he was sitting, a grin of mischief beginning to stretch across his face, the next he was sprawled in the dirt, bleeding from the mouth, his bike held upright courtesy of Alicia’s lightning-quick right hand.

Lex grunted.

Alicia shook her head at him. “Show a little goddamn respect,” she said and walked off, letting the bike fall.

The resulting high-pitched squeal followed her to the door of the house where Michael Crouch stood waiting. Her ex-boss’s boss’s eyes held more than a glint of amusement.

“Haven’t changed, I see.” He squinted past her. “Are you sure we really need the biker?”

Alicia shrugged. “I’m beginning to wonder. If nothing else he’ll be good cannon fodder.”

“Agreed.” Crouch smiled at her. Though Crouch was in his fifties there wasn’t an ounce of fat on him; the man was solid, possessed of short-cropped black hair, a sculpted jawline and a pair of twinkling eyes. When he held a hand out to welcome her, Alicia felt almost proud to shake it.

Crouch had previously headed up the British Ninth Division, a covert agency that looked after Her Majesty’s interests abroad, its agenda blank, its brief to do whatever was necessary. Able to call upon all entities from the local police to the SAS, Crouch had run the department with astonishing success right up until the day it was closed down. After that, then a freelancer, Crouch decided to indulge his other major life-interest—the search for archaeological treasures—by setting up a new team. His countless contacts, garnered previously through countless years as a respected leader, would bend over backwards to help him.

Now, Crouch waved a hand inside. “The team’s all here. Would you like to meet them?”



# TWO

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Alicia followed Crouch through the door, memorizing the layout and judging the security as she went. Crouch laid it out for her quickly, clearly eager to get to the meat of the matter.

“Eight bedrooms upstairs. We’re fully stocked, the grounds are private, and we’re on our own. No maids. No room service. No mail man. If something moves outside,” he nodded back toward the open door where Lex had just arrived, “it really has no place being there.”

“Good. I like to know where I stand.”

“Cook your own food, make your own bed, clean your own dishes. But, having said that, I don’t expect you to be cluttering the place up for too long.”

Alicia eyed him. “Good to hear because, darling, I don’t do dishes. Are you saying that you have a mission in place already?”

Crouch couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “We do.” He laughed. “This change of life has rejuvenated me. I truly feel like a man with a new lease on life, Alicia. This is my dream: chasing down long lost treasures, the dream I’ve nurtured for fifty years.”

“Not Catwoman? Lamborghinis? Chris Evert?”

“Do fifty-year-olds do that?”

“Wow, fifty? You’re old, man,” Lex piped up as he approached. “Where’s the refrigerator?”

Crouch pointed toward the end of the hall and watched the biker creak away. He appeared lost in thought for a moment, but then turned to Alicia. “Shall we?”

Alicia allowed him to lead her through a nearby door, hiding her anger. Lex’s current attitude wouldn’t do. Crouch deserved respect, he’d earned it and he was now their boss. Again Alicia wondered if bringing the biker along hadn’t been a bad, self-absorbed idea. With thoughts and solutions half-formed she entered a vast room populated by leather easy chairs, low coffee tables and fronted by a deep pair of bay windows. Two figures lounged in the chairs.

Crouch pointed. “Alicia Myles, meet the other members of our team. This is Rob Russo, of the Ninth Division, a man I have trained and worked with for twenty years. And Zack Healey, also of the Ninth. I can vouch for both of them.”

Alicia sized the two newcomers up with a soldier’s eyes. Russo was big and craggy, with a face like a windblown escarpment and bone structure that could deflect bullets. He sat in a kind of wary ease, confident in his environment but always alert. He regarded Alicia with blank eyes that could have held suspicion, hatred or amusement—the man was unreadable. Healey on the other hand was almost bursting with excitement, eyes darting from side to side in exuberance and already leaping out of his seat with a hand outstretched.

