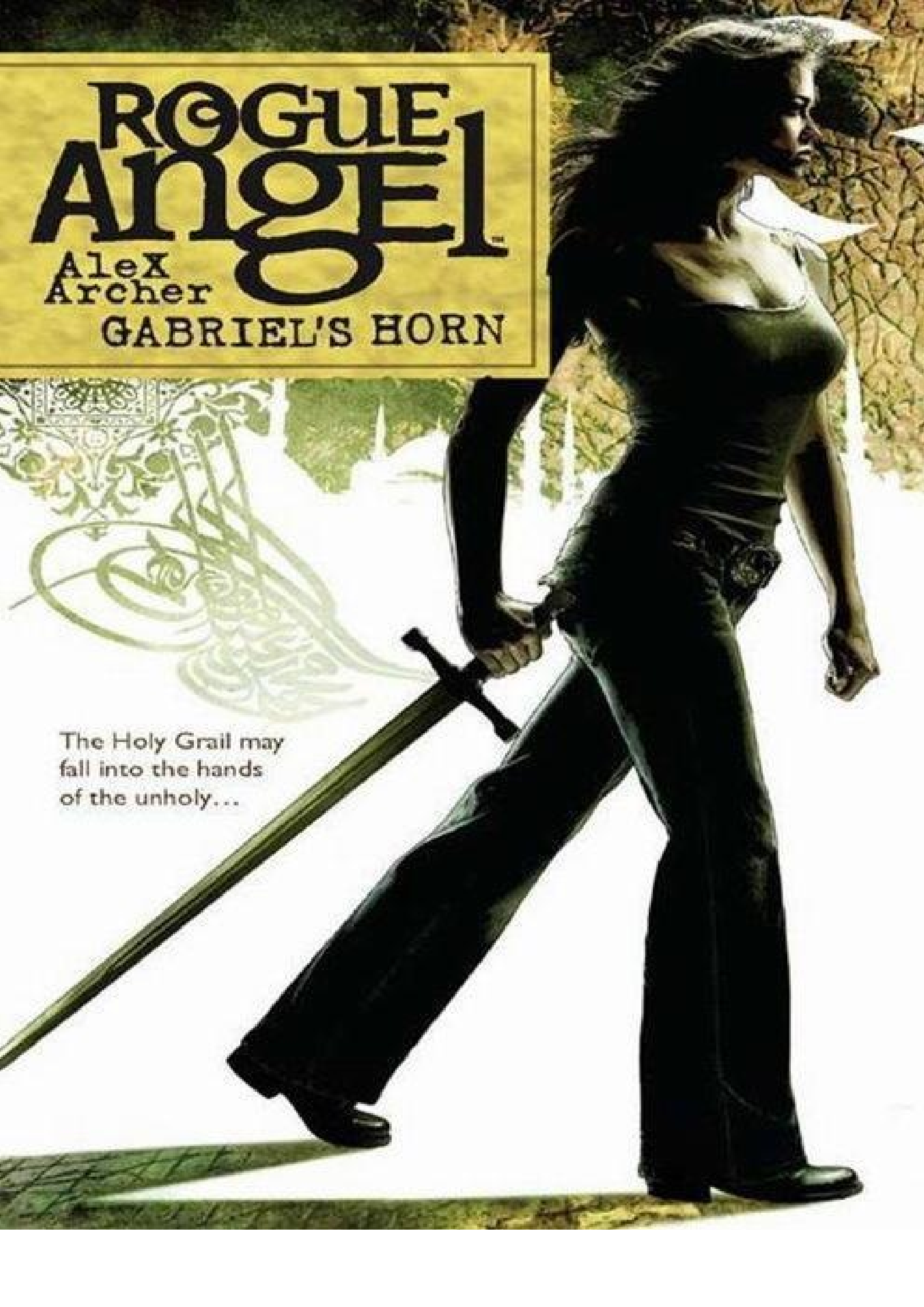


ROGUE Angel

Alex
Archer

GABRIEL'S HORN

The Holy Grail may
fall into the hands
of the unholy...



Gabriel's
Horn

Rogue Angel™

Book XIII

Alex Archer

The Legend

The English commander took Joan's sword and raised it high.

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

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

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

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

Synopsis

The stranger could be insane. Or he just might be our salvation.

Archaeologist Annja Creed is more than curious when a decrepit, ancient-looking man visits her, claiming the end of the world is near. The stranger spins wild tales and speaks as if he actually knew King Arthur. But, strangest of all, he insists that Annja is the only one who can stop the horrible event that is about to happen.

When Annja's mentor and friend Roux goes missing, she quickly realizes there may be something to the stranger's stories. Making her way through the dark and violent underbelly of Istanbul, Annja must find her missing friend and the Holy Grail before the relic gets into the wrong hands. She may not fully believe the fate of the world is on the line, but she doesn't really want to die finding out.

Special thanks

and acknowledgment

to Mel Odom for his

contribution to this work.

Excerpt

The sensation of being watched was uncomfortable

Annja had experienced such things before. Women generally did. Usually it was better to just ignore things like that, but Annja was aware that she no longer lived in a *usually* world.

