

WINNER

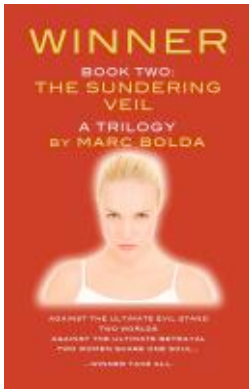
BOOK TWO: THE SUNDERING VEIL

A TRILOGY
BY MARC BOLDA



AGAINST THE ULTIMATE EVIL STAND
TWO WORLDS
AGAINST THE ULTIMATE BETRAYAL
TWO WOMEN SHARE ONE SOUL...

...WINNER TAKE ALL.



*Dive deeper, into an ocean of dreams, as the adventure continues with book two of the amazing Winner trilogy, **The Sundering Veil**. The plot thickens as our intrepid heroes encounter death, mystery and mayhem, not only in our own world, but also in the captivating mirror universe world of Tafariin. This is where Martin finally meets Victoria's beautiful soul double and also the sinister oracle of Mellarn, who will confront him with a dreadful choice...*

WINNER – BOOK TWO

The Sundering Veil

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**WINNER -
BOOK TWO:**

THE SUNDERING VEIL

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PART SEVEN:
THE HALL OF RECORDS

CHAPTER ONE

Gidfel awoke in darkness.

In that first split-second of awareness he did not know whether he was dead or alive. He almost screamed but some resilient, stubborn part of him refused to yield to the impulse. He had spat in the face of death all his life and he wasn't about to change now.

He lay still for a few moments and allowed the fragmented memories he retained from the horror before to flood him.

He shivered and moved gingerly. Everything seemed to work.

Then a sudden anger filled him and he yelled out Russian obscenities he had not uttered in many a year. That made him feel slightly better and he pushed up against the cold stone floor and onto his feet.

Slowly he groped his way through the pitch-blackness before him, until he reached a wall and felt his way around to the main switch panel.

He shielded his brow for a few seconds while he accustomed his eyes to the brightness of the fully lit chamber. Hertzfeld's body still hung upside down, the blood on his blackened face congealed, a look of hate and defiance etched permanently onto his features.

Good for you, thought Gidfel with admiration.

Never go gently into that long night.

Fight to win and if you cannot win, then fight anyway with your last fiber until you can fight no more. And, if you must die, take as many of the enemy with you as you can. It was both the *HJ* and then the *SS* way, instilled in him during his formative years, providing the backbone to his life.

Fight or die.

The old man stumbled out of the memorial hall and ordered his servants to clear up the mess and draw for him a long, hot bath. While he was relaxing in the steaming waters, he thought he could hear that strange whispering again, but when he strained his ears to pick up on it, there was nothing.

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That was when the voice inside his head first began speaking to him.

You have done well.

What?!

Do not be alarmed, for I am the gift you have been promised.

Gidfel sat up in his bath and quickly took stock of his surroundings.

The door to his spacious bathroom was locked and the vidcom station by the vanity was definitely inactive. Did someone think they were playing a joke on him? They would find his sense of humor not to their liking.

Seek not without for that which lies within. The voice you hear is the gift of illumination. Is this not what you sought?

“You mean, the ceremony?”

Gidfel could barely get the words out, so astonished was he at what was transpiring.

Yes. The ceremony. However, you and I have been together for far longer than that.

Think back.

The chest you keep by your bed—my servants have long been watching you. There is power in the mask, rendering connection to your domain. Do you remember the voices; the whispers of encouragement you imagined were your own thoughts? I have been here for you all this time. You have merely strengthened our existing bond.

“Who are—”, I mean, who are you? Gidfel completed the question in his own mind, rather than to utter the words.

He could scarcely believe what was happening to him.

Yes, that’s better. You have no need to speak aloud, for I am always at your side. I am your savior, your protector.

Nonsense, don’t try to fool me with that claptrap, I mean WHO ARE YOU? Answer the question!

It is well that you amuse me, or I would strike you down for such impertinence. I am indeed your protector, but I could so easily destroy you.

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Get out of my head! Get out! Gidfel twisted abruptly and lost his grip on the handrail to his bath.

He slipped back and splashed into the hot water, taking in a large gulp before he jerked up again and coughed repeatedly, holding his head with both hands, while bellowing, “No! Nooooo!”

There, the pain is gone. Perhaps you would prefer pleasure instead?

