



Whisked from being buried alive in Afghanistan to a strange ruin called Atrial, Patricia Langstrom, young archeologist, was given a choice. Stay, find the reason for the destruction, or return to her world with no memory of this one.


Redemption Quest: Book 2 of "Hell's Blade" Series

By R.L. Pool

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BOOK 2 OF *HELL'S BLADE* SERIES

redemption quest

R.L. POOL

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“If we make war too easy to wage, there are some who will be more
than eager to make it so.”

- R.L. Pool

WARNING: MA 18+, Language, violence, and suggested sexual
situations (No erotica!)

Chapter 1

“Well met...”

“Dearest Pat,

Before I get into how much I love, miss, and want to hold you in my arms again, I have to tell you some news!

I was at the site of the Bamiyan Buddhas! You know, the ones the Taliban bombed in 2001, and finally destroyed around 2008?

I was there!

We were patrolling in Bamiyan province last week and... I didn't bring my camera! Not only that, but I think I know where the supposed 300 meter long “Reclining Buddha” is too! There's a bricked up passage just behind...”

That was it. That was the last text she got from him. Neal Stanton. The love of her life, the man she was going to marry after he came home from Afghanistan... was dead.

Or, in the words of the only notice she got, “Missing and presumed dead while on patrol in Bamiyan Province, Afghanistan.” Something about an accident, the “100-year flood” or... whatever. She never got a straight answer from any of her questions, and they haven't yet recovered the bodies of him *or* his squad. She had no legal right to ask questions anyway, so...

Her parents had died in a car accident when she was fifteen. Her only family, an uncle in Fresno, offered to take her in and gave her all she needed to continue her schooling... *but* his time.

He was always on some business trip or something. He showed at her graduation and was thrilled when she asked him to help her get a Bachelors in Anthropology and Archeology at Monmouth. She had the grades, a semester scholarship, and a few grants she could use, but she needed the money to start. He offered to pay her tuition for one year only, but it was on her to keep her grades up and seek other loans for the rest.

She did. She graduated with honors, took her Masters, and was waiting for her doctorate to be approved... pending a major dissertation detailing a dig of some level of importance.

When her uncle died in a skiing accident last year... and left his considerable fortune to her... she left it in the bank and continued to search for the right subject for her dissertation. She really wanted to be an accredited forensic anthropologist/archeologist. Money could possibly buy temporary happiness, but a degree like that could bring her to exotic places, foreign lands, and she could meet other cultures. She didn't like the idea that she would be just another rich-bitch anyway.

Besides, she knew just the right dig.

When she finally became an assistant professor at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey, she knew it would be

difficult to convince the Dean, UNESCO, the government of Afghanistan, and... just about everyone else, that an excursion into the war-torn province could bring historical treasures to the public eye, and could possibly change the minds of the new rulers of Afghanistan!

She'd never again have asshole professors call her "Grad Ass"! *This* would end that shit!

What she really wanted to do is stand where he'd stood, look at what he'd seen, and finally get some closure. By now, she should have had a baby in her arms, with him standing beside her at some University function where she was getting a well-deserved award.

Patricia Langstrom would never marry Neal Stanton, would not have a dream life with the man who held her heart so close. She buried herself in her studies, the maps, the writings that would bring her here. She wrote letters, requested waivers, and finally...

The old pickup truck they'd rented bounced along on bad shocks and worse springs that had been overloaded too many times. She, Professor Nathaniel Fleming, Paul Ritchly, Nancy Trimble and Abdul Rahmi, were given limited permission to travel into Bamiyan Province. The limit? They had one week to find something tangible. Otherwise, they'd have to leave with empty hands.

Time enough, she thought!

The truck had barely stopped when she was out and running toward the cliff where the tall buddhas had once stood proudly.

“Where were you, Neal?” she whispered to herself as she ran along the edges shining her flashlight and peering into cuts in the stone where the monks would have lived ages ago. “Where were you?”

Each was the same. A little... cloister where the monks would live, pray and die. There was no difference in them at all. She ran, peeked in, ran some more, peeked in, ran...

She skidded to a stop halfway between one opening and the next. Had she seen...?

She walked back hesitantly afraid her mind was playing tricks on her. She shined the flashlight into the small room, at the dirt and rocks on the floor, the rough-cut walls, and the...

There. At the back in the right corner. An... alcove? An alcove filled with... bricks? Why would...

She ran back to the previous cell. No alcove. She ran back to the one before that one and, again, no alcove. She ran back to this one and, after a glance at the others just now spreading out to look around, she climbed through the small opening.

Moving the flashlight around to see that she didn't trip on any of the rocks scattered about the small cubicle, she approached the rock filled opening with the arched top.

The rocks didn't look like they had fallen there, it was more like... they'd been stacked. They were squared off somehow and looked more like... like the rocks carved to build the statues she'd studied from

books on the subject. None of them had come loose and were not part of the general jumble of rocks on the floor. So why...?

She took off her pack, set it to the dusty floor, and pulled out her headlight. After strapping it securely about her head, she turned it on. The flashlight went back into the pack, and, out of habit, she strapped it closed.

In the light of the headlamp, she studied the rocks. She was an archeologist, not a miner. One didn't just start grabbing rocks and lifting them away any more than they just began digging. You scoop a little, look, and scoop a little more.

In this case, she had to find the first rock to remove. It was like... a giant game of "Ginga". Move the wrong stone, and the whole thing could come tumbling down destroying both you and what you came to find!

She decided on one, moved it a little and found the one next to it moved a bit too much. She let the first one go, pulled the one next to it, and placed it on the floor to the side. Then she carefully lifted the first one away.

It wasn't as hard as it may sound. The niche was only a little over five feet high and maybe four wide. Patricia was five foot nothing and weighed in at a little less than one hundred fifteen pounds. Not to say she was unfit. Just small. She ran marathons for the fun of it!

She cleared a place at the top to about twelve inches but was faced with another neatly stacked layer of stones. Again, she chose one and removed it. Then another. And another.

A third layer appeared.

“This shit’s getting serious.” she whispered to no one in particular.

She pulled the first stone out and... darkness met her headlamp. She pulled the others to the level of the first two, took out her flashlight, and shined it into the alcove.

Alcove? Not if the dark passage she was seeing was real! It was some kind of corridor that had been filled in... meticulously... by...

Who? The monks? The Government to keep looters out?

Not the government... past or present. That left the monks themselves. Did they see the coming of the end and, in desperation, fled down this passage stacking rocks in their wake? It was too neat... perfect... to have been done in a hurry. Then why?

“I think I’m gonna need some help.”

She turned off her headlamp and turned toward the small opening into the sunlight. With the pack on one shoulder, she sighed and went to find her friends.

Before she was halfway to the opening, she heard the shouting... and stopped. She knew enough Pashto to know whoever was yelling... more than one... was not happy finding them there. Abdul was trying to explain they had permission, but the yellers weren’t having any of it.

Then...

“Get your fucking hands off me, motherfucker!”

That’s Nancy. Always the belligerent...

Patricia heard the slap. Professor Fleming tried to explain, and Patricia heard the rapid fire of an automatic weapon. Nancy screamed, and Pat ran to the opening to peer around the corner.

Professor Fleming was laying against the stone of the cliff, blood pooling around him. Nancy screamed again... and the long knife sliced her throat. Patricia was frozen as one man grabbed Nancy by the hair, while another grabbed her arms. The knife was raised...