A figure stood at the window, and he was staring at her. Gaunt and dressed in rags, the old man looked more like a scarecrow than a human being. A ragged beard clung to his pointed chin. His hair had flaps that covered his ears and gave his face a pinched look. His eyes were beady and sharp, mirrored in pits of wrinkles and prominent bone.

He lifted a hand covered in a glove with the fingers cut off. His dirty forefinger pointed directly at Annja, and even from across the room, she read his lips.

“Annja Creed.”

A chill ghosted through her. How did the man know her name?

“Annja Creed,” the old man said. “The world is going to end. Soon.”

Titles in this series:

Destiny

Solomon's Jar

The Spider Stone

The Chosen

Forbidden City

The Lost Scrolls

God of Thunder

Secret of the Slaves

Warrior Spirit

Serpent's Kiss

Provenance

The Soul Stealer

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[1](#)

Prague, Czech Republic

“He’s going to catch fire when the motorcycle hits the back of the overturned car?” Annja Creed asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. But the real trick is *when* he catches fire.” Barney Yellowtail calmly surveyed the wrecked cars in the middle of the narrow street between a line of four-story buildings that had seen far better days.

“When?” Annja asked, still trying to grasp the whole idea.

“When is important,” Barney continued. He was in his late forties, twenty years older than Annja and had been a stuntman for almost thirty years. “If Roy catches on fire too late, we’ve hosed the gag.”

Gags, Annja had learned, were what stunt people called the death-defying feats they did almost on a daily basis.

“And if you hose the gag,” Annja said, “you have to do it over and risk Roy’s life again.”

Barney grinned. He claimed to be full-blood Choctaw Indian from Oklahoma and looked it. His face was dark and seamed, creased by a couple of scars under his left eye and under his right jawline. He wore rimless glasses that darkened in the bright sunlight, and a straw cowboy hat. His jeans and chambray work shirt were carefully pressed. His boots were hand-tooled brown-and-white leather that Annja thought were to die for.

Annja was five feet ten inches tall with chestnut hair and amber-green eyes. She had an athletic build with smooth, rounded muscle. She wore khaki pants, hiking boots, a lightweight white cotton tank under a robin’s-egg-blue blouse, wraparound blue sunglasses and an Australian Colly hat that she’d developed a fondness for to block the sun.

“That’s not the worst part,” Barney assured her.

“That’s not the worst part?” Annja echoed.

“Naw,” Barney replied, smiling wide enough to show a row of perfect teeth. “The worst part is that the director will be mad.”

“Oh.”

Barney looked at her as if sensing that she wasn’t completely convinced. “Mad directors mean slow checks. They also mean slow work. If you can’t hit your marks on a gag, especially on a film that Spielberg’s underwriting, your phone isn’t going to ring very often.”

Annja wondered if you had to be certifiable to be a stuntman.

“C’mon, Annja,” Barney said. “I’ve read about you in the magazines, seen you on Letterman and kept up with what you’re doing on *Chasing History’s Monsters*. You know life isn’t worth living without a little risk.”

Annja knew her life hadn’t exactly been risk free. Actually, especially lately, it seemed to go the other way. As a working archaeologist, she’d traveled to a number of dangerous places, and those places were starting to multiply dramatically as she became more recognized.

She thought about her job at *Chasing History's Monsters*. Most days she wasn't sure if it was a blessing or a curse. The syndicated show had high enough ratings that the producers could send Annja to a number of places that she couldn't have afforded on her own.

The drawback was that the stories she was asked to cover—historical madmen, psychopaths, serial killers and even legendary monsters—were usually less than stellar. Fans of the show couldn't get enough of her, but some of the people in her field of archaeology had grown somewhat leery.

None of that, though, had come without risk.

“Okay,” Annja admitted. “I’ll give you that. But I’ve never set myself on fire.”

“Roy’s not going to set himself on fire,” Barney said. “I’m going to do that for him.”

“Oh.”

“It’s just that timing is critical.” Barney stepped to one side as his cell phone rang. “Excuse me.”

Annja nodded and surveyed the street. The film crew had barricaded three city blocks in Prague’s Old Town. A few streets over, the Vltava River coursed slowly by and carried the river traffic to various destinations.

Prague was a new experience for Annja, and she was thoroughly enjoying it. Getting the job on the movie had been as unexpected as it was welcome. She’d done a bit of work with props before, but never on a motion picture of this magnitude.

Kill Me Deadly was a new spy romp that was part James Bond and part Jason Bourne. The hero even carried the same J.B. initials—Jet Bard.

Annja hadn’t quite understood the plot because a lot of the details were still under wraps. She was worried about the impression some of them were still being worked out, which was causing extra stress on the set.

Three cars occupied the middle of the street. Two of them were overturned. All of them were black, and they’d been burned from where they’d been. The stuntman was supposed to hit the upright car, catch on fire and turn into a human comet streaking across the sky.

When Annja had heard about the stunt and had received an invitation from Barney to attend, she’d thought about gracefully declining. Then she’d found she couldn’t stay away.

Now her stomach knotted in anticipation. She’d gotten to know the young daredevil who was about to become a human fireball. He was a nice guy and she didn’t like the idea that something bad might happen to him.

“Okay,” Barney said as he stepped back to rejoin her. His gaze remained on the street while he adjusted his headset. “I’m going to need you to stay quiet for a moment, Annja.”

“Sure.” Annja gazed down the street anxiously.