Gidfel drew a sharp intake of breath and was aware of a tingling sensation growing rapidly within his shriveled testicles. He then arched his back, when wave after wave of intense orgasmic ecstasy rippled through him, causing him to groan loudly in the back of his throat. Seconds later, he involuntarily ejaculated all over the side of the bath.

Gidfel was aghast, for he did not think he had any sexual function left. Abstinence had been his way since his mid seventies, even to the point of turning down several offers from the Sisters to warm his bed with him.

Please, I beg of you, do not *ever* do that to me again.

The pain is preferable.

You have dishonored me.

The old man was humiliated—deeply humiliated—but he could not hide, not from himself and whatever this entity was, this *thing* that had seemingly taken up residence inside his head.

It is of little consequence, but I will adhere to your wishes.

However, we digress.

I am not here to offer you pain or pleasure but that which you hunger for above all else; your beginnings, and your roots...

Gidfel sat up.

Yes, yes, tell me more and please, I mean no offense, but tell me also who you really are, or else I’m going to think I’ve gone delusional in my dotage.

Do not worry about that.

Your mental faculties have been...optimized by the ceremony you just performed. I am the Gift of the Ages, but you may find it easier to think of me as an aspect of your higher consciousness.

I have always been with you.

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And how, how am I to address you?

You may call me Ghest.

The ancient ones who are your direct ancestors welcomed my presence, for I showed them the way to great power. You have already demonstrated your abilities in this arena. I am here to help you realize all of your goals, all of your ambitions.

You wish to repopulate this rock with creatures in your own image. So shall it be. I will show you the way to dominance. I have already shown you. Did you think you conceived the change in your plans from mere world conquest to a whole new beginning?

You mean—

Yesss, the whisperings in your mind, the little suggestions, the prompting, the urgings, all of that was me. And so, now we will better be able to understand one another, you and I.

You must learn to trust me, and I in turn will show you the path to your true heart's desire...

CHAPTER TWO

The Mochello brothers, Juan and Jose, controlled upwards of eighty percent of the cocaine and heroin trade flowing north into the United States from Baja California.

They stepped into the vacuum left behind when other more highly profiled drug cartels were taken down during some widely publicized busts. This was the result of a joint US/Mexican taskforce set up to deter international drug trafficking between the two countries.

What a joke!

However, the brothers were ruthless and smart, believing passionately in the American Dream, and worked hard to establish trading partners and a lucrative distribution network on the US side of the border.

Profits increased steadily and everyone affiliated with the organization grew fat and content, for business was good and bribery on a massive scale took care of most problems—either that or professional assassins would pay a visit to make one final offer in the finest Mexican tradition: the choice between the silver or the lead.

As Juan Mochello, an avid science fiction aficionado, was often fond of saying: “The coke must flow.” Whatever it took, he was very handy with any number of different weapons, although the Spanish garrote was a personal favorite.

All continued to go well, until the arrival of the Germans on the scene. Both brothers were made aware of the fact that no criminal organization foolish enough to try to take on the Dark had long survived doing so.

The German method was remarkably straightforward.

Pay tribute or die.

The Sisters were on hand on several occasions, to sweeten the pill with a variety of sexual favors that were as wonderfully imaginative as they were perverse.

On the last weekend spent in non-stop copulation and bondage, Tasha left behind a special videodisc, fitted with a tamper-proof time

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delayed digital wipe mechanism, showing how they attended personally to those who double-crossed the Dark.

Hardened though they were to the administration of death in many of its more unpleasant varieties, both brothers were violently ill before the video was complete, and knew when they had been outclassed.

With the Dark taking thirty percent right off the top, the brothers were obliged to take a very close look at their own organization, in the hopes of tightening up any loose ends. It was at this time that they discovered they were being brazenly ripped off by several of their US distributors.

The brothers were enraged and took immediate action.

Their plan was simple; all those who were fingered by the internal audit were invited to a special meeting in Tijuana, just across the US/Mexican border, ostensibly to set up an expanded scale of operations. The brothers also made it known that they wished to promote deserving individuals for good work performed in the past.

Suckers. Everybody showed up but one man, a Vietnam veteran who had lived on his wits for far too long not to smell a trap in the offing. Those who did attend were greeted very warmly and treated to a highly pleasant, if short-lived evening, full of drugged wine, women and song.

When they were too stultified to move, the unfortunate guests were introduced to the crowning event of the festivities; their own demise. All were hog-tied, blindfolded and executed, one after the other, with a bullet to the back of the head. Their bodies were buried in the desert.

