

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt and dark pants, is shown from the waist up. She is holding a sword with both hands, looking intently at it. She is standing in a rocky, cave-like opening that looks out onto a vast, arid desert landscape with rolling hills and a clear sky. The lighting is bright, suggesting daylight.

ROGUE Angel

Alex
Archer

STAFF OF JUDEA

This religious relic in the wrong hands
would be a disaster of epic proportions...

The Staff of Aaron...the sword of Joan of Arc.

After decoding an ancient scroll—one that purports to pinpoint the treasure of the Jewish Temple lost for two thousand years—archaeologist Annja Creed agrees to lead the party to recover the find in Judea. It's a perilous desert journey through sandstorms and bandits, and complicated by mysterious sabotage within the group, to arrive at a long-forgotten fortress deep beneath a mountain. Only then does Annja discover that this archaeological expedition is really one man's quest for the mystical Staff of Aaron, one of the Bible's holiest and most powerful relics—a weapon they say can do incalculable harm in the hands of the wrong individual. She must try everything humanly possible to prevent the staff from being used for selfish purposes. Even if it puts her in the mightiest battle yet—sword against staff.

“Help! We’re under attack!”

Without waiting to see if anyone heard her, Annja stepped forward to face the oncoming threat. She didn’t know it, but she was smiling as she set her feet and prepared to meet the rider bearing down on her.

Annja could see the horse watching her as it came on, its round eyes glistening in the moonlight. Her first instinct was to bring the rider down by taking out his horse, but she found she couldn’t. The horse didn’t have a choice in being there and she couldn’t punish the animal for doing what it had been bred to do. So instead of targeting the horse, she changed her position slightly and prepared to deal with the rider himself.

He raced toward her, trying to spook her into running, but she held her ground. He guided his horse so that he would pass her on his right. His arm drew back and he raised himself slightly in his saddle, ready to deliver what he must have believed would be a killing strike with his sword.

The rider was ten feet away now.

Five.

Three.

Annja had a moment to take a deep breath and then horse and rider were upon her.

Titles in this series

Tear of the Gods

The Oracle's Message

Cradle of Solitude

Labyrinth

Fury's Goddess

Magic Lantern

Library of Gold

The Matador's Crown

City of Swords

The Third Caliph

Staff of Judea

Destiny

Solomon's Jar

The Spider Stone

The Chosen

Forbidden City

The Lost Scrolls

God of Thunder

Secret of the Slaves

Warrior Spirit

Serpent's Kiss

Provenance

The Soul Stealer

Gabriel's Horn

The Golden Elephant

Swordsman's Legacy

Polar Quest

Eternal Journey

Sacrifice

Seeker's Curse

Footprints

Paradox

The Spirit Banner

Sacred Ground

The Bone Conjuror

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STAFF OF JUDEA



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The LEGEND

...THE ENGLISH COMMANDER TOOK
JOAN'S SWORD AND RAISED IT HIGH.

The broadsword, plain and unadorned,
gleamed in the firelight. He put the tip against
the ground and his foot at the center of the blade.

The broadsword shattered, fragments falling
into the mud. The crowd surged forward,
peasant and soldier, and snatched the shards
from the trampled mud. The commander tossed
the hilt deep into the crowd.

Smoke almost obscured Joan, but she continued
praying till the end, until finally the flames climbed
her body and she sagged against the restraints.

Joan of Arc died that fateful day in France,
but her legend and sword are reborn....

Special thanks and acknowledgment to Joe Nassise for his contribution to this work.

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Chapter 1

The Monastery at Qumran

68 CE

“Quickly, my brothers!” the rabbi said, watching as the men around him packed the treasure in whatever receptacles they had on hand—clay jars, wooden boxes, rough burlap sacks, anything that could be used to transport it away from the monastery. The scrolls on the library shelves would be next; the precious documents would be placed in clay jars and stored in cliff caves in the wadi nearby.

Time was of the essence. He had received word that the dreaded Legio X Fretensis, the tenth legion of the sea strait, was marching in their direction and under orders to seize anything of value in the name of Titus.

Ordinarily this wouldn't have been a concern. The rabbi and his people had lived under the Roman yoke for years now and had endured more than one visit from the emperor's dogs. Each time was the same. The troops would search the property, rifling cupboards, smashing crockery and generally making a mess of things. A few of them, including the rabbi, would be beaten or whipped for no better reason than that they were Jews. And then the troops would leave, not having found anything of interest. The rabbi and his followers were a community of scholarly ascetics, studying the Torah and what it meant to be the chosen of God. The only thing of value in the entire complex was the ever-growing collection of religious texts housed in the library, but since the Romans had no interest in the word of God these were always left alone.