“Zack. Call me Zack,” he said. “Or Healey,” he added in answer to her impassive gaze. “Whatever works.”

Alicia raised a brow toward Crouch. “Don’t remember you sayin’ we were running a crèche here too.”

Crouch sat down. “Healey’s young but he’s good. Loyal. Vital. Hands-on. Reminds me of myself forty years ago.”

“Reminds me of a puppy,” Alicia said. “And Michael, forty years ago you were *ten*.”

Crouch just shrugged.

At that moment Laid Back Lex entered the room, nursing a Bud and what appeared to be a fully-

loaded ham and pickle sandwich. As all eyes turned to him he made a face. “What? Riding makes me hungry.”

---

“Everything makes you hungry,” Alicia said before turning her attention back to her new boss. “Is this it? No mad professor? No geography whizz or Internet geek?”

“This is everyone, Myles, though I dare say the door will never be off limits to the right person. I can run any Web traffic from our HQ and all the research gets done in the field. We’re well funded, but it’s not a bottomless pit.”

Alicia took her own seat across from Russo. “So tell me, who exactly *is* funding this little venture?”

Russo didn’t respond. Crouch shifted a little, a creak of old leather accompanying his movement. “A moderately wealthy man by the name of Rolland Sadler. To cut a long, tragic story necessarily short I assisted him once. Saved his family through the Ninth, against the wishes of the eggheads. Once he heard I’d finally decided to go my own way I could barely stop him doling out the cash. He’s funding us, and he’s on the level.”

“But he’ll want results.” Russo finally spoke up with an eye on Alicia.

She thought she now understood the craggy-faced soldier. “I see. He’ll want to see some kind of return, yes? And Russo thinks he’s big enough to be field captain. Am I right?”

“I follow orders,” Russo said immediately with a little glance toward Crouch.

“Good. Then follow mine. That way, big boy, we won’t have to test the solidity of those magnificent cheekbones of yours.”

“All right.” Crouch stood up at just the right time, averting a confrontation. “This team’s solid. Made up of the very best, hand-picked by me. I run it. I say how it goes. If anyone doesn’t like that they can leave right now.”

No one moved. Alicia held Russo’s gaze.

Crouch nodded. “Good. If we do this right we might even make a name for ourselves. The *Gold* Team. How do you like that?” He didn’t stop for an answer. “Consequently, it’s vitally important that our first mission is a success. That’s what makes its topic a little unfortunate.”

Now Alicia blinked. “In what way?”

And Zack Healey leaned forward, cheeks flushed with excitement. “We’re heading to Mexico in search of gold. Lost *Aztec* gold.”



# THREE

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Alicia settled back in her seat. “Tell me.”

“Well . . .” Crouch rubbed the bridge of his nose as if pondering where to begin. “Make yourself comfortable. I guess the story begins with the Spanish conquistador, Cortés, whose expedition in the sixteenth century led directly to the fall of the Aztec empire. Tales tell us that the man was in fact a fairly controversial character, ignoring direct orders to carry out his sea voyages—acts of mutiny in effect—even having to return to Spain on occasion to answer charges. Cortés was once quoted as saying ‘it is more difficult to contend against my own countrymen than it is the Aztecs’. At one point he was even suspected of poisoning the Ponce de León.”

Healey joined in. “So with a boss like that you can imagine what his men were like.”

Alicia ignored the young upstart.

Crouch went on, “Well, after he ordered the scuttling of almost his entire fleet in order to minimize any potential retreat, the captain marched toward the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, gathering an even larger army as he went. Natives joined him—warriors of the Nahua in particular. His men massacred thousands even before they reached the great Aztec city. When they arrived, the city’s king, Montezuma, allowed Cortés and his men to enter the island city, perhaps hoping to learn their weaknesses.”

“Enemies closer,” Healey put in.