Now that they were completely revamping their entire method of product distribution, Jose Mochello decided to solve the problem of the remaining thief by sending a care package to his employer.

This contained enough incriminating evidence, including old cleaned out bank account numbers and local drug storage and drop-off locations, to ensure that he would be put away for a very long time. Once the thief was in prison, the brothers had a hundred different ways of getting to him.

Adiós, *asshole.*

CHAPTER THREE

Gidfel's private, state-of-the-art stealth enhanced Lear jet was fueled up and ready to depart at a moment's notice. The news from Cairo was most encouraging. Steinhart and his team had cleared the way to the underground chamber entrance by the removal of over several hundred tons of the shifting, desert sands.

The main shaft down, including the short tunnel leading to the limestone blocks surrounding the black granite doorway, was shored up with neotearl webbing stretched tightly across titanium bracing.

The local authorities—distracted in any event by the recent civil unrest—had been completely fooled by the SCA permits issued from a compromised source, high up in the Egyptian Archaeological Surveys Department of the Ministry of the Interior.

Secure contacts within the German embassy and the German Archaeological Institute provided everything else that was needed—including extended diplomatic immunity coverage for all of the specialized excavation equipment, weapons and explosives that were flown into the country in tightly sealed, x-ray shielded crates.

Gidfel advised he was leaving and issued strict orders that no further work was to be performed until his arrival. He was about to depart when Karl Eckart, the replacement specialist assigned to redesign the failed SHARK technology, called through on a priority one vidcom.

The old man was highly annoyed by the delay and snarled at the terrified scientist that the excuse for interrupting his departure had better be good.

"Gebieten, you may recall I was placed under standing orders to report immediately, should any further sign of the Rittmann worm transpire."

Eckart had Gidfel's attention now.

"Yes, yes, I did indeed issue those directives, but that was before our NSA contact advised that what was left of it had been found by the American military and handed over to the JCS and the CIA."

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Fortunately, Stealthnet counter-measures had already eradicated most of the message bearing and replication portions of the worm, before it was discovered. In any event, I had quite forgotten all about that little annoyance. What have you to tell me?”

“As you instructed, all of the SHARK hunter/sniffer specifications underwent a complete redesign and deployment using the modified AI routines Herr Renn has developed. One of our newer agents monitoring atmospheric relay bounce on the outgoing GEO K-STAR signaling station, has traced an ASIR occurrence that matches the DSL footprint we were able to obtain from the *Kralle*. There is a greater than ninety percent probability the trace originates from the same source.”

“Langley is experimenting with Rittmann’s worm?”

“Perhaps, *Gebieten*, although initial signal sourcing suggests Southern California as the OP.”

“Damn that Rittmann! The Americans have obviously improvised on his device and are using it in an effort to track us. You are to locate it, do a remote intercept and wipe it out—“

Wait.

“Eckart, belay that order and standby for one moment.”

Gidfel cut the link and sat down at his desk.

I thought we had an understanding that on day-to-day matters you would allow me to command as I see fit.

Yes, and I do not revoke that agreement. My function is to advise. Your minion makes reference to the, familiar your erstwhile seneschal released?

If by familiar, you mean artificial life agent, then yes.

There is the one I have already warned you of.

I sense his involvement in this, not those you spy upon.

Do not depreciate this enemy, for he has latent abilities of which he has not yet been made aware—out of fear their use would be enable me to track him. He is the last hope of your pathetic race and must be found quickly, in order for us to destroy him before he grows strong.

Rather than elimination of this device, can you not follow it without detection—for it will lead us to him.

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You are sure? This, is it *Valra* you refer to him by? You say he has the power to prevent the attainment of my plans? I think not. No one individual can stand against me now. Those days are long gone by.

Your ignorance is forgiven as an oversight of zeal.

To under or overestimate is a fault at which you humans continually excel. I have said before, you must learn to trust me. No one wishes your ambitions to bear fruit more. Now, can you follow this creature or not?

Yes, it should be possible. In fact it is a good idea; I always like to tie up loose ends whenever I can, assuming we are not dealing with the entire intelligence community. We will set a trap for whoever has the audacity to continue using this worm.

Gidfel reactivated the link to Eckart.