Patricia ducked back inside the small room. Even when she heard the staccato burst of automatic fire... that obviously meant the end of her friends... she was looking for a way out.

Making a run for the truck was out. Besides, it took them forever to get the old beater to start the first time! Jumping out of the opening and running for the hills was out too! This was their playground, and she was just another prey to them.

A woman? A woman alone? A woman alone without a veil in Afghanistan?

Losing her head would come only after they had their way with her! Infidels were easy pickin’s! No sin attached to rape... or murder!

So, what’s left?

The sound of footsteps headed her way made her decision easy. She ran for the alcove.

There was no time to be subtle. She had to get in there and crawl as far away as possible. But to put her butt to the opening...

She dropped the pack from her shoulder, held it in one hand, and jumped feet first! She spun her body as her feet... miraculously... entered the narrow space at the top of the stone blocks. She got all but her breasts into the opening and, to keep from dislodging any of the blocks on the first layer, she wriggled back carefully. Once clear of the third or fourth layer, she began pushing back with her hands, dragging the pack along with her.

She was thirty feet in and moving steadily when she saw the light of a flashlight spin around inside the small room out there. She stopped and held her breath. When it disappeared, she moved quicker, taking stones from the side and stacking them in front of her as she pushed her way back.

The lights came back and she stopped. When the light came down the narrow opening, she heard one of them say something about Americans... and it didn't sound nice. There was some laughter, and the light went out.

Patricia let the breath she been holding out slowly and dropped her head to her hands.

The sudden light caused her to jerk her head up! She'd accidentally turned on the headlamp! She reached up quickly and snapped it off... but it was too late.

There was yelling, and the sound of stones being ripped out of the alcove. Pat reached back carefully, touched the release to the leather flap over the Ruger Blackhawk .357. She pulled it out and, aiming in the general direction of the small opening to the side of her makeshift blockage, thumbed back the hammer. When she touched the trigger...

The roar was almost deafening! The light disappeared for a moment. She started pushing her way back quickly, but she heard the sound of a bolt being ratcheted back. She stopped, covered her head with her arms and...

The loud, staccato pulsing of the automatic weapon ripped the air around her, the ricochets barely missing her. She felt something hit the toe of her boot, but nothing hurt.

She pulled her t-shirt up over her sports bra, covered her mouth and nose to ward off as much of the dust filtering down from the blocks above her head as possible, and began backing up in a panic. It took them a while to risk ripping more of the blocks away, the ringing in their ears probably as bad as hers.

She didn't give a shit! She was going to get back as far as she could, find a place to make her stand, and send as many of these fuckers to Hell as she could!

No, no, no!

No tears! Not yet! Don't let them hear you cry! They didn't earn that! Stay angry!

With the pistol in one hand, the pack dragged along with the other, she backed into the long... whatever this was. It seemed to be gradually getting deeper... a slow grade down deeper into the mountain.

The rocks gave way behind her, and she slid back, holding onto the pack and pistol desperately. Her feet hit solid ground. Stone. Carefully, she stood up in a crouch.

The ceiling was low, and she wasn't tall. Yet, her hair touched the stone of the ceiling when she stood. Hence, the crouch. She looked down the narrow opening at the top and grinned at the sounds of frantic rock throwing and shouts, the light from their flashlight moving constantly.

Yeah, she was afraid of them, but she was at that point where fear and "I don't give a shit" meet!

These fuckers had killed Professor Fleming, Paul, and... and they cut Nancy's head off! One or more of these assholes might have even had something to do with Neal dying too!

Well, she had something for them! She had twenty-four cartridges for the Ruger in loops about her pistol belt, five left in the chambers, and solid stone under her feet.

Keep coming assholes. I got something for you!

Neal bought this pistol for her. After taking her to the range, he told her she needed a "girl gun". She took his Springfield 1911A1 and put three in the black at twenty yards!

As a tiny girl at seven, her dad thought it would be “prudent” for his little girl to know how to use an “Equalizer”. She’d been shooting for many years before meeting Neal, so, after she clicked on the safety, and handed the big pistol back with a grin, he shut up! The Ruger was the last thing he gave her before the last deployment.

Now, that Ruger was in her hand, and these motherfuckers were on the receiving end.

Here, she thought with a bigger grin, Let me give you some incentive.

She looped the pack over her left shoulder, thumbed back the hammer, and, with it in both hands, pointed it toward the wavering light down there.

“Hey, assholes!” she shouted.

The light down there glared toward her, and she saw the small opening to the right of the blocks she’d piled behind her. She might not hit anything, but this should give them the shits!

“Left ball, back pocket!”

She touched the trigger.

Again, the pistol bucked in her hand, and the ringing in her ears made all other hearing almost impossible. She barely heard the ricochet... but then she *knew* she heard a scream from down there! She didn’t have long to revel in that thought.

She dropped to her knees, covered her ears with her palms, closed her eyes, and got as close to the side of the corridor as possible.

The guy down there seemed to want to empty the machine gun into the corridor! Bullets were ricocheting off of... everything! Somehow... *miraculously*... none of them touched her!

When it stopped, she started to stand up and shout something else nasty at them, but never got the chance. The rumble told her she was in trouble.

It was dark. I mean... *dark-dark*! Pat switched on the headlamp and saw the cloud of dust rolling toward her... fast! She also saw the small blocks of squared off stone falling from the top of the corridor! They caved the whole damned thing in!

She turned and ran! Only the light from the headlamp kept her from running headlong into the curved wall at the end!

Another corridor!

She looked to the right, the headlamp following, and saw the stacks of stone that blocked that direction. She looked left.

It was clear and led away into the darkness. Pat moved quickly that way, one hand against the side of the block wall, and the other holding the pistol out toward the darkness. The dust caught up with her and she leaned against the wall, her dirty t-shirt again held to her mouth and nose. She closed her eyes and breathed shallow.

The rumbling stopped and it got quiet. Okay, the ringing in her ears was muting slowly, but she couldn't hear anything else. She waited.

It got a little easier to breathe through the t-shirt, so she blinked her eyes open. The headlamp showed the pocket of relatively clean air over the fog of dust, the dust receding slowly down.

It was like... you're in a sinking ship, standing in a corridor... hallway... and the water is up, but you can breathe the air just above it, you know?

Pat looked to the left and saw the pile of stones down that way, just above the cloud of dust, that showed the passage now totally blocked. She looked right and the darkness beyond the range of her headlamp.

She was buried alive in an ancient Buddhist monastery, all of her friends were dead, her parents dead, everyone she knew... *loved*... was dead! She tried to hold it back, but it overwhelmed her.

She cried. Bawled! Screamed in the darkness! She let it all out! All of it!

Then, a voice came to her mind. A soft voice. Neal's voice.

"Where the fuck is my Indiana Jones girl?" it asked. *"Where's the short, cocky girl who shot pool with me while standing on a stool?"*

"She's dead, Neal." she whispered back.

"Not yet." the voice responded. *"We all die, Pat. You, me... everybody. But, you're not dead yet! Now, get your head outta your ass and figure this shit out!"*

"Smartass." she whispered, and then grinned. He always did know how to get her going. "If I get outta this, I'm gonna get me a fedora." she added louder. "Hear me, Neal? A fucking Indiana Jones fedora!"

And maybe a whip. Okay, not a whip. She'd probably hurt herself with a whip.