Crouch nodded. “And despite the locals’ offer of gold and jewels the Spaniards were driven to more frantic acts of greed and plunder. The more gold they saw the more they wanted—”

“Huh,” Russo spat in a deep voice. “Nothing changes.”

“Cortés believed the Aztecs thought him a god, the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl, or at least an emissary of his, and perhaps they did. He wrote as much in a letter to the king of Spain. But Cortés remained a harsh ruler. When he learned that several of his soldiers had been slain along the coast by Aztecs he took Montezuma prisoner in his own palace and, without the population’s knowledge, ruled through him.”

“A nice history lesson.” Alicia tried not to yawn. “But I’m not hearing anything relating to the treasure yet. Hey, are you going bald?”

Crouch blinked twice, caught off guard. While he struggled for something to say the rugged Russo came to his rescue.

“Try to concentrate on one thing at a time, Myles. Attention span a problem for you, is it?”

Alicia turned in her seat. “Are we gonna have a problem, Robster? Cos my pit bull here, he really wants a piece of you.”

Laid Back Lex was practically seething in his seat, an animal straining at its leash.

“Calm down,” Alicia directed Lex and turned to Crouch. “Continue.”

“Well, you have the Aztecs on one side, living in a city of gold, with more jewels and precious gems than any other race on the continent. The Spanish conquistadors on the other, who seemed to hold the ideal of riches and wealth above even their own lives. Everything soon fell apart. Following the terrible massacre of thousands of Aztec nobles at the Patio of the Gods near the main temple, which triggered a rebellion, Cortés and his men saw that the game was up. They escaped during what later became known as the Noche Triste, fleeing across the Tlacopan causeway while their rearguard was massacred by Aztec warriors. The gold they stole weighed so much it actually killed half the

Spaniards, drowning them in the mud of the river. Now, the time gap between the murder of the nobles and the Spaniards' escape was about two months. What do you suppose the Aztecs were doing during that time?"

"Sharpening their swords?"

"Maybe. But they were also safeguarding their valuables as any nation would. For instance, remember all the Romanian gold that was sent to Russia during the First World War? Every nation wants to protect their assets and the Aztecs were no different. And of course, this is where the stories differ and we get the thoughts and opinions of a thousand treasure hunters from the last five hundred years. Where did all that wealth go?"

"You're saying they transported it out of there?"

"It certainly didn't stay in Tenochtitlan. Cortés returned soon after he fled, now with reinforcements from Cuba, and laid siege, cutting off supplies and subduing the Aztecs allies. He ended up destroying the city. On 13 August 1521 the city fell and the Aztec empire disappeared, crushed. Cortés claimed it for Spain and renamed it Mexico City. He governed it for three years."

"No mention of the gold," Alicia said. "The golden city, the jewels."

"No mention." Crouch smiled.

"So what *did* happen to it?" Laid Back Lex chomped at the bit.

"And what exactly did it consist of?" Alicia wondered.

"The mystery begins with the night of the first massacre at the Patio of the Gods," Crouch said, taking time to drink from a bottle of water before continuing. "Now, how about we continue this over dinner?"

Alicia coughed. "I thought the directive was that we had to fend for ourselves? I sure hope you have a microwave."

Crouch smiled. "For this first night I'm sure I could knock together a pretty mean chili."

Alicia looked genuinely impressed. "Wow, I hope I can do that by the time I'm fifty."

Soon, with steaming bowls of chili laid out before them and glasses of red wine and bottles of beer positioned around the table like strategically placed chess pieces, Crouch continued his story.

"With so many nobles murdered and such utter brutality shown for the locals, the Aztecs must have started to panic. Who was this crazed beast their leader had invited to live among them? Their king was a mere captive in his own palace. What could they do?"

"Elect a new king?" Alicia ventured.