Camera operators lined the street from various points of view. All of them remained out of each other’s

other's line of sight. The crews had worked on the setup for hours. Before that, they'd measured and mapped the distances on a model of the street and the cars.

According to the computer programs Barney and the other stunt people had run, everything would go fine. To Annja, it was a lot like exploring a dig site she'd read about. Even though she knew the background and the general layout, there were far too many surprises involved to guarantee everything was safe. Some of the early Egyptian-tomb explorers had quickly discovered that.

"On your go," Barney said softly. He held up an electronic control box in both hands. "I'm with you." He flicked a switch.

Immediately a half-dozen fires flamed to life within the pile of wrecked cars. They burned cheerily and black smoke twisted on the breeze.

"We've got fire in the hole, Roy," Barney declared.

The throb of the motorcycle's engine rumbled into Annja's ears. She watched with a mixture of dread and anticipation. Roy Fein was one of the top stuntmen in the game. Barney had said that number of times over the past few days. She didn't know if he'd been trying to reassure her or himself.

"Steady," Barney said. "Okay, you're on track. Now increase your speed to seventy-eight miles per hour."

The exact speed had been a big concern, Annja knew. Too much and the impact angle would be wrong and the motorcycle might flip end over end. Too little and Roy would fall short of the air bag that waited at the other end of the jump.

The motorcycle roared into view. Roy Fein, dressed in dark blue racing leathers and a matching helmet, had raced around the corner. A car followed only inches behind him.

"You're on," Barney said. "Hit the Volkswagen and I'm going to light you up."

At that moment, the pursuit car slowed and slewed sideways. Actors inside the vehicle leaned out the windows and fired weapons.

"I got you, kid. I got you." Barney's voice was soft and reassuring. "Get that fire-suppression unit ready."

The motorcycle rider popped a slight wheelie just before he hit the Volkswagen. Effortlessly, the motorcycle climbed the specially altered vehicle.

"Now," Barney said. His finger flipped one of the switches on the electronics box.

Immediately, the motorcycle and rider were enveloped in flames. But something was wrong. Instead of arcing gracefully across the distance, the motorcycle went awry.

"Kick loose, kid!" Barney yelled. "Lose the bike!" He dropped the electronics box and ran toward the street.

Roy pushed free of the motorcycle and spread-eagled in the air like Superman. But he wasn't flying—he was falling. Flames twisted and whipped around his body. He threw his arms out and tried to adjust his fall as gravity took over and brought him back toward the pavement.

Annja ran after Barney, though she didn't know what she was going to do. There was no way she could help Roy. But she couldn't just stand there, either.

The motorcycle spun crazily, nowhere near the trajectory it was supposed to maintain to get near the air bag designed to break Roy's fall. Then it blew up.

The force slammed Annja to the ground. She tucked into a roll and came to her feet instinctively. Slightly disoriented, she glanced up to see where the flaming pieces of the motorcycle were coming down. She saw Barney was on his side. His face was twisted in agony as he reached toward a blood gash soaking his shirt.

Annja went toward him. She yelled for help, but couldn't hear her own voice. She tried again. Her ears felt numb, then she realized she was deaf.

She dropped beside Barney and surveyed the wound. An irregular furrow ran along his ribs. She tried to tell him that he was going to be all right but knew that he couldn't hear her, either. She yanked his shirt from his pants and rolled the tails up to his wound, then leaned on the folds to put pressure on the wound in his side.

One of the other stunt coordinators joined Annja and dropped to his knees. His mouth was moving. She knew he was shouting something. He was young, tall and gangly, and he was in shock.

Annja grabbed one of his hands and directed him to take hold of the makeshift pressure bandage she'd created. For a moment he froze. With authority, Annja caught his face in her palms. She met his eyes with hers and struggled to remember his name.

"Tony," she said. "It's Tony, right?" She couldn't hear herself.

"I can't hear you," he said.

Annja read his lips. "It's okay," she told him. "Your hearing will come back." She hoped that was true.

Sirens, muted and faraway sounding, reached her and gave her hope that her hearing hadn't been permanently destroyed.

Tony nodded, but he didn't look any less scared.

"He's hurt," Annja told Tony. "Hold the pressure on the wound. Like this." She guided his hands.

"Okay," he said. "I got it."

"I'm going to look for a first-aid kit," Annja shouted.

Tony nodded and held on to the rolled-up shirt.

Annja got up. Her legs were shaky. She felt her phone vibrate in her pants pocket. Still on the move, she took the phone out and glanced at the number. She'd been expecting a call from Garin Braden, but the call was from New York. It was from Doug Morrell, her producer on *Chasing History's Monsters*.

She switched the phone off and returned it to her pocket. With her hearing compromised, the last thing she needed was a phone call.

Burning debris from the motorcycle littered the immediate vicinity. Annja looked for Roy Fein's body, knowing that he might not have survived the fall and the flames. Fire-suppression teams worked the air bag's surface. White flame-retardant foam coated the bag and made it slippery.

Some of Annja's tension drained away when she realized Roy had made it to the air bag. Then she saw him moving. The distinctive motorcycle leathers bore scorch marks and charring, but he was standing on his own two feet.

All along the street, the set teams hustled to the site. Even with all the wreckage they'd seen and helped produce for the movies, the shooting teams weren't prepared for the damage they saw now.