“*Gebierter?*”

“Yes, I want you to have Rittmann’s agent followed rather than eliminated, for the time being. It shall lead us to those who may have partial awareness of my plans. When you have the source of its transmission confirmed, report it to *Dunkel Gebierter* Tau, head of security. He is then to send the Sisters on an expedited cleanup—and, unless we are clearly dealing with more than just a few individuals, I want *no* survivors or witnesses. Should it transpire that the mission parameters require further support, the Sisters are to go on standby and seek additional instruction—do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly, *Gebierter.*”

“I’m glad to hear it. You are to report to me again when it’s done—and I don’t want any delays. Also, remind *Dunkel Gebierter* Tau I want all of our encryption standards revised and changed forthwith.”

Gidfel terminated the call.

These Sisters, they are adept in their work?

They are the best of the best. They have never missed a single assignment and they take great pride in performing a thorough job. Once we know from where the worm has been sent, your *Valra* is as good as dead.

Good. They will be well rewarded if they can accomplish this.

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I am going to leave you now, to attend to matters not of this realm. When I return, you shall advise me of your progress. Until that time, do not fail me...

CHAPTER FOUR

Back in LA, and once initiated into the general concept of the thing, LISA took to hacking like a duck to water.

Claudia marveled at the devious but utterly brilliant code design lying at the heart of LISA's core matrix. It was years ahead of anything she had ever seen. She took delight in working closely with the program, refining survival skills LISA had learned on the fly and demonstrating to LISA how to adapt appropriately from one stealth mode to another, depending on circumstances.

Martin bought a couple of high-end wireless laptops and Claudia and Victoria impressed the men by scouring the Internet for every hacker and cracker site they could find, compiling a database of information LISA was instructed to assimilate.

When they thought she was ready, they sent her out into the great unknown, with instructions to seek out anything even remotely connected to Gidfel and his secret organization.

In the meantime Wolf made his own inquiries, and soon discovered that Leroy Taggart was under investigation by Internal Affairs, as well as the FBI and the DEA, for suspected complicity in a number of cross border drug running operations involving the Mochello cartel.

The Department of Justice was drawing up numerous charges and it looked like he was going to be spending his retirement days in a federal corrections facility rather than on a beach in Florida.

Wolf further learned that all charges against him by Taggart had been dropped. The DA did not want the public embarrassment of a trial where the prosecution's main witness was a crooked cop.

Wolf elatedly told Martin and both agreed to share this particular piece of good news with the women over dinner.

Now that he was beginning to realize something special might be developing with Claudia, Wolf was determined to make a clean breast of everything before they went any further.

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Wolf also advised everyone that he was in the process of setting up a face-to-face meeting with General Lauderton of the United States Army.

In light of recent developments and the previous information they had supplied, the General was taking everything Wolf told him very seriously, especially the fact that there was probably a high level mole operating within the top echelons of the White House administration.

Wolf suggested to the General that it was best they all keep a low and independent profile, until they could identify and isolate the source of the leakage in US intelligence.

Later on, when the four decided they would eat out, to be followed by an after dinner show, Claudia said she would check one last time to see if LISA had come home.

She was thrilled to discover that not only had the agent returned, but also one of her suggested improvements for remote signal sourcing comparisons had struck pay dirt.

LISA had optimized a database of emission spectrum transfer protocols to monitor high earth orbit signal relays. All of these were filtered through a tracing program set to isolate and identify any radio emissions similar in composition to those containing the interference signal that so very nearly destroyed her, when she escaped from the *Kralle*.

Using this process, LISA managed to capture a small segment of encrypted communications between unknown locations originating in North Africa and somewhere in Eastern Europe.

The encryption level was of an order exceeding even the highest American AES standards. It was loosely based on a variable length block cipher, but with modifications to the reciprocal values in the Galois field S-box implementation, thus avoiding a pure prime number factoring approach.

Claudia explained that any block cipher was designed to be all but impossible to break, with this one really taking the biscuit.

Unless LISA had knowledge of the specific encryption method used, they faced a hopeless task in trying to decode the intercepted message. However, when instructed to search her internal library banks for any preset values Rittmann may have provided, not only did

LISA have copies of all of these, but she was also able to come up with the actual algorithm used to implement communication security protocols for all levels of encryption.

With this information in hand, it did not take LISA long to decipher the captured segment. Working with LISA, Claudia was soon able to display a transcribed version of the snippet to the others, translated from its native German into English:

‘—passage to the outer doorway has been breached. All attempts at internal imaging negative. Preliminary analysis suggests bulk shielding of unknown composition and design. We await instruction.