Figure this shit out, hunh? When in doubt, keep moving.

But first, assessment time. She wiped at her face with a grimy hand, felt the dusty mud from her tears, and grinned again.

"I'm a mess."

She shook her head and saw the dust billow from the long red ponytail tied up with one of those black scrunchies. She figured, until she could get somewhere to wash most of this grey crap off, she shouldn't do that again! The dust would only make her cough.

She brought the Ruger up to examine it in the light of the headlamp, shook some of the dust off of it, and opened the reloading port. She turned the cylinder until the expended cartridge showed, pushed it out with the plunger, and, after putting the brass into a pocket, thumbed another round from her belt into the empty cylinder.

She did the same to the other empty, and, after blowing a little more dust from it, she stuck the big pistol into the holster and locked the leather flap over it.

Okay. She had the four Granola Bars in her left side pocket, two more in the pack... with three of the MREs she always carried with her to a dig.

Then, there were the three pairs of socks, two t-shirts and two pairs of undies, including another sports bra. She also had her notes,

diagrams, and map case in there. She'd need that if... *when*... she got outta here!

She'd sipped at the canteen sparingly, so it should be over half full. Her research showed a number of springs in this area... but there was no telling if there was any water down here anywhere. Rationing was the name of the game. Her mouth was dry, but she could wait.

She set the pack to the stone floor, the dust cloud now only up to her knees. Then, after leaning against the solid stonework of the corridor, she lifted her right boot up to examine where she knew one of those ricochets had hit.

There was a tear in the sole right at the edge of the toe, with a tiny flap of rubber hanging from it. Pat knew that *that* could be trouble. If it caught on anything, it could continue to tear until there was more of the sole gone than not. If it got down to the thread...

She reached down, found the handle to the big knife... the "Bowie" Neal had bought her two Christmases ago... unsnapped the strap to the handle, and pulled the big blade. Carefully, she carved the little flap away and made certain the small wedge left wouldn't tear any farther.

She slipped the knife back into the scabbard strapped to the side of the pack, snapped the strap around the handle and stood up.

She had the headlamp and the flashlight, with extra batteries for both in the pack. She was as ready as she could be under the circumstances.

She lifted the pack to her shoulders, double checked everything to make sure she left nothing to chance and started down the corridor.

She walked at a steady pace, not fast or slow. It would do no good to miss a possibility while running down the passage, and walking slow would only strain her rationing.

She noted several more blocked off passages to the left and right as she went. It looked like the monks had made certain nobody would follow them as they made their getaway. Good for them! Now, if they would just show her the exit, she'd be happy!

The farther she walked, the less dust cloud. At one point, while walking, she looped the headlamp through her belt to keep light shining down the corridor, pulled the scrunchie from her hair, shook it out as much as she could, and, after pulling the long red tresses back, reapplied the elastic.

She pulled her tee out of her pants, found a relatively clean spot, and wiped her face on it. When the headlamp showed the layer of gray dust now on the tee, she let it hang outside of her fatigue pants. No sense getting that grime... down there!

She brushed dust off the long-sleeved, light, camouflaged jacket and her fatigue pants, stuck the headlamp back on her head, and kept walking.

Other than her own footsteps... and heartbeat... there was no noise at all. No squeaks of rats, no hisses of snakes, nothing. Not even tiny tracks in the dust.

If critters couldn't get in, how the Hell was she gonna get out?!

Nope! No thinking like that! She was gonna get out, make her way back to Kabul to the Field Office, and get her little ass back to the States!

It seemed that she'd been walking forever. She didn't check the watch Neal had given her when she got her Master's. He told her it was one of those international timekeeping watches that showed time, date and, with the sun, could be used as a compass. It was also good to several fathoms down, *if* she wanted to scuba.

Time wasn't normally a thing she watched anyway, and she hadn't bothered to check it before all this shit happened. It could have been a half an hour, or several for all she knew.

It seemed that this corridor, if she stayed on it for... a long time, would take her all the way through the mountain and out to the other side! She was willing to navigate from there, if only to see the sky again!

When the corridor ran out, it took her completely by surprise.

The chamber had to be huge! The headlamp wouldn't even penetrate to the other side... if there *was* another side! And there was a noise! A welcome noise!

It was to the right and across from where she stood, but she knew that walking directly across an open chamber had its own dangers. Cracks in the floor that gave way to wide, deep gaps, hidden traps that

would spring when a foot pushed the plunger down... just all the Indiana Jones shit she'd ever heard of!

She kept close to the wall, passing other sealed corridors as she went. It seemed to be curving slightly left as she went. After the third or fourth blocked corridor, the noise was louder. She figured she had walked maybe... fifty yards? A hundred? The corridors were about forty feet apart, so...

She passed another corridor, blocked with the squared off stones, and saw, in the headlamp, what she thought she'd find.

Chapter 2

“Thanks, my love...”

Water!

Water trickled from a small clay pipe fitted into the wall, and down into a big, raised, natural basin!

Water!

You could live for weeks without food, but water was a necessity!

She inspected the basin carefully to see if there was anything alive... or dead... in it. Clear water all the way to the bottom!

She rinsed off her hands quickly, the gray dust filtering out into the clear water and making it murky, but only for a minute. Somewhere in the back of the basin, the water went out and took most of the murkiness with it. It didn't pour over the sides, and that kept water from flooding the big area!

She held her hands under the trickle, lifted them to her mouth, and tasted the cold water. It was better than anything she could get out of a plastic bottle, she decided quickly.

She pulled the dusty canteen from the canvas holder at her belt, rinsed it off in the basin, opened it and dumped the water out. She rinsed it out under the trickle, and then held it under the cold flow until it filled to the very top. She carefully screwed on the lid, tightened it to make sure it didn't leak, and stuck it back in its holder.

Her turn!

The basin was almost big enough for her to strip down, climb in, and bath away all the dust, pain, and shit that was still running through her head. But it was *cold*!

That's all she needed! Being stuck down here wasn't enough, but to catch a chill, a cold... maybe pneumonia? Stupid!

But she was gonna get cleaned up a bit before she got started. She had a lot of work to do, and she wanted to be at least relatively clean before she began.

See, an archeologist doesn't just start digging. They do a walk-around inspection of the site first... to get a feel for everything in their minds. You look, note it in your mind, and look some more. Then, you start your notes, diagrams, and begin to investigate, but carefully. You don't move anything until it's fully documented, the location mapped, and the proper authorizations are in your pocket!

She'd do the preliminary investigation, make notes, and then find her way out. When her discovery comes out, they'll *have* to let her come back with a full crew... with military protection... and begin to document everything!

She nodded to herself as she lifted the pack from her shoulders. She opened it and took out one of the clean, rolled t-shirts... and the clean sports bra. She'd wash out what she had on later. She took the pencils and notepad from the forest-green, camouflaged jacket, and laid them carefully on the pack with her clean things.

Then, she took several steps away toward the open chamber, took the jacket off, and shook it. Dust billowed away in the light of the headlamp, and she shook it again. More dust. She shook it several more times until there was little dust flying off.

She flipped it up, caught the tail, and shook it until nothing came off, grabbed the collar and started to turn back to her pack. Something caught her eye and, with the jacket over one arm, she took a few steps toward it.

The light picked up the skeleton sitting just a few feet away, its legs crossed and its boney hands in its lap. Its skull was drooped forward and... and it looked like whoever this was, just sat down and waited to die.