These, however, were not ordinary times.

Rumors of change had been spreading for more than a year now. As tensions had risen throughout the spring and the air had grown heavy with talk of revolt and armed conflict, the high priest in Jerusalem had devised a plan to keep the temple treasures out of the hands of the Romans. Little by little the vaults had been emptied, the offerings of the faithful carried by trusted men to the small Essene community on the shores of the Dead Sea at Qumran. There they were delivered into the hands of the rabbi, a childhood friend of the high priest. The rabbi had the treasure cataloged, split into lots and then carried off again under the cover of darkness to hiding places scattered throughout the Negev Desert. Information concerning each cache was inscribed in a pair of scrolls, the first noting the type and location of the wealth, the second providing the necessary clues to correctly interpret the simple code used to obscure the locations in the first document. Both documents were needed to find the treasure. As soon as they were finished here the rabbi intended to make certain that the scrolls were sent to trusted followers in remote parts of the country, there to remain until it was safe.

The latest shipment from Jerusalem had come in four days before and they had barely begun cataloging it when word had reached them of the legion's movement. Even worse, the same messenger told them that command of Fretensis had passed to Larcius Lepidus, a man known for his brutality and his love of confrontation. Give him half an excuse and Lepidus would burn the place to the ground.

He began urging his people to work faster.

When the scrolls were finished, the rabbi called for a messenger. A young boy of no more than sixteen stepped up, and for a moment all the rabbi could do was blink.

So young, he thought. But then again, perhaps it was for the best. The Roman forces would

looking for one of his usual couriers, not this boy. And who was he to decide how a man—any man, young or old—should offer his life in the name of duty and faith?

The boy it would be.

“What is your name, son?” he asked.

“Jonathan, Rabbi.”

Jonathan. A good omen, that.

“Do you know what to do, Jonathan?”

The youth nodded. “I am to take the scroll to Elazar ben Yair at Masada. I am to give it to him personally and to no one else.”

The rabbi nodded. “And?”

Jonathan’s expression hardened but the rabbi was pleased that the boy did not waver as he said. “No matter what happens, I must not let myself or the scroll be captured by the Romans. I must destroy the scroll and sacrifice myself if necessary to prevent this.”

“Let us hope it does not come to that, eh?” He handed over the scroll, written on bronze.

Before the boy could respond, the door on the other side of the room burst open. It was Ephraim, one of his senior disciples. The room’s light revealed the panic on the man’s face.

“The Romans are less than an hour’s march from the gates!” he cried.

So little time. The rabbi scolded himself. They would have time; the Lord would provide.

The rabbi turned back to the messenger, said a quick prayer over him and sent him on his way. He would either make it or he wouldn’t. It was out of the rabbi’s hands.

That took care of one of the scrolls, but the rabbi still had to deal with the second. He had intended to send a second messenger out by a different route in a few hours, but his plan had been predicated on the legion taking longer to reach them. Sending both scrolls out by messenger at the same time was far too risky. He could afford to have the Romans seize the first of the scrolls—without the second, the first was all but useless—but letting them get their hands on both was unthinkable. He would have to secure it much closer to home, for the time being, and hope he survived long enough to move it to a safer location. He pondered the problem for a moment and then decided that he would secret the copper scroll with the rest of the library texts that were even now being hidden in the caves of the wadi above the complex. It was unlikely the Romans would take the time to search there and the scroll would be protected from the elements.

The rabbi called to several of his men and instructed them on what he wanted done.

* * *

IT WAS JUST AFTER dawn when the Romans were sighted approaching the eastern gate of the Qumran complex. A few of the faithful remained with the rabbi, those who had refused his order to leave while they still had time to do so. They stood with him now just inside the gates, waiting for the arrival of the legion, and he was profoundly grateful for their presence.

It didn’t take long.

The first squad of foot soldiers rushed in and took up defensive positions facing them. It was always this way.

The real threat would be arriving momentarily.

The rabbi had never laid eyes on Larcus Lepidus but he knew him the moment he came through the gate. Unlike most of the other Roman generals the rabbi had encountered in the past, this one did not stand on politics or ceremony. Where other generals had arrived in gleaming chariots or on magnificent horses, this one walked in like a common foot soldier, and indeed, he even resembled one in his arms and armor. The authority that surrounded him left little doubt that he was far more than that, however. The phalanx of troops parted before him like a cresting wave as he walked over and surveyed the men assembled before him, giving the rabbi time to study him in turn.

He was of average height, with a hard, uncompromising face and a sharp beak of a nose. A scar marked his left cheek.

