



Achieving redemption
could be the greatest sin...

**ROGUE
ANGEL**
Alex
Archer
PROVENANCE

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A burst of automatic rifle fire in the grand ballroom shattered the band's bright dance music like a crowbar smashing glass figurines from a shelf.

People screamed. Men in tails and white ties and women in elegant evening gowns threw themselves to the floor or clung to each other and trembled. Heads turned to stare at the half-dozen black-hooded men in loose green-and-black camouflage-pattern clothing who had burst in like wolves among pheasants.

And here I am practically naked in this ridiculous dress, Annja Creed thought, arched over backward with her hair almost brushing the elegant blue-and-gold carpet and only Garin Braden's strong right arm keeping her from falling.

SHE HAD THOUGHT the evening had started inauspiciously.

"How good of you to join me," Garin murmured when she presented herself at his table. Actually she was presented by a bowing and scraping steward who acted as if he were giving a supermodel as a gift to a maharajah. Except a maharajah would probably not have received quite such deferential treatment.

Annja felt eyes sticking to her like clammy clumps of seaweed. She felt exposed in the clinging sheath of flame-colored silk he had picked out for her. Her long chestnut hair had been swirled atop her head by the cruise ship's expert staff of hairdressers. She suspected it made her look as if she had a soft-swirl ice-cream cone for a head. Around her slender neck she wore a delicate gold chain with a emerald pendant that Garin assured her would bring out the green highlights in her amber-green eyes. She knew it was exquisitely tasteful, just too small to be gaudy. But she could practically feel the weight of the money it had cost. It felt like an anchor.

"As if I had a choice," she said snidely as she allowed herself to be seated.

Garin laughed a rich baritone laugh. He was a charismatic devil, she had to give him that. And devilishly handsome. The catch was the consistent way *devil* kept creeping into her thoughts about

him.

“There’s always a choice, my dear,” he said. “That is one thing life has taught me in no uncertain terms.”

As always Annja felt conflicted about Garin, as she smiled and accepted the menu from the headwaiter. In his immaculate tuxedo with the star-sapphire stickpin, his black hair and goatee and dancing black-diamond eyes, Garin was admired by every woman in the room. He was charming, breathtakingly well-read and witty. He was vigorous, and as CEO and majority shareholder of the monster oil company EuroPetro he was, officially, richer than God. He was what most women in his position would consider one hell of a catch.

But *hell* was the operative word. That was the catch.

First of all, Annja had sworn off having affairs with men significantly older than she was. Not that he *looked* over the limit. Annja was in her mid-twenties. Garin appeared to be in his early thirties. But his real age belied that appearance—by centuries.

And then, of course, there was the fact that, while he sometimes helped her—indeed, she was paying off one of those debts at that moment—he also had the unfortunate habit of trying, at entirely unpredictable intervals, to kill her.

Around them people chatted and drank wine from immaculate crystal and ate five-star food. The cruise ship *Ocean Venture* was the most modern and luxurious ocean liner yet built.

“I can’t believe I let you blackmail me to serve as arm candy for some business negotiation,” she said.

“*Blackmail* is an ugly word,” Garin murmured over the top of his menu. “Besides, I believe *extortion* is more correct under the circumstances.”

She glared at him through slitted eyes.

“You really must try the Pinot Noir. A splendid vintage. In any event, if you wish to keep your scruples inviolate, you can always choose to believe that you are here of your own free will. It’s true, of course.”

He held the crystal goblet up, where the light from the chandelier struck bloody highlights through the wine. “See? As I’ve told you, my dear. There’s always a choice.”

She winced.

He ordered for them. She didn’t mind. It was the role he was playing. She was secure enough in her own independence not to feel threatened—least of all by him.

She did have something he wanted. And she did keep it coyly and carefully hidden from public view. But it wasn’t what most people would think.

It was a complicated dance they danced.

The food was excellent but Annja ate mechanically. Distracted by circumstances, she scarcely noticed what she consumed. Growing up in an orphanage in New Orleans' French Quarter, she had learned not to be picky about what she ate. As she spent more time on the Crescent City streets she had learned to appreciate good food. Subsequently, as a graduate student and then archaeologist on innumerable digs, and in the last few years trotting the globe as staff talking head and resident voice of reason on *Chasing History's Monsters*, she had learned to be quite adventurous about what she ate.

She was preoccupied, on the evening of the first full day at sea in the Caribbean.

"So why *do* you have me here?" she asked.

Garin smiled. "Reasons of my own."