She walked closer, her head turning left and right to send light in those directions. More skeletons, all sitting like this one. She walked a bit farther and saw another line of them... and another! They all sat right here and waited for the end... after blocking themselves inside!

“Okay, Pat.” she whispered, as she turned and walked back toward her pack. “Investigate later.”

She laid the jacket on the pack and took off the t-shirt. She looked it over, found the back was relatively clean, folded it forward over the dirt, and laid it on top of the jacket. She took a deep breath, pulled the sports bra over her head, and tossed it next to the pack.

She was half naked, in a Buddhist temple, with what could be a hundred dead monks all sitting around... something. Brazen hussy!

She moved back to the basin; her arms wrapped about her to somehow keep her warm. It was cold in here... maybe lower 60s or upper 50s. But she knew she was gonna be a lot colder!

She laid the headlamp on the wide edge of the basin, leaned over, and, after taking a couple of panting breaths, plunged her upper body into the cold, near freezing, water! She quickly scrubbed her face, ears, nose and... everything else! Her hands were going numb, and she knew the rest of her body would turn blue soon!

Her underarms, breasts and the back of her neck were washed, the ponytail hanging into the water as well.

She had to grin at the thought that her freckles were probably blue now too! Neal liked her freckles, the scattering of dots across her nose, and those on her neck and shoulders. He'd count them as he kissed each one. He never finished counting of course. Other... distractions always came up.

She pulled herself out of the water, took a couple of gasping breaths, and shivered. She pulled the scrunchie from her hair, took another breath, and took the plunge again. This time, she scrubbed at her scalp, ran her fingers through her long red hair and let it hang in front as she lifted from the freezing water. She ran numb hands over her head to push the water out of her hair and into the basin. She did the best she could to squeeze the water out of the hair hanging in front of her, stood up, and flipped her hair to her back.

Bad idea, she decided, as the cold wet hair hit her bare back! She moved quickly to her pack, grabbed the dirty tee, and wiped her face, arms and breasts. Then she used the now wet tee to squeeze more water out of her hair.

She laid the tee over the edge of the basin, grabbed the clean sports bra and slipped it on. The clean tee came next and then the jacket. After she pulled on the jacket, she lifted her hair from beneath it, rubbed her hands together, and blew on them to get a little feeling back.

How the Hell did these guys survive this cold, she asked herself? I mean, they were monks and all, and probably sat in the snow chanting to keep their concentration up to fight off the chills, but what about their everyday lives?

They must have had something to bring a little warmth here. Maybe a couple of braziers, lots of candles or... something!

She picked up the dirty sports bra, rinsed it out as well as she could in the cold water, wrung it out, and set it in on the edge in a little ball. Then, she did the same with the dirty tee.

She dried her hands on the jacket, blew into them to warm them up a bit, picked up the pack, and walked along the curved wall. Looking into the monks was part of her initial inspection, but first she wanted to see if they had any way to warm it up in here.

She passed another blocked off passage, a small, waist high brazier... with nothing but ashes in the bottom... and another water basin. With so many monks, they needed more than one basin, right?

And the brazier was made of strips of iron riveted together vertically. It wasn't ornate but would still look good in her apartment next to the window with a potted plant growing inside.

Another passage, another brazier, and...

It was big! Carved into the stone of the wall, the big fireplace had a few pieces of burned wood still there! Not only that, but a little farther down, a large pile of stacked wood, already split and seasoned, waited for someone to stack it in here, set it on fire, and heat this place up toasty warm!

She dropped the pack, pulled the big bladed knife, and started shaving slivers of wood from the burned logs already there! She used one as a chopping block to keep the sharp blade off of the stone, but soon had a big pile of kindling right where the fire had been... years ago? Ages?

She slipped the knife back into its scabbard, fastened it in securely, and ran over to get some of the other wood just waiting. The headlamp showed no termites, scorpions, or anything else crawly on it, so she scooped up several and ran back.

She set one log to each side of the kindling, and two over it. Then, after making a small hole in the pile of shavings, she wiped her hands on her pants, and pulled the Bic from her pocket.

"Please?" she whispered, as she held the Bic inside the hole and lit it.

It took a little while, but the shavings smoldered, and a small flame came up. She pulled the Bic out, burned her thumb on the metal ring at the top, and stuck it back into her pocket. She put two more logs diagonally across the first two and squatted there to watch and wait.

“Com’on.” she whispered, almost desperately.

As if in answer to her summons, the kindling flared, caught the logs on top and Pat had to back away from the sudden heat!

“Yes!” she shouted, and then glanced around at the echoes. She looked toward the row of skeletal backs now faintly lit by the fire, chuckled, and added, “Sorry, guys. I’ll try to hold it down. I’ll get to you in a minute.”

She walked quickly back the way she came, found the first brazier, and dumped the few ashes to the dusty floor. Not a very “archeologist” way of doing things, but she reasoned she was in survival mode right now. Besides, the ashes would tell her exactly where the brazier actually belonged.

It was rather heavy, but she carried it back to the big fireplace, set it close, and walked through the heavy layer of dust toward the basin where her wet t-shirt and sports bra waited.

She rinsed her hands of the grime from the brazier, picked up the two pieces of clothing, and walked back while shaking them both out. She hung them on the pointy edges of the iron brazier to dry, added another log to the fire, turned, and sighed at the monks just sitting around waiting.

“Your turn.” she whispered.

She got the flashlight from the pack and turned it on. The LEDs were a little dim, so she brought the pack of “D” cells out, replaced the two in the flashlight, and put the two low ones back into the package upside down. That would let her know they weren’t really good but would work in a pinch.

She closed the plastic package of batteries, put it back into the pack where it had been, and turned to face the monks still waiting on her. She needed to set her mind to the task, and the best way to do that is to recap all she studied, right? So...

These guys could be new. But, if that’s true, why isn’t there more flesh... and smell? If they were here when the Taliban came, the whole place woulda been ripped apart! So... When?

Back in the early third century CE, the Sassanid threw the Kushans out and took over. That’s when the... uh... Lokot-taravada Buddhists built the two big Buddhas outside. The Sassanid left the Buddhists alone for the most part until the mid-third century.

That’s when a Zoroastrian high priest, Kartir, came into power and, because he thought the mixing of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism was somehow heresy, had a lot of Buddhist Temples destroyed.

If these guys were Lokot-taravada Buddhists during that period, that would put the reason for them coming down here and blocking off all passages, the fear that the fanatical high priest would destroy their

temple, library, and any other artifacts they wanted to save. That would put this site at seventeen... eighteen hundred years old!

Makes sense. Now, prove it!

“If any of you guys wanna speak up and make my job easier,” she said just loud enough to carry to the skeletal monks, “I’m all ears.”

No takers? Figures...

The first thing she noticed, as she walked toward the row of monks, was the symmetry. They were sitting almost exactly a foot and a half apart, and in a straight line. When she shined her flashlight to the left and then the right, they seemed to be almost perfectly aligned with each other... like soldiers standing in formation.

She liked symmetry. Neal always laughed at her OCD and tried to make certain he put everything back in the proper place when he was with her. He was understanding like that.

The monk five down on the left kinda broke the symmetry... but that wasn’t his fault. His skull had fallen off and sat just beyond his crossed legs... *bones*.