Without warning, another detonation occurred and the three stunt cars erupted in flames.

The force of the explosion blew Annja from her feet and rolled her away. A wave of heat washed over her back. Stunned, she lay still for a moment and checked the sidewalk around her for shadows of falling debris.

A dark mass centered over her as if she lay under a solar eclipse. She pushed her right hand against the street and rolled to her left. She barely made out the twisted wreckage of a burning car falling toward her.

2

The clangor of the mass of flaming metal striking the street jarred Annja and filled her head with noise. She lay still and stared at the debris that had barely missed her.

In that same moment, she spotted movement on top of one of the nearby buildings.

Three men stood atop the building. One held a box that looked similar to the one Barney had used. He pointed at Annja and spoke to his companions.

Another man drew a pistol from under his jacket and pointed it in Annja's direction. She rolled to her feet and ran toward the building because it offered quick cover.

The third man slapped the second man's arm down and the bullet fired into the rooftop. The sharp crack of the report barely registered in Annja's hearing. She lost sight of the men as she ran into the alley.

When she spotted the skeletal fire escape tracking back and forth across the side of the building, she ran for it, leaped to catch hold of the lower rung and swung herself up like a gymnast. She raced through the ladders and landings as she pushed herself to reach the top.

The panorama of the red-tiled roofs that filled the city spread in all directions. The silvery shine of the river snaked through the heart of Prague.

Forcing herself to remain calm, Annja turned slowly. Thoughts of the pistol the man had been on too willing to use were foremost in her mind. She'd only been in Prague for a few days. She didn't know anyone there who wanted to kill her.

The keening wail of the sirens drew closer.

From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the three men running across the next building. Annja launched herself in pursuit. She drove her legs hard and reached the building's edge in a dozen strides. By that time she was up to speed.

A narrow gulf nearly three stories deep loomed before her. She never slackened her effort. Her left foot landed on the building's edge and she propelled herself over the intervening distance.

Almost immediately she knew she hadn't jumped high enough. She had the distance covered easily but she dropped too quickly. Desperate, she threw her arms out and slammed against the other building with enough force to knock the wind from her lungs.

Her fingers curled as she slid down, then caught the lip of the roof. She pushed her hiking boot against the stone wall and found purchase. When she climbed up, she started to run again.

The men she pursued remained a building ahead of her. Concentrating, she found her rhythm. She leaped the next alley, landed and didn't miss a stride. The distance between her and the three men was shrinking.

Ahead of her, the three men turned and looked back. The man with the pistol stopped suddenly and whirled around with the weapon before him. A green tattoo of a curved sword covered the hollow of his throat.

A quick step to the side put Annja out of range of the first bullet. The second chopped into the roof where she'd been. By that time she had taken cover behind a chimney. She felt the vibrations of bullets squarely striking it.

Were the men going to continue to flee? Or were they going to come back to finish the job? Especially since she'd cut herself off from possible help.

You really need to stop and think some of these things through before you do them, she chided herself. The problem with that was there generally wasn't much time for thinking when something like this happened.

And information—any information—was better than no information. She wanted to know who the men were and why they'd tried to kill her.

She was sure they'd been there to kill her, not anyone connected with the movie.

Squatting down, her breath still coming smoothly in spite of her exertion, Annja reached for her sword. She felt it with her hand and drew it forth from the scabbard.

The sword was a part of her life she was still struggling to understand. She set herself, arms bent the elbow, balancing the sword straight up in front of her.

Her hearing was still muffled so Annja watched for moving shadows to either side of her. It was late enough in the afternoon that the shadows would be long, but they wouldn't be bent toward her since the men were south of her position. She also paid attention to the vibrations throbbing through the rooftop.

Three more rounds slammed into the chimney. Stone chips sprayed the rooftop. After a moment Annja glanced around the chimney and saw the men fleeing. She sped after them with the sword in her hand.

After leaping to the next building, she made it to the fire escape before they could reach the ground. The man with the pistol leaned out from the second-floor landing and fired several shots.

Annja dodged back just in time for the shots to miss her. The bullets ripped along the low brick wall in front of her and tore through the air. She reversed her grip on the sword, stepped along the wall for a few paces and leaned out again.

The man stood farther down the stairs, almost to the ground.

As the man turned toward her and froze in his position, Annja whipped the sword at him. The keen blade caught the man high in the chest and knocked him over the railing. He dropped in a loose heap to the ground and writhed in pain.

He wasn't dead. She hadn't intended to kill him. Although she had killed while saving her life or the lives of others, the idea of doing that didn't sit well with her.

Annja started to climb down, but the other two men pulled out pistols. She ducked back again. Great, she thought. Everyone has a gun but me.

Bullets smacked against the building. She felt the vibrations more than she heard the harsh crack of the gunshots.

She concentrated for just a moment, felt for the sword and pulled it through the air again. On the ground, the man screamed in agony. The blade appeared in her hands blood free. Annja still didn't know how the sword did what it did, but she'd come to trust it and use it when necessary.

She shifted and moved to a new position. Then she looked over the roof's edge again. Below, the two healthy men had the third man between them in a fireman's carry. They ran toward the street. One of the men talked on a phone.