The reason she was there was that he had called in a favor. A big one. A save-your-life favor—not to mention the life of an innocent girl who'd depended on her.

Of course in the process of doing her that favor he had increased his wealth and influence almost exponentially. To his mind that failed to diminish the moral obligation one iota. What was worse was he knew full well it didn't in her mind, either.

At some point in the future, when she wasn't still miffed about having her arm twisted, she would have to admit to herself there were worse fates than getting a free ocean cruise with a movie-star handsome man who happened to be one of the world's richest. If she was a captive bird her cage would be very well gilded by any standards. And her captivity, to call it that, would last no more than the forty days of the cruise. But her fiercely independent nature bridled at it anyway.

"Come on," she said, spearing a piece of asparagus. "You owe me a better explanation than that."

He shrugged a broad, tuxedoed shoulder. "Perhaps you're right, Annja dear. I have no wish to torment you, after all. I am not a cruel man, you know—I worked that out of my system long ago."

She tried not to shudder, and tried harder not to envision just what he meant.

"Although I'm maintaining a low profile on this voyage," he said, "and the world at large still does not know my face—an expensive status to maintain, but well worth the investment—I have a certain image to project to those with whom I'm carrying out a certain, most delicate negotiation."

His accent was vaguely and indeterminately European. She suspected it was an affectation. He no doubt could speak English better than she could. He'd had long enough to practice.

Nonetheless it did contribute to making him devastatingly sexy. Curse him anyway, she thought. This could turn out to be a *very* long voyage.

"Aren't you concerned about doing that under the noses of the Venezuelans?" she asked. The *Ocean Venture* had just steamed past Aruba in the Netherlands Antilles, and was scheduled to make landfall at Willemstad on the island of Curaçao the next morning to allow sightseeing and, of course, a spree of shopping. Venezuela's north coast lay less than a hundred miles to the south.

"How do you know those aren't the ones I'm negotiating with? Their oil holdings might prove

interest to EuroPetro. They certainly do to the Chinese.”

She looked at him hard. “Am I just arm candy?” she asked. She shook her head in almost reflexive negation. “You could have your pick of supermodels or Hollywood stars. If you crooked one finger, Nicole Kidman would kick Keith Urban back into rehab and fly at you like somebody’s wristwatch against the inside of an MRI machine.”

He laughed with a gusto that made heads turn. He paid no mind. He did few things by halves. “You’ve a gift for unexpected expression,” he said. “Indeed, you’ve a positive gift for the unexpected. Is it not enough to know that I savor that? Because I do. Not to mention your beauty, which to my sorrow you constantly denigrate, and which possesses, to these jaded old eyes, a freshness few celebrities—especially the flavors of the week—can match.”

Annja snorted in a most unladylike way. “Flattery,” she sputtered.

He scowled and she recoiled slightly. She feared a lot of things and a lot of people—she had seen and experienced far too much not to—but she was intimidated by no one. He came close, though.

“Please, my dear,” he said, softening a degree or so, “never say such a thing again. I never flatter.” Then that grin, youthful and ageless, returned. “It implies I need to.”

“Point taken.” Finding her plate empty, she set down her fork, propped her elbows to either side, and laced her fingers in their flame-colored long gloves and rested her chin on them. “Now, give. Why is it so important to have me along?”

“Perhaps I feel the need of additional security,” he said, with a roguish twinkle in his eye. Well, even more than usual. “You make a most exemplary bodyguard, as well as a—shall we say—*disarmingly* lovely one?”

She snorted again. “I don’t want to set off that touchy Renaissance pride again,” she said—she was something of an authority on the Renaissance, it being her period of professional specialization as an archaeologist and historian. “But that seems rather hard to believe. You can afford to travel with a phalanx of top security men. And you do—I’ve spotted a few of them on the boat. Immaculate, well-dressed bald guys with wires in their ears.”

“Ship,” Garin corrected automatically. “Without meaning to denigrate your own falcon keenness of perception, don’t you think potential evil-wishers can do at least as well spotting such men? Whereas you are an extraordinarily gifted amateur, some of them are lifelong professionals at the craft.”

“Hel-lo,” she said quietly, “you’re immortal.”

He chuckled. “Being immortal doesn’t necessarily mean I can’t die,” he said. “It just means I haven’t.”

He made an easy gesture with one hand. “I am extraordinarily tough to kill, I grant. But there are certain fates that might make me wish I could die. What if I was trapped at the bottom of the sea? Or what if that I was perpetually drowning, but couldn’t quite die? That would be like hell, would it not? So you

see, I've plenty to fear. And of course, there is always my concern, now that you've claimed the sword, that my gift—the one that old rake Roux perversely prefers to consider a *curse*—immortality might evaporate.”