She’d have to make sure she noted the exact location of the skull, and the things each had on them. She’d do that in her journal when she began her serious investigation. Her sketches, diagrams and descriptions for each a requirement she placed on herself. Everything had to be scrutinized and noted. Each nuance detected, looked at and inspected with a jaundiced eye. Only then would she be able to piece

together what had actually happened here some two millennia ago... *if* her conjecture was right.

Gone was the worry about Taliban thugs. Gone was the thought of her friends lying in pools of their own blood above her. She was in investigation mode, these monks... seemingly *hundreds* of monks... deserving her full attention.

With that in mind, she stepped carefully between the monks in that row, and shined her headlamp down into the lap of the one on her right. His hands were laid one atop the other, with the thumbs interlaced. Around those hands, the prayer beads rested, the thumbs holding them in place. Whatever held those beads together was still intact.

She looked down on the monk to the left and found he too had his hands in his lap, the prayer beads also looped about his hands and the interlaced thumbs holding them.

Then she saw something else. A small black dot on the end of his right forefinger. She brought the flashlight to bear and saw, in the grey, mottled bone, the tiny black dot a bit clearer. It wasn't a speck of dirt, but something that had stained the finger bone to the point that it had lasted... millennia.

She turned the flashlight back to the monk on the right and found the same tiny dot on his boney forefinger. She took the small notepad from her pocket, held the flashlight under her arm, and made a note describing the placement of the hands, the beads... and the dot.

She tapped the little silver piercing in her tongue to the roof of her mouth... something she did unconsciously when faced with a thought inducing dilemma. She'd gotten the piercing with some friends in Monmouth, the idea that it would bring... pleasure to their boyfriends.

When she met Neal, he noticed it right away and warned her of the dangers of piercing that particular appendage. But he said it was her choice to keep it and it wouldn't change his opinion of her one way or another.

Of course, she kept it. It had become so much a part of her by then that to remove it might be removing a part of herself and her past.

Now she tapped it to the roof of her mouth as she looked back at the spot on the other monk's finger. What could cause something like that? Some kinda ritual tattoo they all had? Did they all have it?

She carefully walked between them to the next row of monks... offset almost perfectly between the row behind. They too had their hands folded as the others, the beads around the hands, and the tiny spot on the forefinger.

She made notes on the small notepad, and moved to the next, and then the next row... all symmetrically offset from the one behind it. They were all the same. They sat, folded their hands, bowed their heads... and died. All with that annoyingly obvious tiny spot on their forefinger.

After she passed the last row of monks, she shined the flashlight down the rows. Way down there to the right... the way she'd come

when she first found the water... was a hole. Someone hadn't gotten the memo, and there was a space that should have been filled with monk.

"Later, Pat." she warned herself. "Let's see what they were praying to, and then..."

She turned the flashlight to the wall some twenty yards in front of the last row of monks.

Actually, it was a wall, with another wall on top. That first wall was about three feet tall with a ledge that held several small bowls... incense bowls, Pat reasoned.

The wall just beyond was quite a bit taller and looked like it was more... curvy. She'd have to come up with a better word to describe the wall above the short one, but she had a Thesaurus on her computer.

Thing is, the bowls were, again, perfectly spaced... as were the small braziers placed about six feet back, and every thirty feet or so from the wall to light it.

"These guys had worse OCD than I do!" she muttered, as she walked closer and shined her flashlight up toward the upper wall.

What she saw... what she thought she saw... made her stop and gasp! Could this be...?

No. That's impossible. That had been searched for a long way away from here. This had to be something these guys had built... *carved!*

Carved? The wall, and the thing above it, had been carved from the stone of the mountain, right here in the bowels of this monastery. None of those squared off blocks. Smooth, carved stone. How the Hell...

She moved her flashlight slowly up to the carved legs, butt, and the carved covering for said butt. She moved it to the right and...

Yep! It was a very large... *huge*... "Reclining Buddha". Or she was totally wrong, and when she went to the other side, somebody else's face would smile at her from the stone!

If this wasn't the hidden "300-meter Reclining Buddha" everybody was looking for, it would be another one just like it! She pushed her excitement down as hard as she could and walked casually to the right end of the big statue.

"Holy shit, Neal!" she breathed. "You were right!"

The rows of monks didn't end here. They wrapped around, in a perfect arc, and continued on to the other side.

"Geez!" she muttered. "There must be... five... six hundred of them all sitting here waiting to die!"

How could anyone sit and wait like that? What kind of person sits, chants, and waits to die of starvation, thirst or... whatever, without panicking, jumping up, and running toward an exit?! These guys had faith!

"Or the mindset of the Jonestown massacre." she conceded.

Each of the monks sat there, their hands folded on their laps, and died. But each one also had that tiny stain on the bony fingertip. She filed that away as she turned the corner that would bring her to the front... the eastern face... of the long, huge statue.

She shined her flashlight up into the smiling face of the Buddha, grinned, and turned the light on the five rows of dead monks sitting there. She would have to document each one of them, give them a number, and see that they were each described, as well as the possessions each had in their hands. The color of the beads, the position of the skeleton, the placement of their feet, would all have to be written down accurately.

It would take time to document the whole site, but she would do what she could before finding her way out.

She began counting her paces as she walked along that short wall below the huge statue. She noted the placement of each incense bowl, how they were all spaced almost exactly apart, and the braziers they would have used to light up their deity.

At one hundred and seventy-two paces, she stopped at the small stone table placed about eight feet away from the wall, and the one monk sitting there, again with his hands in his lap. There were three more of the monks sitting behind him, and the rest in their assigned rows behind them.

“You must be the head guy around here.” she muttered as she examined the three bowls on the table.

It was about three feet long, a foot wide and was a single slab of the same dark stone the statue had been carved out of. It sat on a few of the squared off stones at about a foot off the dust covered floor.

The bowls on each end were like the ones around the statue. Incense burners... but after so long, there was no residue. The bowl in the middle was different.

She shined the flashlight into the bowl and frowned. Raisons? She started to reach into the bowl to bring a few out... but stopped.

She glanced at the abbot, sitting there all regal and shit with the gold chain around his neck. She walked toward him, her flashlight finding his hands on his lap, and the tiny stain on his forefinger too!

“Poison.” she said breathlessly. “What kind, guy?”

If it were cyanide, these guys would be writhing in pain, not sitting here casually waiting to die. It would have to be something that put them to sleep, slowed their heartbeat, and caused their lungs to finally stop, without causing them any pain at all. What could do that?

The evidence from Jonestown showed they were given a concoction that had tranquilizers and cyanide in the mix. Many were found outside the pavilion where they died in pain.

But these guys just went to sleep and never woke up.

“But you had to make sure, didn’t you, shithead.” she whispered at the abbot. “You found a berry or something that, when they even held it in their fingers, it would still eventually kill them. No matter what they did, they were gonna die.”

That, her fear, her fatigue, and the deaths of her friends, caused her anger to flare.

“You stupid, self-serving asshole!” she said loud enough for the guys in the back to hear her. “You brought them all down here, had ‘em block up the way out with stones, and told them to sit down and take their poison. For what? Protect a fucking statue? A god?”

“This isn’t a god, shithead! It’s a carved piece of stone! Gods don’t need your help to protect ‘em! They need you to be a good person, help others, be an example! Some fucking example you turned out to be!”

She looked out on the bowed skulls in rows, took a deep shuddering breath, and continued her tirade.