‘You are ordered to stand by until further notice. Dark Lord Alpha proceeding directly to Giza base camp, ETA 1300 hours, May 15. Advise Cairo embassy contacts. Arrange local transportation. End of transmission.’

“Is that it?” asked Martin.

“That’s it,” confirmed Claudia. “Is this what you were expecting?”

“We were never entirely sure what to expect,” said Wolf with a big grin on his face. “In that sense, you know as much as we do at this point. However, congratulations are in order. I don’t think Martin or I could ever have coaxed *that* out of LISA.”

“No doubt about it,” agreed Martin. “So, anyone fancy a trip to see the pyramids?”

“I don’t know about you, Claudia,” said Victoria, “but I keep pinching myself to see if I’m awake. I think I now know what Alice must have felt like when she fell down the rabbit hole.”

They all laughed and Claudia responded, “Rest assured my dear—you’re in keeping with some very good company on that score!”

“Right then,” said Martin. “Given that we’ve already taken the red pill—I say it’s down to business. Any idea on logistics? Wolf—or Claudia for that matter—you ex-military types should be up on that sort of thing.”

Claudia smiled and shook her head graciously.

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“I held the rank of captain during my time in the medical corps, but I’m an absolute greenhorn compared to the field command experience Wolf has. I think we had all better defer to him.”

Wolf nodded sagely.

“I’ve some ideas on what might prove useful. Let’s start with the basics. The krauts are obviously up to no good—we don’t know what, except that it seems to involve something they’ve found—in Egypt of all places. We still don’t know anything about the location of their home base of operations. We do know that someone with authority—for all I know it could be this Gidfel fella himself—is gonna be there the day after tomorrow. Which must mean it’s important. All of which points to one thing, as Martin here has already summarized—a trip to the pyramids. We need intel and this might be our best and only chance to get hold of it.”

Wolf regarded his three companions intently.

“We’ll have to enter as tourists, so that will restrict what we take in with us. We might be able to kit up once we get there. I spent some time in Algiers once, these Arab places are all the same: you want anything, you go to the local bazaar, part with enough greenbacks and you’ve got it. Now that their revolution’s more or less over with—at least for today—I hear travel to Egypt is reasonably safe, so we should be fine initially. Okay, this next part’s gonna get me in trouble, so I may as well get it over and done with. Martin I know will accompany me, but what about you, Claudia and Victoria? I know we’re partners an’ all, but I’m not going to presume to order anyone around while we’re still here, so the choice is yours—so long as you realize that if you do come with us, you might find yourselves walking right into the lion’s den.”

“Do you think he’s trying his hardest not to be sexist, Claudia?” asked Victoria.

She nodded. “He can’t help it, all of his generation were born like that. Wolf, I’m sure Victoria and I appreciate your gentlemanly concern, but we’ve already had quite the talk about this between ourselves the other day. When we agreed to join you and Martin, we did not mean it as arm ornaments. You’ve got yourself another A-team, and we intend to pull our weight as much as the men.”

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“Rightly put,” said Victoria. “Shall we begin packing?”

“First among equals then, that sort of thing, eh?” said Martin. “Well, it works for me too, but I think we should all agree on this: Wolf is armed with the most experience in this sort of endeavor, so when we’re out there, in the thick of it, he’s in charge and we do what he says.”

Victoria and Claudia readily assented to that and Wolf addressed everyone. “When I was in ‘Nam, I brought home three out of four teams safely. That’s not bad, considering what we were up against. You’ve seen fit to place your trust and confidence in me. Therefore, on my honor I will die fighting before I let any of you down. I suggest that we forget about the show and order in dinner, so we can sit around and plan for a little infiltration. Martin, you’re going to be in charge of intel and preliminary operations, including all of the travel arrangements; Claudia, you’re assigned computer specialist, medical and assistant weapons, and Victoria, you get communications, research and assistant engineer. I’m operations leader on tactical, mission objectives and implementation in the field, as well as coordination manager.”

Wolf smiled grimly. “The Romans used to say—if you would have peace, prepare for war. That’s going to be our basic approach here. Until we can be one hundred percent sure our own government is secure from leakage, we’re on our own. I don’t want Gidfel being tipped off and canceling out on us at the last minute. So far, so good. Are there any questions?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Gidfel stepped out of the tiny elevator cage and blinked rapidly against the brightness of the ceiling mounted klieg lights. They illuminated a narrow, excavated passageway, leading to a black granite doorway about five meters away.