"Exactly. Enter Cuauhtémoc, the new king. Following his order and under his guidance it is believed that the Aztecs hatched a great plan. Through the nights following the massacre, with the Spaniards beaten back and under siege inside their compound, surrounded by warriors, Tenochtitlan's main hoard of gold was systematically stripped away, its jewels packed into crates. It was a great undertaking, so much so that seven entire caravans were filled—"

"And Cortés never noticed?" Russo's eyes widened skeptically.

"They left the surface gold where it was," Crouch said. "Which was all the Spaniards had ever seen and quite plentiful. It was the far more spectacular *vaults* they emptied."

"Seven caravans worth?" Lex whistled. "That's a shit-ton of money, man."

"Treasure," Crouch corrected him. "There's a very significant difference between the two. It's what separates our team, the one that will display and donate it to the world, from the thieves and villains that might try to stop us."

Lex nodded quickly. "Okay."

Alicia snorted. "He doesn't get it. He's more of a 'hands-on' kinda leatherhead. But he will."

Crouch continued, "In answer to one of your earlier questions, Alicia, apart from the copious amounts of gold and jewels, several items of major historical importance to the Aztecs were loaded onto the caravans. Our main focus will be on the legendary cartwheel treasure."

Alicia shook her head. "The what?"

"A large wheel of gold decorated with glyphs in the shape of the sun. As big as a cartwheel. It's where the phrase 'pieces of eight' originally comes from."

"So something that spawns a legend powerful enough to live down the centuries has to be considered a huge find."

"It quite possibly was a symbol of the entire foundation of Aztec belief."

Alicia chewed her lip. "Impressive. What else?"

"Cortés described gigantic idols of beaten gold, masks of silver and turquoise, and piles of gleaming emeralds, rubies and garnets. These were just the treasures he was allowed to see. It's a safe bet that the *real* treasures were aboard those caravans."

"But what of the people that guarded the caravan?" Healey asked perceptively. "Wherever they ended up, wouldn't they speak of this treasure they carried for so many miles? And if they were killed then their murderers would shout it to the rooftops."

"I know I would," Lex added drily.

Crouch scratched his chin. "Then you know nothing of warrior loyalty. Take Attila the Hun for example. When his thousand-strong personal bodyguard, the greatest warriors in his army, diverted a river and buried his tomb they then allowed themselves to be massacred to protect the secret of its location. It has never been found."

He turned back to the group. "It's thought that once the treasure arrived at its destination, all the slaves that helped transport it were killed. Half of the Aztec warriors remained to guard it whilst the other half returned to Tenochtitlan. The plan was probably to retrieve the treasure once the Spaniards had been eradicated from their shores. However, for those that remained near the treasure months and years will have passed without word. Tenochtitlan, if you remember, was first besieged then destroyed. Any survivors and returning warriors will have drifted away, joining other tribes like the Nahuatl, and will have eventually intermarried with local tribes, now equipped only with stories of the great empire to the south."

"So where is it?" Alicia hissed, laying down her fork and glancing around at the assembled team. "Do we know?"

Crouch smiled grimly. "I've lost count of the number of legends relating to the fabled lost Aztec gold. It's purported to be anywhere from the bottom of the sea to Texas. The *true* story, however, lies in the rich history of Tenochtitlan itself. That's where we'll start."

"You're talking about traveling to Mexico City, the old Aztec capital?"

"I want to start from scratch and see what we unearth. A good treasure hunt always starts at the very beginning and there's good reason for that. It helps shake off any presupposed ideas we may have about the treasure's location. We have plenty of tech stuff and state-of-the-art equipment thanks to Sadler's generosity." Crouch looked around the room. "If we do this, we do it right."

"Speaking of your contacts," Alicia said. "Who else do we have on board?"

"Too many to mention." Crouch shrugged. He had major contacts in virtually every region of the world. "But our main source of operational Intel will be Armand Argento. Do you know him?"

"Not as well as I'd like." Alicia grinned. "I heard he's a looker."

Russo grunted. "I guess *your* reputation is well deserved."

Alicia looked over with an air of innocence. "What reputation?"



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