“Who is in charge here?” he asked.

The rabbi stepped forward.

Lepidus glared at him. “Where is the treasure?”

The rabbi frowned. “We are a scholarly community with—”

That was as far as he got. Lepidus’s mailed fist crashed into the side of his face, sending him to the ground.

“Do not lie to me, Jew! I know the temple wealth is here, somewhere. Save yourself and your men and tell me where it is.”

Ignoring the blood dripping from his nose, the rabbi climbed to his feet and faced his tormentor. Even if he was inclined to tell the Roman what he wanted to know, which he most emphatically was not, admitting anything at this point was tantamount to treason. They would be tried, found guilty and crucified as enemies of the Empire.

“I do not know of any treasure,” the rabbi said.

A savage blow to the temple dropped him like a sack of dates. Darkness beckoned, but the general’s next words cut through the haze like a torch in the night.

“Burn it!” Lepidus cried. “Burn it all!”

Chapter 2

Jerusalem

“I’m sorry, but we couldn’t possibly take less than five.” Annja Creed stared dispassionately at the three men seated across the table from her, taking care to hide even the slightest hint of emotion. The item she was selling, an ossuary clearly of Jewish manufacture that contained the bones of a Roman soldier, was an oddity, all right, but wasn’t worth anywhere close to that price, she knew. The question was, did they?

The flight from New York to Jerusalem had taken twelve hours but she’d arrived the day before the meeting, giving her plenty of time to get acclimated to the time difference. She had awoken this morning, eager to face the challenge of dealing with the three gentlemen seated before her now.

She was not what they had expected. That much had been obvious when they had entered the room and practically fallen over one another in surprise when they found a woman waiting for them. It was precisely the reaction she and Roux, her sometime mentor, sometime partner, had been hoping for.

“They’ve no doubt spent hours studying what little information they can find on me, working out complicated strategies to deal with any possible move I might make in the negotiation,” he’d said when she reached him by phone earlier that morning. “Having you handling things will force them to throw all their carefully crafted plans right out the window. They’ll be off balance and scrambling to come up with a response. That’s when we’ll strike!”

And strike they had. Now it just remained to see if the fish took the bait.

The fish in question were named Cummings, Mortimer and Finch. Lawyers. High-priced ones at that. They were here representing the interests of Mitchell Connolly, the buyer who had contacted Roux several weeks ago with an interest in his ossuary. Annja had done her share of homework, too, after Roux had asked her to handle negotiations on his behalf. Connolly was the man behind a global empire built on mining rights and the exploitation of natural resources. He wasn’t as rich as Roux or Garin Braden, not by a long shot, but then again, he hadn’t had five hundred years to acquire his wealth the way those two had. Connolly was known to be both a savvy businessman and a cunning negotiator. It was this reputation, more than anything else, which had prompted Annja to accept Roux’s invitation to represent him. For someone as highly competitive as she was, the opportunity to pit herself against a man of Connolly’s reputation was one she just couldn’t resist.

She knew that as a collector Connolly was primarily interested in artifacts from the Roman occupation of Israel, most notably those from the First and Second Temple periods. The ossuary Roux was offering to sell had been dated to the year 50 CE, plus or minus a few decades, so it fit within the general time frame rather nicely. The fact that the bones inside it had been identified as European rather than Middle Eastern was what made the artifact unusual and, more than likely, had triggered Connolly’s interest.

Unfortunately, the media mogul must have come up with the same strategy Roux had, sending these three to negotiate in his place.

“Five million? Surely, you’re joking, Ms. Creed,” Cummings said, glancing at his two companions with a smug little smile. “We aren’t prepared to offer anything even close to that ballpark.”

Annja looked at them without saying anything. Cummings and Mortimer appeared to have been cut from the same cloth—large, overweight men in expensive suits. Both oozed arrogance, their expressions and body language telling her all she needed to know about their opinion of her. Finch, on the other hand, was the Laurel to their Hardy. Tall and thin, he was dressed in a dark suit that unfortunately made him look more like an old-time undertaker than a lawyer. To Annja's surprise he seemed embarrassed by his colleagues. Apparently he hadn't been at this long enough to build up the same kind of insufferable ego.

Handling this sale for Roux was a nice diversion from *Chasing History's Monsters*. The cable television program on ancient mysteries and legends that she cohosted had grown in popularity over the past year. The program's climb up the ratings chart had driven the need for new material, and her producer, Doug Morrell, had been all too happy to send her crisscrossing the globe to get it. In the process she'd managed to be involved with some groundbreaking discoveries and her status in the archaeological community had risen along with her popularity as a television star. The long hours and constant travel had been worth it, in that regard, but she was thankful that Roux had come along when he did. She hadn't spent much time in Israel and she was looking forward to a few days to see the sights.