“These guys probably spent most of their time out there with villagers!” she almost shouted. “They probably helped in their fields, laughed with the residents, held their children and gave all that they had to others to see they had something to eat... even if they didn’t eat themselves!

“They were good men, fuckhead! Some of them, by the bone structure and size, were probably not even teenagers! You made them sit here, take your fucking poison, and die, so you could sit here for someone to find you and say what a great guy you were!

“Well, listen up, asswipe!” she concluded, as she glared at the bones of the leader of the temple. “I’m gonna make sure they all know what a manipulative asshole you were. I’m gonna tell the *world* how

you coerced good men... *boys*... to come down here, close up their escape routes, and take poison, just so you could be looked at as some kinda fucking martyr! I will expose you for the monster you were!”

She was suddenly very tired. All of it... the running, fear, death... *all* of it came back on her and she slumped. She still needed to do the investigation, but it could wait for a while. She needed to rest, eat a little of what she had, and sleep.

She started to walk back around the table to continue her pacing around the statue, but the light from her headlamp caught the bowl in the middle again.

She pulled the roll of Zip-Loks from the pocket on her right thigh, slipped one out, and returned the others to the pocket. She unzipped the plastic envelope, turned it inside out, and, with the plastic covering her hand, reached into the bowl to recover a good bit of the remaining raisons... that were once poison berries. She turned the bag right-side out, and zipped it closed.

Once back in the states, she'd have one of the chemists at Monmouth run tests on these, find out what they were, and if any were still around and a danger to anyone in this, or any *other* region of the earth.

She took out her small notepad, wrote a quick note, and dropped it into the bowl. It said, “Danger! Poison raisons! Do not touch! Will soak through skin and kill you!”

That was a warning for anyone who came down here whether she was with them or not!

She found the dust disturbed where she had stopped counting, glanced at the abbot, sneered and said, “Fuck you!” Then, she continued her paces.

At three hundred, forty-seven, she stood at the end... the feet sticking up into the air a good thirty feet! She made a note in the notepad, turned and walked back along the wall to the other side.

Her flashlight swept over the monks as she looked for the tracks from where she entered this nightmare and caught something... out of place.

There was that hole in the formation. Where the monks sat in straight lines, each about a foot and a half apart, there was a place with no monk. How...

Her flashlight saw something behind the last row and, carefully, she moved between the skeletons toward it. It was another skeleton, but it was laying in the dust as if in pain. The bones of its legs were pulled up and one hand... the left hand... was holding the wrist of the right.

The right hand was almost totally black! She looked the skeleton over and...

“It’s a kid.” she breathed. “He can’t be over... eight?”

She dropped to her knees next to him and tried to “see” the young face, in pain, fear and agony. It was obvious he hadn’t taken the berry

to eat... but that didn't make a difference. He died anyway, and in misery!

"You sick-assed motherfucker!" she shouted, as if the abbot could even hear her. "You poisoned this baby, but he didn't believe you! But that didn't matter, did it?! You murdered him, you son... of... a... *BITCH!*"

She was crying now. She couldn't help it. Here was this kid... this *baby*... lying dead on the cold stone. All alone. He probably waited while the others died, figured he'd find the best way out, and escape.

"He was the smart one!" she decided, as she wiped the tears from her cheeks.

She wanted to pick him up, hold him, tell him it would be alright... but it was too late for that. If she could go back in time, maybe she could catch him before he came down here, ask him to help her with something, and they'd run away! Maybe find a place where there weren't any assholes trying to kill everybody.

"You'd go with me too, wouldn't you... Danny." she whispered. "I can call you Danny, right?"

He didn't answer, so she smiled. She and Danny would travel together, find people they could help along the way and... maybe herd sheep, goats... or something.

But there's always assholes who are killing other assholes, forcing good people in their armies to kill each other. Kinda like this asshole abbot killed all of these good men just to save a fucking statue!

Where would they go? Where *could* they go?

It didn't matter. If she could just have saved him, they'd have a few years before some son-of-a-bitch caught 'em, tortured 'em and killed 'em for... whatever reason they came up with.

But maybe they would get away. Maybe they could stay one step ahead. With her knowledge of history, maybe she could guide them to the safe regions where war hadn't come, move on before the war came there, and move on to the next safe zone.

She chuckled and wiped her face again.

"Sorry, Danny." she whispered. "I'm getting a little punch-drunk. I need to sleep, eat, and get started documenting all of this... and you, before I try to figure out..."

Wait a minute! Danny was trying to escape, right? So, where...

She looked in the direction he seemed to be going, shined the flashlight that way, and...

The basin where she washed? No. The passage *beside* the basin! He knew the shortest passage to the outside and was gonna start digging his way out!

"Thanks, Danny." she whispered as she got to her feet. "Wish I'd met you sooner. We'd probably have been friends... good buddies! I'll see that everybody in the world remembers you, and I'll remember you forever. Now, you just rest easy, little buddy. I'll make sure nobody bothers you for a while."

She walked slowly to the basin and the trickle of water, slipped the headlamp under her belt, and washed her hands and the tears from her face. She shook her hands as she walked toward the light from her fire way over there.

She'd take her time dismantling the stones from the passage Danny showed her, find her way out, and get her ass to the Field Office in Kabul. It would take time, but she had water. If she rationed herself to a couple of bites from the Granola Bars every couple of days, and maybe an MRE every third day or so, she'd make it!

She'd make it back to the States and let everybody know what happened here! She'd be on every news station, talk show, and blog available. She'd do pod-casts, YouTube videos, and streams on Twitch! She'd let the *world* know what she thought of these assholes, and make sure the families of her friends got in the State Department's face about what they were gonna do about it!

She'd write a book, with Danny as the main character, and tell about his life here, the things he might have done, and how he showed a girl from the twenty-first Century how to escape when he couldn't.

She'd write her dissertation, to include her opinion of the fanatical maniacs who held this beautiful country in a theocracy of religious hatred, incestuous pedophilia, and fear! These maniacal, shit-eating motherfuckers would remember her name by the time she was finished!

But... she couldn't.

If she let it out that this was even here, the Taliban would find their way in, sweep all these good monks to the side... along with Danny... and set a nuke right next to Buddha's head! Some zealous asshole would then take a hammer, shout something like "Allahu Akbar" and hit the warhead on the nose, thinking he'd end up in Heaven with seventy-two virgins to rape!

Everything would be gone. The find of a lifetime, the possible library of scrolls that told of life here before the shitheads moved in, the history these good monks tried to preserve with their own lives... and Danny! Gone!

Yeah, she'd get famous, but at what cost? No! She'd wait. It may take ten, twenty... even fifty years before she would feel safe enough to bring a crew here to investigate this find. She could wait.

She'd write her dissertation, sketch everything she had in her notes, and write a book detailing... *everything*. She'd put it all into a lockbox with her provenance and wait.

But first...

Neal's text had given her the nudge, his death the desire, and his love of what she was good at the impetus. If things had gone differently, he would have followed her all over the world seeking knowledge of the ancients, while playing with their kids. She owed it to him and Danny to see that their sacrifice wasn't wasted!

But she was dead tired. She needed a clear head to properly document this find, get her notes perfect, and then start digging her

way out. She'd take the time to sleep, and then get down to business. It may be years before she comes back here, so she wanted to get it as right as she could!

Her hair was almost dry, so she pulled it back, wrapped the scrunchy around it, and tossed another log into the fire. She took one of the Granola Bars, carefully unwrapped the end, took a bite, and wrapped it back up.