Annja started down the fire escape with the sword in her hand. She took the steps two and three at a time, boots thudding against the steps, almost spilling over the landings in her haste. At the second-floor landing she let her momentum get the best of her and vaulted over the side. She flipped and landed on her feet, her sword swept back and ready.

A dark sedan screeched to a stop near the three fleeing men. The rear door swung open. The two men carrying the third stared in awe at Annja. They passed their wounded comrade inside and climbed

in after him.

Annja ran after them, thinking that she might be able to keep pace. She willed the sword away and reached for her phone. For a moment she kept up with the retreating vehicle and strained to make out the license plate.

The rear window sank down smoothly. The wicked mouth of a submachine pistol jutted out just as Annja closed in on an outdoor café packed with diners.

Annja couldn't risk innocent bystanders. The people at the café would never see the threat in time, much less be able to take evasive action. Frustrated, she stopped, then dived for cover as the submachine gun chattered to life. Bullets passed over her head and shattered the windows of the clothing store behind her.

Glass shards rattled down all around her. She kept her hands and arms wrapped around her head to protect her face. The deadly rain had stopped, and she made sure she wasn't bleeding from anything serious. When she looked up, the dark sedan was gone.

She punched the car's license plate number into her phone's memory and hoped the police would arrive soon.

3

Annja watched the Prague police detective and tried to read his lips. The man's mouth hardly moved, and the bushy mustache further disguised what he was saying.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You're going to have to speak up." Her own words barely penetrated the thick cotton in her ears. "I can't hear very well since the explosions."

The detective, whose name was Skromach, calmly started over. He looked like a patient man. Slightly of stature, he exuded an air of competence. His salt-and-pepper hair needed the attention of a barber, but his suit was impeccable.

"You ran after the men, Miss Creed?" Skromach asked.

"Yes." Annja sat on the steps of a nearby building. An ambulance attendant treated a thin cut below her left eye and another along her jawline. Neither was bad enough to scar, but they would show for a while. She hoped Garin wasn't planning on taking her anywhere too elegant because she would look like a ragamuffin.

Skromach held his pen poised over his notepad. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"I didn't want the men who did this to get away."

The detective nodded. "You think they did this?"

Annja nodded at the burning pyre of cars the local fire department was dealing with. Water streamed from hoses. Gray steam clouds mixed with the black smoke.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” she said.

Skromach shrugged. “Perhaps it was an overzealous special-effects person.”

“No,” Annja said, feeling the need to defend Barney and his crew. “That blast was deliberately set.”

“For the movie, yes?”

“No.” Annja shook her head. The ambulance attendant, a no-nonsense woman, grabbed her chin and held her steady. “The special-effects crew is good. They wouldn’t make that kind of mistake.”

Skromach flipped back through his notes. Annja had seen him questioning movie people which she’d talked to Barney and Roy. Both of them were banged up but they were going to be fine.

“I see here that you’re not a special-effects person,” the police detective said.

“No,” Annja said, realizing her hearing was beginning to clear.

Skromach nodded. “You’re here as an archaeologist attached to the film?”

“Yes. But I’m only loosely attached. I’m taking care of the props.”

“I see. Tell me about the props.”

“They’re Egyptian. Statues of Bast and Anubis.”

“Were they pharaohs?”

“No. Gods. A god and goddess, to be exact. Bast is an ancient goddess worshiped since the Second Dynasty. About five thousand years, give or take. Anubis was the god of the underworld. Usually he’s shown having the head of a jackal.”

That seemed to catch Skromach’s interest. “These statues are valuable?”

“Only to a collector. They aren’t actually thousands of years old, but they are a few hundred.”

“A few hundred years seems like a valuable thing. I collect stamps myself, and some of those are worth an incredible amount of money after only a short time.”

“That’s generally because they’re issued with flaws. This—” Annja tried to find the words she wanted but failed “—wouldn’t be like that.”

“I see.” Skromach didn’t sound convinced.

“Someone hosed the gag,” Annja said.

Skromach blinked. “Hosed the gag?”

“Sorry. The explosions were no accident,” Annja said confidently.

“You’re no authority,” the detective replied.

Annja sighed. The conversation seemed determined to go in circles. “Check with Barney Yellowtail. He’ll tell you the same thing.”

“I expect that he would. Especially in light of the fact that he was responsible for the *gag*, as you put it.”

Don’t get angry, Annja told herself. He’s just trying to do his job.

“If these statues are not so much valuable, why, then, are you shepherding them?” he asked.

“I’m *shepherding* all of the Egyptian artifacts in this movie,” Annja replied. “Those two props are the more important ones. The director wants everything realistic.”

Skromach scratched his long nose. “You were hired for your expertise?” he asked.

“Yes.”

The detective smiled. “Perhaps also because of your own notoriety. You have a certain reputation.”

“I suppose.”

“Come, come, Miss Creed. *Chasing History’s Monsters* is very popular, they tell me. My wife is a fan.” Skromach looked utterly disarming.

Annja knew to be on her guard. It’s the quiet ones that always get you, she cautioned herself.

Skromach looked at his notes again. “Why did you chase the men?”

“Like I said, I didn’t want them to get away.”

“Such a thing is dangerous.”

“Today has been dangerous,” Annja countered.

“You could have been shot.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You said there were three of them?”

“Yes.”