It seemed she was going to get to that sightseeing quicker than expected.

"I guess we're finished, then," she told them in the same unemotional tone she'd been using, and began to collect her things from the table.

There was a moment of silence, broken at last by Cummings. "What are you doing?" he asked in a strangled tone.

Annja looked up, the files in her hand half in and half out of her briefcase. Cummings looked like a fish out of water. It was all she could do to keep from laughing.

"Mr. Cummings, you indicated that your client is not interested in paying anywhere near what my client is asking. That is, of course, your right. As a result, I am exercising my right to end these negotiations. I came here in good faith to sell this artifact. You, apparently, came here to waste everyone's time. I don't believe we have anything more to discuss. Good day, gentlemen."

Chew on that, you bloated toad.

No one said anything as she finished putting her files in the slim leather briefcase Roux had given her that morning and stepped away from the table. She headed for the door of the hotel's conference room, counting silently in her head.

One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand...

Behind her, a phone rang.

Gotcha!

"A moment, please, Miss Creed." She turned to find Finch watching her, the still-ringing conference phone in his hand.

Interesting. Perhaps Finch is more of a senior player than I thought. Annja waved him to answer the call.

Finch did so, listening to whoever was on the other end of the line—Connolly most likely. After saying a few words too quietly for Annja to hear, he hung up.

He turned to face her. "Please forgive my colleague, Ms. Creed. In his excitement to do his job, it appears he misspoke."

Annja raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Perhaps you’d be willing to return to the table so we can discuss this further?”

Cummings looked like he’d swallowed half a dozen lemons, which delighted her to no end, and she took a perverse pleasure in returning to the table and facing Finch rather than his portly partner.

“Mr. Connolly says he is willing to offer three and a half million in cash, as well as a fourteenth-century codex written by the blind monk Justinian in exchange for the ossuary. What do you say to that?”

Annja pretended to give the matter some thought, but already knew she was going to accept the offer. Roux would be lucky to get two million if he offered the ossuary on the open market, and anything over that was pure gravy. With an extra 1.5 million in cash *and* the codex thrown in, it was a deal she couldn’t refuse.

After a few moments she pretended to come to a decision, smiled a shark’s smile across the table at her opponent and said, “I’d say we have a deal, Mr. Finch.”

* * *

AN HOUR LATER Annja was sitting in a chaise longue on the balcony of Roux’s suite in the Davinci Citadel Hotel. Jerusalem’s Old City splayed out before her, the white walls washed bloodred in the setting sun. Roux was seated beside her in the twin to her lounge. He was dressed in light cotton trousers and an open-necked shirt. Comfortable lounging clothes, as he liked to call them.

Annja never would have guessed how her life would change upon meeting Roux. Nor, she had imagined, would he. They had first encountered each other in the foothills of France where Annja had been hunting for information on the legendary Beast of Gevaudan. An irate crime boss out for revenge and an earthquake had thrown the two of them together unexpectedly. The quake had opened the earth under Annja’s feet, dragging her into a sinkhole connected to a series of caverns. In the caverns she had found an irregularly shaped coin hanging on a leather thong around the neck of the man who had died killing the beast’s savagery.

The “coin” had turned out to be the last missing piece to the blade of a sword that had once belonged to Joan of Arc. Roux had been there the day the young woman he had sworn to protect, Joan herself, burned in a heretic’s fire. He had watched as the sword she had carried had been broken beneath the boot heel of an English captain. The death of the bearer and the sundering of the blade had sparked some kind of mystical working on both Roux and his squire, Garin Braden. It wasn’t long after that the two men had discovered their lives had been indefinitely extended. As a result, they had individually begun a search for the pieces of the blade—Roux under the belief that bringing them back together might release him from the weapon’s curse, while Braden sought to safeguard his longevity by keeping them out of his former master’s hands. The situation had put them on opposing sides for several centuries, until Roux had finally succeeded in bringing all of the pieces of the sword back together again in Annja’s presence. To their surprise, the weapon had been mystically forged anew and had become bound to Annja in a fashion no one, not even Roux, had ever imagined.

Thinking of the sword brought a smile to Annja’s lips. She could still remember Roux’s shock when the blade had reformed right before their eyes. Roux wasn’t surprised very often, she’d learned since, but he certainly had been then.

“Is that smile for your victory or the sizable commission you’ll be getting as a result?” Roux asked.