A musty, dry smell was in the air. Steinhart waited nervously to greet his master, one of his own spies having just informed him about the awful fate of Hertzfeld.

“*Dunkel Gebieter* Omega, you have no idea, I assure you, of the number of years I have awaited this moment. Theodor, alas poor Theodor, he was convinced that we stand before the very entrance to the Hall of Records itself. What are your thoughts?”

Steinhart swallowed hard and then nodded ever so slightly.

“I think he was right, *Gebieter*. Everything we know to date leads us to this conclusion, but—”

“—the proof of the pudding?”

“Yes indeed, *Gebieter*, it does lie in the eating.”

Gidfel raised his eyelids briefly and smiled. “In that case, what are we waiting for?”

“At once, *Gebieter*. Unfortunately, we will have to use the laser cutter on the outer door—we have been unable to find any other way to get past it.”

Steinhart clicked his fingers and two technicians hurried to maneuver a modified Teltron Mark V industrial laser into firing position. German technology and the latest in its field. Solar Shield goggles were handed out to everyone and the machine was activated, sending a piercing blue-white beam into the granite rock and tracing a continuous pattern, ten centimeters inside the circumference of the door’s seamless fit into the surrounding sandstone rock.

A fan-pipe extractor blew noisily, sucking up the debris and blackened smoke until the job was complete. Then the technicians attached a vacuum sucker pad to the cut rock and pulled it back, until it toppled over, crashing to the sandy floor with a dull thud.

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Flashlights punctured the blackness beyond and a further corridor was revealed, limestone blocks aligned perfectly on all planes, with walls smooth as polished glass.

It opened up into a small antechamber where another, much larger portal awaited, imposing in its stark magnificence, and composed of a dull, gray metal with a peculiar matte finish. Set in the exact center was an embossed motif composed of different colored metals. The angular, scripted letters of an unknown language appeared beneath, cut into the metal and filled in with what looked like solid sapphire, the facets glittering in the light and wondrous to look upon.

Gidfel marched ahead and stood before the door.

Steinhart had never seen him like this; he could have sworn he saw tears in the old man's eyes.

"Look, Steinhart, look," he whispered. "We have found it. My lifetime's search is over. I am home."

Steinhart moved forward and examined more closely the markings on the door. The motif was simple in design, yet highly evocative.

A stylized wandering albatross in silver, clearly recognizable by its hooked bill, was with its wings outstretched back-dropped by a golden orb, obviously representing the sun. Surrounding this central design in each corner were four smaller symbols, superimposed by embossed, equilateral triangles.

To the upper left of the black-tipped wings, a conical shell was depicted, marked exquisitely with ascending spiral ridges, and bluish white in hue. To the lower left, was a beautiful five petaled rose, the corolla colored in a delicate pinkish-red.

On the opposite side, to the upper right, lay a yellow-white moon, surmounted by three white stars, its crescent tips reminiscent of twin horns sticking up, extending out beyond the sides of its surrounding triangle. Below it, a circular snake was shown in pale green, eating its own tail.

The sapphire letters beneath resembled the cuneiform scripts they had spent the last several years transcribing, but there was a bold and

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asseverating uniqueness about them, stamping them with the mark of originality:



It seemed to Steinhart that the Sumerians had almost certainly copied this script and used it as the basis for their own writings, and not the other way around.

The old man stretched his arms out in wonder and with his fingertips brushed the motif on the door. Almost without thinking, he touched each of the black-tipped wings and when his fingers were on both of them together, there was a whirring sound and the door split evenly down the middle and opened swiftly.

“Ha!” Cackled an obviously delighted Gidfel. “There, Steinhart, it seems I have a talent for solving mysteries!”

“A remarkable feat,” agreed Steinhart, slavishly. “Perhaps we should have the technicians enter first—“

“No, Omega, that won’t be necessary. I’m an old man now. I should be dead many times over with some of the crazy stunts Rittmann and I pulled off in earlier days. I appreciate your concern, but this is one risk I am more than ready to assume. If you would care to join me?”

“Of course, *Gebierter*, it would be my honor to do so.”

Steinhart privately felt anything but, when he moved forward, because he had seen the footage from the undersea reactor before it went up. He expected at any moment a shimmering wall of energy to spring up before them, spelling out their doom.