“Men you had seen before?”

“I didn’t say that,” Annja told him. Finally finished with her chore, the ambulance attendant stepped away.

“Had you seen them before?” Skromach asked.

“No.”

“Would you recognize them if you saw them again?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps, when you’re able—say in a few minutes or so—you could come down to the police station and look at some photographs.”

Inwardly, Annja groaned. She wasn’t looking forward to her date with Garin and didn’t want to be stressed before she joined him.

“I’ve got plans for this evening,” Annja replied.

Skromach checked his watch. “We’re still hours from evening, Miss Creed. And I’d rather you came down voluntarily than me going to the trouble of making my invitation official.”

“Why me?”

Skromach smiled. “Because you were the only one who chased those men.”

“I gave you the license plate of the car they were in.”

“Unfortunately, that car was stolen this morning. The owner is very distressed.”

“Does the owner have any tattoos?” Annja asked.

Brows knitted, Skromach studied her. “Why do you ask?”

“One of the men had a sword tattooed on his neck.” Annja touched her own neck in the place where the man’s tattoo had been.

“Ah.” Skromach wrote in his notebook. “You didn’t mention this before.”

“I just remembered,” Annja said. “What about the car’s owner?”

Skromach thought for a moment, then flipped back through his notebook. “I see no tattoos, sword otherwise, mentioned.” He looked up at her. “Perhaps I’ll go see him. Just in case. In the meantime, I’d like to offer you a ride down to the police station.”

Skromach was very good with surprises. He waited until he had Annja seated beside him in the back of the police car before he sprung his.

“So tell me, Miss Creed,” he said. “What did you do with the sword?”

The car got under way. Annja fumbled for the seat belt to cover her reaction. Her heart beat fast and her hands suddenly felt clammy. She tried to relax. No one could find the sword. Only she could call

forth, she reminded herself. When she had the seat belt fastened, she asked, “What sword?”

“Policemen working this case canvassed the street where you chased the men,” the detective replied. “Witnesses said you threw a sword at one of the men and pierced him.”

Annja held up her hands. “No sword.”

Skromach scratched his jaw with a thumbnail. “They seemed most adamant, these witnesses. And there was a lot of blood at the scene.”

“One of the men fell.”

“The one with the sword tattoo?” Skromach touched his neck.

“I think so,” Annja said.

“I see.”

“Maybe the fall hurt the man and caused an injury.”

“The witnesses said the man had to be carried off.”

Annja waited. She wasn’t very good at lying, but lying was better than trying to explain a supernatural sword.

“If you or your men can find a sword up there, then I must have had one,” she replied. “Things get confusing very quickly.”

“They usually do.” Skromach shrugged. “We also had reports citing the number of men from two to eleven. Although how all those men fit into one car is beyond me. Eyewitnesses, as every policeman knows, are unreliable at best.” He leaned back against the seat. “Besides, even if you did have a sword, you would only be guilty of self-defense.”

“Yes.”

“If those men were the ones who hosed the gag, as I believe you said.”

“That’s right,” Annja replied. “That’s what I said.”

“Hopefully, we can find them.”

Annja hoped so, too. Because if they didn’t, she had the distinct impression the men might come looking for her again.

4

“Annja, you’ve got to listen to me. You’re in Prague. That’s almost Romania. They’ve got vampires in Romania. Therefore there are vampires in Prague.”

Seated at the small metal desk she'd been shown to in the police station, Annja stared glumly at the ~~page of photographs of known criminals operating in Prague. Actually she'd looked at so many~~ pictures of criminals now that she believed Skromach had borrowed books from other countries.

After a while they all started to look the same. There were some who were old and some who were younger, but they all had earmarks of desperation or deviance. She wondered if her best friend, Barbara McGilley, the NYPD detective, ever noticed how similar the criminals he chased looked.

She glanced at her watch. It was after five. Dinner was at eight.

Now I'm going to have to rush, she thought as she listened to Doug Morrell continue his tirade about vampires. She hadn't wanted to rush. This was a date. More than that, it was a date with Garin Braden, a man she knew she couldn't trust.

And how did you dress for something like that? It was a question that had been plaguing her for weeks. Ever since he'd told her that it was time for her to pay off on her promise to have dinner with him after he'd helped her out of a dangerous situation in India ages ago.

"I must have been brain-dead when I made that deal," she said to herself. At the time it hadn't seemed like a big deal. Now it felt as if she'd made a deal with the devil.

That was one thing she was certain of—Garin Braden didn't walk on the side of angels.

But what kind of conversation did she expect to have with someone who was seemingly immortal? It was intimidating and that was a feeling she rarely experienced.

"Doug," Annja interrupted. Her head throbbed from studying photographs and trying to deal with Skromach's suspicions about the sword.

The police detective had checked in a few times, usually to bring her something to drink and once to see if she wanted anything to eat. Despite the fact that he'd consigned her to this room and the photographs, he wasn't a bad guy.

Doug hadn't been thrown off his game. "Don't you see that this is important?"

Be patient, Annja reminded herself. She took a breath. Then she spoke slowly.

"There...are...no...vampires...in...Prague."

"There have to be."

"Doug," Annja sighed, "vampires don't exist."

"They hide," Doug said. "No one's as good at hiding as a vampire."