“Neither, actually. Just enjoying the day.”

“Bah! When you get to my age, they all tend to blend together. But the thrill of besting your adversary never gets old!”

Annja laughed. If there was one constant with Roux, it was that he loved besting anyone he saw as his competition.

“What’s on the agenda now that you’ve milked Connolly out of an extra million?”

“I’m off to Monte Carlo first thing in the morning,” Roux answered with a gleam in his eye. “There’s a Texas Hold’em tournament beginning tomorrow night that I have every intention of winning. Care to join me?”

She was tempted. Time spent with Roux was always an education of one sort or another. The man had lived for over five hundred years and had seen some of the most amazing changes in human history. She even had money to spare for a change. But it had been some time since she’d last visited Jerusalem and she felt the pull of the Old City.

“I think I’ll stay here for a few days,” she told him, “take in some of the sights.”

There was something here for her in the Old City. She didn’t know what yet, but she would soon know enough. She’d learned to trust her instincts since taking up the sword and right now every fiber in her being was telling her that she was needed here.

Chapter 3

After breakfast the next morning, Annja decided to begin her sightseeing expedition by looking at some old books. Two-thousand-year-old books, to be precise. A taxi brought her to the Givat Ram neighborhood in central Jerusalem where many of Israel's important national institutions were located, including the Knesset, the Israeli Supreme Court, the National Library of Israel and the Israel Museum.

She was headed to the latter, specifically the wing of the museum known as the Shrine of the Book. Built in 1965, the shrine was home to several major archaeological finds, including the Aleppo Codex and the Dead Sea Scrolls. While any of the exhibits would likely have held her interest on any given day, Annja had specifically come to see a showing of the Copper Scroll currently on loan from the Jordanian Museum. The scroll was only rarely on display and Annja was determined to see it when she had the chance.

After all, it isn't every day you get to see a two-thousand-year-old treasure map!

The shrine's architectural design was unusual. Two-thirds of the main structure was underground with the remainder topped by a large white dome reflected in the pool of water that surrounded it. Across from the dome was a black basalt wall. The colors and shapes of the building had been deliberately chosen to suggest the imagery of the War Between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness—the white symbolized the light and the black the darkness. The images came from the War Scroll, one of those many found in the caves at Qumran and which eventually had become known throughout the world over as the Dead Sea Scrolls. It detailed a battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Since taking up the sword, Annja herself had become a living symbol of the struggle between good and evil and she found herself musing over that particular irony as she gazed at the glistening white surface of the dome.

The Dead Sea Scrolls were a collection of over nine hundred biblical texts and other manuscripts that had been discovered in a series of caves in the Qumran wadi between 1947 and 1956. Written on parchment, papyrus and, in the case of the unique scroll she had come to see today, copper. They were some of the oldest surviving copies of certain books from the Hebrew Bible and as such had tremendous historical and religious significance. They were generally divided into three groups—biblical manuscripts, apocryphal or noncanonized biblical texts and sectarian manuscripts. Both the War Scroll and the Copper Scroll were considered sectarian.

Since the fragility of the scrolls made it impossible to keep them on display, various copies were rotated into the display cases housed in the underground portion of the building. Annja descended the stairs to the main floor and began moving through the exhibition, slipping past small groups of tourists. At first she stopped occasionally to examine one display or another, but her impatience finally got the better of her and she moved directly toward the last exhibit, the one featuring the unique scroll she came here to see.

The Copper Scroll.

Besides the fact that it was the only one that had been written on a sheet of metal, what made the scroll so different from the others found at Qumran was that it was not a literary work, but rather a list of sixty-four locations where various items of silver and gold had supposedly been hidden. And not just a few coins here and there, Annja mused, but treasure measured in tons. Back in 1960 the entire haul had been estimated to be worth more than one million U.S., which, she knew, meant it was worth

one heck of a lot more now.

So far no one had been able to find any of the various troves listed on the scroll, for the starting point referenced in the directions had either been deliberately obscured or simply lost in the centuries since the scrolls had been written. And *that*, of course, was what made it so intriguing to Annja. The scroll was a giant puzzle just waiting for someone like her to solve.

One thing was for certain, whoever solved it was going to be set for life, if the amount of the treasure listed on the scroll turned out to be accurate.

Annja turned a corner and there at last was the scroll. It had originally been discovered as two separate scrolls written on rolled sheets of copper, but the metal had been too corroded to be unrolled without damaging them so they had been cut lengthwise into twenty-three separate sheets. Several of those sheets hung in the cases before her and she spent some time examining them, marveling at the technology that allowed a voice from the past to travel so far into the future. It was discoveries like this that had prompted her to become an archaeologist and she still found, all these years later, that it was the first true love of her life.