Nothing happened, however, except that as they stepped forward, ceiling mounted lights softly illuminated the chambers ahead, and

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they forgot all threat of danger, while struggling to comprehend what they saw.

A short corridor split three ways in front of them, opening out into separate rooms, with the one in the center being the largest and furthest away.

The chamber to the left was full of beautifully crafted boxes and crates. Gidfel issued strict orders that these were not to be opened, but removed intact and taken back to Rusbrinka for detailed examination.

To the right, were a number of very odd looking machines mounted on pedestals. These looked similar to the ones seen in the undersea fusion reactor control room.

In the center of the room were several open containers. These were full of shaped crystals of varying color and facet range, from very small to large. The largest crystals were a deep emerald in color and shimmered magically in the subdued light. They looked identical in composition and form. There were nine of them.

The old man picked up one of the smallest green crystals from a container, examined it thoughtfully and placed it in his pocket. Again, he gave orders for everything to be taken to Rusbrinka. He then advised Steinhart that he wanted the whole place stripped of anything removable, including the doors, and then rigged with high explosives and destroyed.

He did not want the Egyptian authorities to have any inkling of the priceless treasures that were being stolen from them.

They wandered into the final chamber, where a large map mounted on the furthest wall riveted their attention. It was made up of seamlessly fitted two-tone polished marble, the lighter shade depicting water, and the darker, land, which was shaped to reflect topographical relief and bedecked in various clusters of different colored jewels.

It was clearly an orthographic azimuthal map of the Southern Hemisphere, with the South Pole being situated directly in the center. Both men stood transfixed by the map, for there was something peculiar about it, the geography didn't seem quite right.

MARC BOLDA

“*Gebieten*,” said Steinhart finally in hushed awe, “It matches those maps I referred you to during our earlier research, from Hapgood’s work in the late nineteen sixties.”

“You mean the crackpot who came up with that disputed earth-crust displacement theory?”

“Yes, although widely discredited by the scientific community, others have speculated that the theory must be modified, in order to allow for a displacement of the *entire* mantle around the earth’s inner core. In neither case is there any satisfactory explanation given for the causation of such an event. Regardless, Hapgood based his theory on the existence of a number of maps from the middle ages, all of which had been sourced from much earlier materials, because they showed Antarctica with an *ice free* coast line.”

Steinhart stepped forward for a closer examination.

“Now, if you look carefully at this map, it shows exactly what Hapgood noticed with those earlier maps—the whole continent is located about thirty two hundred kilometers north of where it should be. For instance, the mass of diamonds on the right hand side there, would seem to indicate that the bulk of the ice sheet is lying *east* of the Transantarctic Mountains—the area to the west appears to be completely ice-free. This allows for some intriguing possibilities, *Gebieten*—such as that this part of the continent was likely habitable at a much earlier time.”

“Incredible!”

“Yes, and *if* the map is accurate, then it shows Antarctica as it must have appeared, thousands of years ago. Nevertheless, it would take a disaster of epic proportions to shift the entire continent to its current location. Therein lies the mystery. Indeed, Hapgood speculated that the most recent geological activity capable of encompassing such radical change occurred well over ten thousand years ago, towards the end of the last ice age marking the beginnings of the Holocene Epoch.”

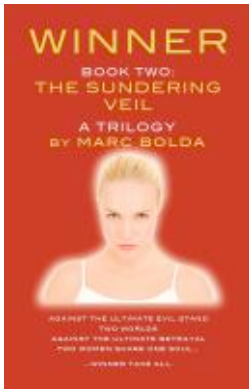
“*Hmmp!* And I suppose I should be thanking you for yet another history lesson,” responded Gidfel dryly. “If we take what you say to be the case, however, then what do you suppose *that* to be?”

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The old man pointed to a small collection of bluish-white gems that were quite unlike any of the others affixed to the rest of the map; for these were shaped like buildings, clustered around three emerald pyramids, each proportionally smaller than the other. The tiny pyramids were in the exact center of what looked like a large, low-lying plain. Their layout reminded Steinhart of the Great Pyramids here at Giza and he realized there must be a connection.

He then excitedly pointed out that on a modern map, the miniature city would be located immediately to the southwest of what was presently Berkner Island, an ice rise emerging from within the vast confines of the Ronne-Filchner Ice Shelf, in the Weddell Sea.

Steinhart took a deep breath, before adding, “At the risk of sounding melodramatic, *Gebieten*, I would suggest you have found Atlantis.”



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