"Really?" Annja leaned back in the straight-backed chair and tried to get comfortable. She couldn't

"I'm telling you there's a story about vampires in Prague," Doug whined.

“I’d rather do the one on King Wenceslas that I suggested.”

Paper turned at Doug’s end of the connection. “This is that sleeping-king thing, right?”

Annja felt encouraged that Doug had read her proposal. “The king in the mountain. Yes.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Doug said. “Sleeping king. King of the mountain. Same diff. Supposed to be called forth from the earth in times of great danger to the world. Did I leave anything out?”

“The legend of King Wenceslas coming back to fight evil is an important part of why I want to do the story. It’s been woven into the King Arthur myth.”

“He comes back from the dead?” Doug sounded excited.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

Annja took a breath. “I did. I sent research notes.”

“You know I don’t look at that stuff. This is television. All you need is a good beat line to make anything fly. I like the idea of him coming back from the dead,” Doug said. “Kind of spooky actually.”

Annja looked around the small office and spotted a picture of Skromach with a woman about his age and three kids, two girls and a boy.

“Didn’t they write a song about this guy?” Doug asked. “I seem to recall you saying something about a song.”

“A Christmas carol.” Annja focused. The story about King Wenceslas would be a good one.

“Yeah. ‘Good King Wenceslas,’ right?”

“Yes.” Annja was even further amazed when Doug tried to remember the chorus.

He kept singing “Good King Wenceslas” until she couldn’t take it anymore.

“Stop. That’s not how it goes.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.” Annja looked at the mug shots. Those were preferable to dealing with Doug when he went obsessive-compulsive with her.

“Guy was supposed to be Santa Claus, wasn’t he?” Doug asked.

“Not exactly. That’s a connection a lot of people make.”

“I have to admit, I like it.”

Annja felt hopeful. “You do?”

“Yeah. So this King Wenceslas comes back from the dead? Correct me if I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong,” Annja said immediately. She had the worst feeling that she knew exactly when Doug was headed. “He’s not supposed to be dead. Just sleeping.”

“Hibernating,” Doug said. “Kind of like a vampire.”

“No.”

“Comes back from the dead. Wants to wreak havoc on whatever villain is sucking the life out of the world. Kind of sounds vampirish to me.”

“No,” Annja repeated.

“I like it,” Doug said. “I want this story.”

“King Wenceslas wasn’t a vampire.”

“Maybe you just haven’t dug deeply enough. Maybe his whole vampire nature is there waiting for you to discover it.”

“It’s not.”

“I mean, can you imagine this?” Doug asked.

“No,” Annja said. “I can’t. Doug, Wenceslas was *not* a vampire.”

“He could be.”

“He is a saint.”

“Cool,” Doug exclaimed. “A vampire that’s been sainted. You know what’ll really sell this piece though?”

Annja was afraid to ask.

“Picture this,” Doug went on. “We show Wenceslas as a warrior knight. A big sword or ax. Horned helmet like the Vikings wore.”

“The Vikings didn’t wear horned helmets,” Annja said. “That’s just a perception created by Hollywood. It’s wrong.” But she knew Doug wasn’t listening. He was lost in his own world.

“So we see this big knight with this gnarly weapon.” Excitement thrummed in Doug’s voice. “Big burly guy. Muscles out to here. And let’s make the armor red. With a hood. So the Santa Claus connection comes through.”

Annja didn’t even try to interrupt. She’d been through sessions like this with Doug before. It was

already too late.

“A red hood,” Doug said. “Get it? Then the camera pans in and Wenceslas grins at us. Only instead of regular teeth...he’s got *fangs!*”

Annja hung up. There were times when talking to Doug, though she counted him as a friend, was exhausting. She could always claim a dead battery later. She laid the phone beside her notebook computer.

While she was looking at the mug shots, she was also searching the archaeological sites for information about the green-scimitar tattoo. She felt certain there was something significant about the design.

So far there weren’t any responses on the boards.

* * * *

The phone rang a few minutes later. At first Annja was just going to let it go to voice mail. Then she noticed that the number was local to Prague. She scooped up the phone and answered.

“You’re not at your hotel,” a strong male voice accused.

The voice belonged to Garin Braden. Just like that, all the trepidation Annja had about the upcoming date slammed into her.

She took a deep breath in through her nose and let it out her mouth. This is a mistake, she told herself.

“I’m not,” she said in a calm voice. Still, she felt her pulse beating faster than normal. She didn’t like it. Garin was a dangerous man. If she’d had her preference, she’d have kept him as an enemy the way he’d been when they’d first met. He’d tried to kill her then.

“I thought this would be something special.” Garin didn’t sound disappointed; he sounded irritated. “I’ve gone to considerable lengths to make tonight happen.”

Unable to sit in the chair any longer, Annja got up and paced the room. She rubbed the back of her neck and tried to relax. Her shoulders felt knotted and sore.

“Things didn’t go exactly as planned at the movie set today,” Annja said.

“You’re only there as an adviser,” Garin said in a pleasant baritone. At least, if he didn’t sound as if he was ready to chew nails his voice would be pleasant, Annja thought.

“Leave the movie set and go to your hotel. I’ve got reservations,” Garin said.

Was that a command? It definitely sounded like a command. And Annja didn’t intend to be commanded. She had reservations herself, and they weren’t at a restaurant.