After a good, long drink from her canteen, she put everything back where it belonged, unstrapped the poncho wrapped blanket from the bottom of her pack, and laid it out. She set the pack at the edge of the blanket and poncho, laid down and pulled the blanket over her shoulders.

"Night, Danny." she whispered. "See you in the morning. Sleep tight."

And sleep took her...

Chapter 3

“What the...”

“Hey, short-and-gorgeous.”

She turned, and replied, “Hey, tall-and-handsome. Where ya been?”

“Here and there.” Neal answered as he began to straddle his legs... like he always did to bring him down to her level.

“Me too.” she whispered, as she pushed her smaller body into his, cupped his face in her hands, and leaned toward him.

The kiss was soft, warm, and oh so delicious. She wanted to stay that way forever, but...

She pulled back with a little pouty frown.

“You’re... dead, Neal.” she whispered. “How...”

“It doesn’t matter, baby.” he replied. “We have a minute, and then you have work to do. Me too, though I can’t tell you...”

“You can’t tell me anything about what you’re doing, right? Secret stuff.” she pouted. Fucking Marines...

“Yeah.” he responded. “Something like that.” His grin slipped a little, and, “Listen, Pat. You have something you can do that would really make a difference.”

“You mean Danny?”

“Danny can wait.” he replied with a little chuckle. “He’s been there for a long time. A few more days aren’t gonna make much difference.”

“Then, what?” she asked, her deep green eyes and pout working hard to get him to tell her something she could use to just stay here with him.

“Can’t say.” he said. “All I can say is, you can make a difference. That’s all.”

“But I wanna stay here with you.” she replied, her pouty face and kitten eyes almost always getting her way.

“Maybe... later.”

He sighed and moved his head toward her slowly. She knew what was coming. He would kiss her on the forehead, smile at her, and, with his duffel bag over his shoulder, walk out the door.

She closed her eyes, felt the warm kiss, and... he was gone.

She tried to open her eyes, but it was hard. She ached all over, and the rough, but pliant pack wasn’t as comfortable as it was last night. She reached out for him, but only got a handful of brush and grass. She wiped her hand on the blanket and tried to get back to her dream, but...

She sat up and blinked at the light all around her!

“What the fuck?!” she whispered in shock.

The light was coming from the reflection off of the mountain across from this cut in this side. She looked up at... the sky!

Somehow, she’d gotten out of the temple, made her way here, and slept under the stars. That much was obvious! But how? When?

She pulled the little notepad out, opened it and...

The last entry was the one about Danny. If she'd done her investigation, she'd have a bunch more written in this little book, and her big spiral notebook would be *filled* with sketches, notes, and opinions!

Maybe she accidentally touched one of those fucking berries... *raisons*. Maybe it was enough to send her loopy, walk around like a zombie, and dig her way out.

Well, if she could get out, she could get back in again! She didn't know how she was able to sleep out here without the Taliban finding her, but she'll take luck where she could find it. Right now, Danny needs her to do her job.

She was in a... gap... a niche in this side of a valley... thing. That much she could see from where she sat. She pulled the Ruger from the holster lying next to the blanket, checked the cylinders, and found them loaded. It was still covered in dust, but she promised herself... and Neal... she'd clean it when she got the chance.

With it in hand, she crept through the brush and tall, dry grass to the opening. It looked to have been, at one time, a road, rather than a natural valley. There were marks on the other side that showed where stone looked to have been carved away from the brush-overgrown roadway.

It was thirty... forty feet across, and it looked like there were... guard posts carved some thirty feet above. When she glanced left, she could guess why it was now overgrown.

It looked like the whole mountain had been dropped into the valley! It wasn't natural. She could see that. Someone... or *something*... had ripped the sides of the valley down into the road to block... something.

Huge boulders were between her and the blockage, but she reasoned she could climb out that way. But first...

She looked right. Way down there, at the end of the overgrown road about two hundred yards away, was a crumbling wall. From here, it looked like there was an opening in the wall... other than the gaps she could see at the top of the construction.

That is how she got out of the temple, and the way she would get back in to finish her initial investigation. She listened to the noises around her, but only heard the chirping of a few birds. It didn't look like anyone had made their way through the grass and brush either. No crushed grass, broken twigs... nothing. Not even a game trail.

She slipped back to her bedroll, carefully rolled it and strapped it to the bottom of her pack. She buckled on the pistol belt with the canteen hanging on the left side, holstered the big Ruger, and looked around the niche to see she hadn't left anything there. When she was sure she had everything, she shouldered the pack and, at a crouch, left the niche.

She stayed to the right, to keep tracks from being made through the tall grass and brush, until she got close to the gates. The archeologist in her caused her to stop and assess.

She took it all in. The partial holes in the thick stone walls, the missing section of parapet, and the half open, rotting wood of the gate on the left. It had a hole... half hole... where the big wood doors were supposed to be joined when closed. Now, that gate stood with a couple of the wood beams hanging from the rusted steel bands, with a hole that looked like the result of an RPG blowing it open.

The other gate was on the ground... mostly. The bottom hinge held on, but the top hinge had given way when the RPG hit the gate.

“Just like the Taliban to resort to overkill.” she muttered. “These monks didn’t have any weapons. So, why...”

Her eyes caught the statue situated over the thick piling that held the gate on the left, and the... winged gargoyle that stared down the road in the valley.

“Gargoyle?” she whispered. “Why would Buddhist monks have gargoyles...”

That question would be answered once inside, she reasoned. She left it at that, and climbed over the broken, rusted bands and rotted wood of the partially removed gate.

More tall, dry grass and brush. She looked beyond the courtyard of this ancient ruin, to the mountain that looked like it had been carved into... a castle... citadel... something from the Middle Ages.

“Okay.” she whispered to herself. “The monks found... an old city, built by... uh... medieval pagans... or something.”

Again, she left it there. As Alice would have said, “Curiouser and curiouser...”

All three of the doorways into the... citadel... were open. Instead of having to choose between them, she headed for the one in the middle, the one with double doors open wide.

“Kinda careless leaving the door open while invaders were knocking.” she whispered as she mounted the ramp up toward the doors.

She started up the ramp, but something caught her attention. Just off of the ramp, in the overgrown grass, was... a wrinkled piece of leather, aged with the passage of years. It looked like there were daggers... knives, or something still in the sheaths sewn into the blackened leather. She knelt, carefully pulled one of the rusted daggers out, and a sliver of black metal fell out of the rusted blade.

She picked it up, brushed it on her pants, and, after rubbing at it for a second with a finger, saw the silver under the tarnish.

“What the...” she began as she dropped the silver onto the old leather... that looked like it once was some kinda vest... and looked around more carefully.

Part of a skull, a leg bone, maybe a collar bone, was lying close to the vest. A little way from that, another vest just like it peeked through the grass. A boney hand over there with what looked to be...

“A sword?” she asked herself, still in a whisper. With a glance at still another hand lying next to still another vest, she added, “A... a pistol?”

Not a modern one either. This one looked like one of those pirate pistols... a flintlock, but not like any she’d studied. This was so out of place as to make her stop and think.

“What the fuck happened here,” she whispered, “and when?!”

She started to pull her little notebook out but stopped. It would do no good to start making notes here, when the story should begin in the temple chamber.

“I’ll get to you guys in a bit.” she whispered again.