An English translation of the scroll hung on the wall next to the display case. She read the first few lines of the first column.

In the ruin that is in the valley of Acor, under the steps, with the entrance to the East, a distance of forty cubits: a strongbox of silver and its vessels, with a weight of seventeen talents.

Each verse of the scroll held to the same basic formula: general location, specific location and listing of what would be found there.

She looked over at the second column.

In the salt pit that is under the steps: forty-one talents of silver. In the cave of the old washer's chamber, on the third terrace: sixty-five ingots of gold.

Annja knew that a talent was estimated to be about equal to something between fifty and seventy-five pounds, so a single talent worth of gold at today's market prices was worth something in the neighborhood of \$800,000. Which means that first verse alone is worth a small fortune to whoever finds it, she thought. And there are sixty-three more locations!

That was a lot of money.

Of course, finding it was the trick. That second verse was a prime example of the problem would-be treasure hunters had with the document. You were supposed to find the salt pit under the steps, but the document didn't give any sense of what building those steps were in. The same held true for the old washer's chamber mentioned a few lines later. It was worse than trying to find a needle in a haystack, because first you had to find the correct haystack!

It made an intriguing puzzle, there was no doubt about that.

Annja was about to move on to the next display when a reflection in the glass of the case next

her caught her eye. She saw a man leaning around the edge of the doorway behind her, a camera in his hand. Normally Annja wouldn't have given it a second thought. They were in a museum and people took pictures in museums. But she was standing squarely in front of the display case, blocking the camera's view of the scroll, which meant the guy was either a completely incompetent photographer or he was taking a picture of *her*.

Annja relished her privacy, perhaps more than most given the unusual nature of the activities she'd become involved in since taking up the sword and the cause that came with it, and she didn't take kindly to having it violated.

She spun around, intending to have a word with her newfound admirer, only to find the words sticking unspoken in her throat when she discovered the newcomer was now holding a gun rather than a camera.

A gun that was pointing directly at her.

Chapter 4

Fifteen feet.

That was all that separated Annja from the gunman, but it might as well have been fifty. By the time she called her sword and crossed that short distance, the man with the gun would have been able to pull the trigger two, maybe even three times.

I'm quick, but not that quick.

The average person off the street would have been frozen with fear at having a gun pointed their direction, but not Annja. Her work as bearer of Joan of Arc's sword had brought her into contact with some very hard men and women over the past years, some of whom had appeared far more frightening than the slim, Arab-looking individual standing on the other side of the room, though Annja knew that looks could be deceiving. She would have to be careful, there was no doubt about that, but where another's thoughts might have been mired in indecision by the sight of the gun, Annja was already calculating her options.

She was either going to have to close with him or escape in the opposite direction. Unfortunately a quick glance showed her that the only door out of the gallery was on the other side of the room behind the gunman.

Perhaps she could just yell for help?

He must have realized what she was thinking. "I will shoot if you yell, Ms. Creed," he said, betraying British-accented English and the knowledge that he knew exactly who she was.

The first revelation was incidental—probably half the men his age spoke English with a British accent, given the long years that this part of the world had been under British rule. The second revelation was far more interesting. It told her he hadn't come here to rob some random, unsuspecting tourist. He'd been looking specifically for her.

"If you shoot you'll bring security running," she told him, betting that discovery would be the last thing he wanted.

In reply, he twitched the gun to the left and pulled the trigger.

There was a soft, spitting sound and then Annja felt a breath of superheated air race across her cheek as the bullet sped past with only inches to spare. It made more noise thudding into the wall somewhere behind her than it did leaving the barrel of the gun.

"That may be the case, Ms. Creed," the gunman said to her in response, "but you will be dead before they get here."

Annja frowned. She hadn't noticed the silencer on first glance and that wasn't like her. She needed to pay better attention. Her life depended on it.

"What do you want?" she asked, keeping her voice down. A calm gunman was more likely to stay in control, she reasoned, and less likely to shoot the first tourist that happened to wander into the tête-à-tête.

Now if she could just get him to move closer....

"You are about to be offered a job. My colleagues and I would like to discuss why it is not a good idea for you to accept the position. We're going to walk out of here together, without making a fuss."

car will pick us up outside.”

“And if I choose not to cooperate?”

“Then I will step back into the gallery behind me and start shooting civilians until you change your mind. We intend to have a conversation, one way or another. It is up to you.”

He could have been commenting on the weather or some other banality rather than killing innocent people in cold blood. Hearing that tone was enough to convince her he was deadly serious.