“This isn’t working out,” Annja said.

“Prague was your idea,” Garin countered, as if the location was the problem. “I would have preferred meeting in the Greek islands.”

Annja knew that. Garin had even offered to send his private jet—one of his private jets—to pick her up from Brooklyn. But she’d refused. If she had to meet Garin for dinner, she wanted to do it under her own power.

Doing that meant she could also leave whenever she wanted. You could really run out of places to go on an island if you wanted to get away from someone.

“If you’re trying to weasel out of our agreement,” Garin said, “then that’s fine. I’ve got other things to do.”

The man’s arrogance was monumental. In that instant Annja saw that she could break the date if she chose. She also realized that Garin sounded as if he had misgivings, as well.

That possibility irritated her. She knew she was good company, bright, articulate and attractive. She’d been told that by enough men to accept there must be some truth to it. So where was Garin getting off telling her he had other things to do?

“I’m at the police station,” Annja said.

Garin growled a curse. “What did you do now?”

“I,” Annja said, taking affront at once, “didn’t do anything. Some men attacked the movie set today. They planted explosives that nearly killed several people and sent five stunt crewmen and women to the hospital. Maybe you heard about that.”

“No.”

“It was in the news.” In fact, now that she thought about it, Annja wondered if she should have been upset that Garin hadn’t called immediately to check on her.

“I wasn’t watching the news.”

Annja wondered what Garin had been doing.

“Were you injured?” Garin asked.

“No. Otherwise I’d be at the hospital.”

“What are you doing at the police station?”

“Looking at photographs of potential bombers.”

“Ah. You’re giving a statement?”

“One of the local detectives *invited* me to come down and identify the men who planted the explosives.” Annja stopped pacing and placed a hip on the edge of the table. “He hasn’t been too amenable about letting me go. Of course, I haven’t told him that I was meeting you for dinner. I’m quite positive,” she said as sarcastically as possible, “that if I mentioned that he’d let me go immediately.”

“Don’t be crass.” Garin didn’t sound angry now, only grumpy.

“I tend to get that way when someone calls me and starts dumping blame on me.”

“You have a phone,” Garin argued. “You could have called me.”

“Why? Dinner’s still hours away. I can make it easily.”

“I want you attired properly for the night,” Garin said.

“I didn’t know there was a dress code.” Annja started to get angry all over again.

“This isn’t an evening at McDonald’s. I don’t know how your other men treat you—”

“Kindly,” Annja replied. “And with due consideration for the fact that I have a career and obligations. They even acknowledge that I know how to properly dress myself.”

“Trust me. I’ve moved more on my schedule than you did to make tonight happen.”

Annja was torn between being insulted and flattered. She also felt a little competitive. Being around Garin brought that out in her. She disliked the feeling, but she also knew it was impossible to circumvent given the company.

She also knew that what Garin said was probably true. He had several international business interests under several dummy corporations and holding companies. Managing an empire like his couldn’t be easy. Especially if much of it was criminal, as she suspected it was. And Garin wasn’t exactly the sort to have someone oversee it for him.

“You’d be better served if you just told the police that you didn’t see the men who did this thing,” Garin said.

“They knew I chased them.”

“Well, that was certainly foolish.”

“I didn’t want them to get away with what they did.”

“So now you’re going to identify them for the police and be a witness at some time-consuming trial.” Garin’s distaste for such a prospect was clear.

“I don’t want them to get away with this,” Annja repeated.

“Then find them and kill them yourself. It’s much simpler and not as dangerous as you might think if done properly.”

Annja sighed. “Not exactly my choice of solutions.”

“I find it very comforting,” Garin said.

“Getting caught could be a problem.”

“Did I need to mention that you’d have to be clever about it? You needn’t claim your kills.”

Annja rubbed the back of her neck. The headache wasn’t going away. She wanted a hot bath and time to enjoy it. Stanley Younts, the writer she’d met while looking to solve a friend’s murder, had couriered a draft of his new book to her because he wanted her to fact-check the history in the text. He was paying her quite handsomely. She’d had hopes of spending some time with it that day.

“I can have an attorney there in twenty minutes,” Garin offered. “You’ll be out five minutes after that.”

“No,” Annja said.

Garin cursed again.

“I’ll handle this.” Annja stared at the thick books of photographs. “And I’ll be on time for dinner.”

“I’ll send a cab for you.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know. It’ll be there.” Garin hung up.

The quick dismissal stung Annja. She almost called him back. But she suspected she wouldn’t get past Garin’s personal assistant. Garin had an infuriating habit of becoming inaccessible.

Just get through tonight, she told herself. Then the debt’s paid.

* * * *

In the end, Skromach wasn’t happy about releasing Annja before she could identify the guilty parties, but he didn’t have a choice. He politely and patiently confirmed her hotel’s information and told her he would be in touch.

A short cab ride later, Annja paid the driver and got out in front of her hotel. She’d chosen to stay in the Old Town where the surroundings were more Gothic than industrial. She loved the older sections of European cities. All she had to do was look at the buildings and she could imagine the wagon carriages and horses clattering down the cobbled streets. History, hundreds of years of it, was ingrained in the architecture.

Her hotel boasted a collection of gargoyles that perched along the roof and looked ready to swoop

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