She glanced around and listened for a moment. Still only chirping birds. No Taliban.

So, who blew the gates open, and why hadn’t the monks fixed ‘em up? If these monks *were* from the third century, where’d the flintlocks come from? And those swords are iron! They didn’t have iron during that time... did they?

“One step at a time, Pat.” she whispered. “One step at a time.”

She walked slowly up the ramp now, looking to both sides and the other vests she could see. Some had a knife or two still in the sheathes, but others had none.

Did these guys come here years after the monks died? Was there some kinda knowledge that left that passage alone, still blocked, when these guys moved in? Maybe the fear of ghosts, spirits, or demons?

“Patience, Pat.” she warned herself. “Looks like you have *two* digs to investigate, and many questions that need answers. Take it slow.”

She walked up to the double doors, the one on the left hanging on by the bottom hinge. The top one was rusted through and stood precariously half open. The one on the right was wide open.

Again, she wondered why the monks had just left this place a mess and answered her own question. They probably blocked up the passage she came out of many... hundreds of years before these guys came here. They probably found a tunnel that led to a blocked off corridor, figured it was the gate to... Hell? Then, they just carved out a palace or something above it.

Pat knew she would find the blocks sitting to the side down below somewhere. She had to have opened that “demon portal” to get here, right?

It was really dark inside. She set the pack down, opened it, and, noting that everything... including her now rolled up t-shirt and sports bra she’d washed downstairs, as well as the Zip-Lok of poison raisons... was still there, pulled out the headlamp and flashlight.

Once she had the headlamp on, she touched the switch. With it lighting the way, she lifted the pack to her shoulders, took the flashlight in her left hand, and drew the pistol.

There was no sense in walking into the unknown unarmed. If there were wild dogs, hyenas, or... *shudder*... snakes, she had a deterrent.

She was pretty good at reloading the big revolver on the fly, but still wished she had Neal's 1911... and a bunch of magazines for it!

She took a deep breath and stepped inside.

She panned the flashlight right to left and back again quickly. When she didn't see any... *boogers*, she holstered the big revolver, and brought the flashlight back slowly to look about the very large... Main Hall.

That's what it was. The Main Hall for this fortress... thing, complete with highbacked pews, a throne of thick stone, and tapestries hanging from bars above it all.

The pews were askew, and two had been tipped over. The tapestries were faded, and there were tears in them as well. One was hanging by the smallest piece of rotting material.

Even then, Pat could see the figures faintly in the weave, the artistry coming through the faded material. Farmers, herders, families working fields. Knights, in full armor, battling, what looked like from here, barbarians... or something akin to it.

Pat half expected to see a portrayal of St. George plunging a spear through a dragon... but there was none.

The light from the flashlight caught the railing to the atrium, and, as she moved it along the left side, she saw the doors up there, four of them, were open. She followed the rail to the left, located the stairway carved into the stone right next to this wall going up, and moved the flashlight to the right.

Again, she followed the railing until it wrapped around down there on the far side to end at the wide stairs going up behind the throne. At the top of those stairs were the open double doors with the ornate carving over the arch.

“The king’s digs.” Pat muttered.

She panned the flashlight along the atrium to the right wall, found the four doors up there all open as well. She brought the light to the left and the first floor, found three more doors ajar, and the big arched opening at the far end to the next... chamber? It matched the one on the right as she panned that way.

She brought the light to the right wall and...

There was only one door there, and it had been burst into the room beyond. Her flashlight caught the vest, and skeleton, just this side of that door, and, as she pulled the light toward her, there were three more. One between her and the skeleton close to the door, and two just to the right of her. It looked like they were protecting... this particular door.

Considering the singularity of the door in a palace... castle... citadel... thing, this must lead to the catacombs. And, if so, to the passage she stumbled out of when her head was all messed up.

She walked to the side of the two, shined the light down on them and tilted her head to the side. The one closest to her had one of those daggers in his vest sheath, and one of those weird flintlocks in a boney

hand. The other one had no daggers, a sword in his right hand, and a flintlock on the floor close to the bones of his other.

She started to move on to the next skeleton but saw the pouch on skeleton number two had spilled some small... she didn't know what. Patricia had learned her lesson about reaching in to touch, so she left those alone.

The skeleton between her and the door... and the last skeleton... also had the pouch open and the little... beans... or whatever, littering the dust covered floor.

Not beans, she decided as she leaned down to move one with the end of her pencil. Or poison berries.

Bullets?

She looked closer, thought she saw the tip of lead at the open end of the rough, blacked, tarnished metal surrounding it.

"Jacketed bullet?" she whispered. "Here with all the swords, armor and shit? Weird!"

She carefully picked one up, brought it under the headlamp, and examined it closely. Copper didn't tarnish like this. It corrodes. She pulled the small penknife... the one she used to sharpen her pencils... opened it and scraped the metal.

"What's with these guys and silver?" she asked herself softly. Then, as she again turned the flashlight to the room and down into the darkness of the shattered door, she added in a whisper, "Werewolves?"

She chuckled nervously, stuck the silver covered bullet into her pocket with the penknife, lifted the flashlight from under her arm, and moved slower toward the broken-in door.

The skeleton just in front of that door had a section of his skull removed. She leaned down and shined the light inside the skull and...

A distorted ball of obviously lead rested inside the skull. She didn't know if they killed him and then shot him there to be sure, but the question came to her mind. Why were the attackers using lead, while these guys were using variations of silver laced weapons?

"Curiouser and curiouser." she reiterated.

From what she could see, whoever attacked this place either took their bodies with them, or the defenders were lousy shots. The latter sounded questionable, so she settled on the former.

But why leave these guys just lying here, and walk away after winning the war? Did they somehow collapse the mountain outside to keep people away from here? Why? There had to be... loot, or *something* valuable for them to have gone through this much trouble.

There were no other skeletons in this large room. Maybe there were some in the other chambers, but she doubted it. This was their last stand while protecting...

What?

This door. For some reason, this door was important.

It was important to her too! It was the obvious direction she had taken out of the big temple. But... where were her boot tracks?

A slight breeze came through the door, moved a bit of the dust around, and she sighed. Maybe there was a windstorm after she hid in the gap out there. Maybe the dust covered her tracks and this whole thing was making her paranoid!

“Paranoid is good,” she whispered, “considering the situation.”

She skirted the skeleton, shined the flashlight into the darkness beyond the busted door, and saw the stonework inside. It wasn’t the neat squared-off stones of the temple, but maybe these guys replaced them after taking up residence.

But that didn’t make any sense either. Why replace something that is so... perfect? It makes better sense that they probably began digging this, found a chamber down below, and saw the blocked-up passage as some kinda evil doorway to Hell. Pat decided that conjecture was worthless when all she had to do was follow this passage down and get the answers for herself.

It was intriguing though. Here was a medieval castle... of sorts... stuck in the middle of Afghanistan, and nobody found it before? Surely it would show up on Google if somebody just looked. She’d spent a lot of time doing just that when she was setting up this exploration, and she didn’t see this.

“Enough guessing, Pat.” she whispered to herself. “We’ll figure this out after we find our way back into the temple and Danny. Just leave it alone for now.”



Whisked from being buried alive in Afghanistan to a strange ruin called Atrial, Patricia Langstrom, young archeologist, was given a choice. Stay, find the reason for the destruction, or return to her world with no memory of this one.

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