He wasn't giving her much of a choice, now was he?

“Lead on,” she said with what she hoped was a disarming smile.

He didn't register the humor in her remark. He gestured for her to come toward him, stepping back out of the way as she drew closer, keeping himself out of her reach.

She couldn't fault him for his caution. She *did* intend to go for his gun, just not in the way he expected. She made note of the waist-high display case directly behind him and smiled to herself the way he'd unintentionally eliminated one direction of retreat.

He tensed as she drew abreast and then relaxed slightly as she passed. That was what she was waiting for, that moment when he thought the height of danger had passed.

Annja mentally reached into the otherwhere, that mystical place she'd been made aware of when she'd taken up Joan's sword, and called the weapon to her. The ancient broadsword leaped into her hand as if it possessed an intelligence of its own. The hilt fitted her grip exactly and the weapon seemed perfectly balanced, as if it had been made for her and her alone.

As the sword flashed into existence, Annja spun to one side and lashed out with the weapon aiming for the arm that was holding the handgun. She could have taken his hand off at the wrist, and probably should have, but something caused her to turn the blade at the last minute. Instead of slashing through flesh and bone, the flat of the blade caught the fingers of the hand holding the gun, knocking the weapon from the gunman's grasp.

He surprised her by recovering almost immediately. Even as she was bringing the sword back around for another strike, he spun around and delivered a near-perfect ax kick to her shoulder, the heel of his foot hammering into the nerve junction near her collarbone and causing the arm holding the sword to go numb. The sword clattered to the floor and Annja willed it away into the otherwhere as she skipped backward, out of reach of another strike.

Watch it. He's quick and he knows what he's doing.

He hesitated, clearly confused as he searched the floor for her sword.

Her right arm was still numb, useless for a few seconds, but that didn't stop her from pushing the attack once more while her opponent was still trying to work things out in his head. She lashed out with a savage front kick, followed immediately with a roundhouse punch with her good arm to his head. She'd been training for years prior to becoming the bearer of the sword and she was confident in her ability to handle herself. If she could just delay him long enough, one of the other museum patrons was sure to report their confrontation to security.

Her opponent, however, apparently realized this, as well. He quickly parried her attacks while trying to maneuver into a position where he might be able to incapacitate her long enough to disappear into the crowd in the large atrium beyond.

The gunman threw a left at her face while at the same time targeting her knee with a short, sharp

side kick. Annja pulled her head back, letting the fist slide past less than an inch in front of her nose. She turned slightly and raised her leg, taking the kick on the side of her thigh. It hurt, a lot, but it was far better than letting him pulverize her kneecap.

The constant shifting and maneuvering for position had put them several feet from their original positions and Annja now found herself being forced on an angle to the entrance of the gallery, so she only became aware of the fact that they were no longer alone when a man suddenly bellowed, "What the hell's going on here?"

The sound startled her, breaking her concentration for the barest of moments. That split second was all her opponent needed.

Stepping forward, inside her reach, he caught one of her hands in both of his. Pivoting sharply on one foot, he twisted around and heaved her over his shoulder in a classic judo throw. Her momentum carried her several feet across the floor until she fetched up hard against one of the display cases with a loud crash.

From her position on the floor she watched the gunman turn toward the newcomer, a tall, dark-haired man in the casual clothes of a tourist who looked familiar, though she couldn't say why. The gunman delivered a hard right to the man's solar plexus, paralyzing his diaphragm and sending him to the floor as he fought for breath. A glance over the gunman's shoulder revealed several museum patrons headed in their direction.

She had to end this and end it quickly.

As Annja scrambled to her feet, her opponent turned to the display case next to him, raised his elbow and brought it down into the top of the case. Alarms began to howl as the glass shattered beneath the impact of the blow but the gunman didn't seem to notice as he reached inside the case and withdrew the ancient clay tablet inside.

Annja was horrified, far more so now than when he'd been pointing a gun at her head. The tablet in his hands was no doubt thousands of years old and to see him handling it with bare hands made her want to scream. Oil from his fingers could cause incalculable damage to the artifact.

What he did next was worse.

He smiled, said, "Catch," and then threw the tablet about forty-five degrees to her right.

"No!" Annja was first and foremost an archaeologist and something deep inside cried out for her to save the tablet. All thought of stopping the gunman was forgotten as she leaped for it.

Someone, somewhere, must have been watching over that tablet. As Annja hit the floor on her stomach, sliding forward, she managed to catch the fragile piece before it could smash against the unyielding surface of the floor.

Bernie Williams, eat your heart out! she thought as she came to a stop against a display case like a baseball player against the center field wall. She tore her gaze away from the tablet she held gingerly and looked up in time to see the gunman snatch his gun off the floor and slip out past the small crowd that was beginning to gather near the entrance.

Oh, no, you don't.

Laying the tablet carefully on the floor, she jumped to her feet and took off after the gunman. The crowd parted before her as she reached them and she ran forward into the larger atrium, turning the other way and that as she tried to find him.

Come on, come on, where did you...there!

She caught a glimpse of him as he approached a door on the far side of the atrium and headed ~~that direction, trying not to draw too much attention to herself. He was walking at a brisk pace but she~~ knew she'd be able to catch up with him provided she didn't do anything to spook him. All she had to do was keep from giving herself away.

"There she is!" someone shouted from behind her. "That's her!"

Annja turned and found herself staring down the barrel of a pistol for the second time that day. This time, the gun was in the hands of a museum security guard who looked like he was just begging for a reason to use it. A young man stood beside the guard, and, as Annja watched, he jabbed his finger in her direction. "That's the woman who tried to steal the tablet!"

This is so not my day.

She raised her hands over her head, glancing over to where she had seen the gunman. The door he'd been headed for was just shutting behind him and Annja knew she had lost her one chance of catching him. It was going to take hours to work through this mess with the police, and by the time she was convinced they were chasing the wrong individual, the gunman would be long gone.

With a sigh, she turned her attention back to the guard. It was going to be a long afternoon.

The day had one more surprise in store for her, however. When the guard led her back to the gallery to await his superiors, she found the man who had tried to help her calmly talking to several men in finely tailored suits. Annja pegged them as senior museum officials. As she approached, her rescuer turned and said, "Ah, here's Ms. Creed now. I'm certain she'll back up everything I've said."

Annja glanced quizzically at him, wondering how he knew who she was, and then realized with a start that she knew him, as well. Or rather, knew of him. They hadn't met personally but she'd been studying him and his business strategies for the past several days.

The man who had come to her aid was none other than Mitchell Connolly.

Chapter 5

Her guess had been correct; the men in suits turned out to be the head of security and one of the museum directors. They took her aside and asked her to explain her side of the story. She told them the truth—how she'd come to see the Copper Scroll exhibit, how the gunman had waited until she was alone in the gallery before attempting to abduct her. She had no intention of mentioning the "extracurricular" activities she'd been involved in since taking up the sword, so when she was asked why she thought she had been a target she fell back on a reason as old as the city in which she stood. She was a good-looking woman alone in a foreign place and must have seemed an easy target.

Her story must have matched up with whatever Connolly had told them, because their attitude toward her quickly moved from suspicion to solicitousness. They thanked her for saving the tablet and offered to have their medical staff check her over for injuries, which she declined. As they waited for the police to arrive, Annja took a moment to speak to her would-be rescuer, who was sitting on a folding chair a few yards away.

"Thank you for getting involved, Mr. Connolly," she said after walking over to stand next to him. "Most people wouldn't have had the courage to."

He rose to his feet and waved away her thanks with a self-conscious grin. "It was the least I could do, Ms. Creed. Couldn't leave a fellow American in distress, now could I?"

"I guess not," she said with a laugh. "It was fortunate that you were here to help."

"Well, I must confess that it wasn't entirely by accident, Ms. Creed."

"Oh?"

"I stopped by your hotel this morning, looking to speak to you, and the concierge told me you had just left for the museum. As I'd been meaning to see the exhibit myself, I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone."

Annja thought back to when she'd left the hotel that morning. Had she told anyone where she was going? Ah. She had asked for directions to the museum.

"What was it you wanted to speak to me about?"

"I was impressed with the way you handled the negotiations yesterday. So much so that I'd like to discuss a particularly urgent situation I believe you are well-suited to assist me with."

Annja was already shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Connolly—"

He put a hand on her arm. "Please, Mitchell is fine."

She tried again. "I'm sorry, Mitchell, but my schedule for the next few months is rather tight and I'm not sure I can fit anything else in."

He flashed a smile. "At least hear me out. Let's discuss it over dinner this evening, if you don't have any plans? I assure you it will be worth your while. I wouldn't bother you with trivialities."

Annja thought it over for a moment. The truth was that her schedule really wasn't full at all. In fact, she was kind of surprised at herself for her automatic rejection of his offer. Connolly's wealth wasn't an issue for her. After hanging out with Roux and Garin Braden for so long—who had to be among the world's wealthiest, given how their fortunes stretched back over five hundred years of investments—she had grown, if not comfortable, at least capable of moving in the rarified circles

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