Annja's blood ran cold. She could never forget that Garin would—if he could—wrest the mystic sword of Joan of Arc away from her and break it to pieces again, as had the English soldiers who had captured St. Joan so many centuries before.

“Fear not, fair lady,” Garin said, eyes dancing as he finished his wine. “So long as I continue to wake up each morning feeling hale and whole—you can continue to wake up in the mornings. Shall we dance?”

“You're a bastard,” she told him as he held her chair and helped her to her feet.

“Born that way,” he acknowledged, “although I like to think I've earned the title on my own merits, over the years.”

When the band, perched on its podium to one side of the great ballroom, struck up a tango, Annja thought for sure the evening couldn't possibly get any worse.

“I don't know how to tango,” she snarled in Garin's ear.

“You'll be fine,” he said. “You're a natural athlete. And a trained martial artist. Remember your *taijiquan* balance training.”

“I don't do *taijiquan* in heels,” she said. She knew now why they called them *stiletto*s—they were like daggers stabbing her feet at every step. As much experience as she had wearing heels—very little—she walked in them with all the grace of a drunken baby duck. Whereas she danced in the high spilt heels, she thought, like a water buffalo on skates. But a *tango*—“I'll break an ankle!”

He laughed softly. “Follow my lead,” he said. “It's worked splendidly for you so far.”

She struggled to keep her irritation from showing on her face. Her gown was backless, and its bodice consisted of what she tried not to think of as bunny ears from just south of her navel upward, diminishing to bitty strings tied behind her neck. It was held in place either by some kind of surface tension, like a bubble, or through magic. And she didn't believe in magic.

She'd seen the tango sequences in *True Lies*. She secretly identified with Jamie Lee Curtis, a sort of standard-bearer for gawky women who could still be darned sexy. But once Garin started flinging her around she feared it would be mere seconds before her boobs came flying out of the dress like startled pigeons.

“*Trust* me,” Garin said with a wicked grin.

“Yeah,” she whispered furiously. “It's not like you've tried to kill me.”

“Not recently,” he said. “And most assuredly not here.”

The preliminary violin strains died away. She felt his hand burning at the small of her bare back.

as if heated in a forge.

The tango began in earnest. He leaned forward. In response she leaned back, bent over his strong grasp. She felt her breasts ride up her rib cage and thought, *This is not good.*

That was when the terrorists barged in and fired a burst into the ceiling.

“Nobody move!” a black-hooded man shouted in Spanish-accented English. “We have commandeered this vessel in the name of the People’s Revolution!”

“How tedious,” Garin murmured, his face inches from hers. “It seems we’re being hijacked.”

“I’m almost relieved,” Annja murmured. Her heartbeat, already accelerated, spiked. But she wasn’t in any danger of losing her presence of mind over a little full-auto gunfire, even though it hurt her ears in these close confines.

At least it wasn’t aimed at her.

With deliberation Garin straightened his back. He brought Annja upright as if she weighed nothing.

“You think they’re trying to kidnap you?” she asked softly.

He frowned slightly. “I think not. Trust me, I’d sense their intention.”

“How?”

He smiled. “Long experience. This is something else.”

He let go of her hand. The other stayed at the small of her back. She found it strangely reassuring. “Now let’s play along like good little lambs,” he said.

She knew how he thought. “Until...?”

His smile widened. It made her think of a lean black wolf contemplating a staked lamb. “Until it’s time not to, of course.”

More armed men crowded into the room. They carried what Annja recognized as Kalashnikov AKMs, some with folding stocks, some with fixed wooden stocks. She had learned they were general weapons for terrorists—or people who wanted to pose as terrorists. Something about the men struck

her false. Maybe they're just pirates, she thought.

She looked to Garin. He was looking elsewhere. She saw him give his head a barely visible shake and realized he was telling one of his security men to stand down. For the moment.

At least a score of men in black ski masks had bustled in to the ballroom. They broke up in several groups. One rousted the musicians off the platform. In different circumstances it might have been funny to see the men and women in their penguin suits scurry off clutching their instruments to their breasts. As the gunmen on the platform covered the crowd, other knots of two, three and four began to move among the dancers, cutting them into groups of a dozen or so like cattle-herding dogs.

One of the men on the dais grabbed a microphone from its stand. "You are now the People's prisoners of war," he declared. "If you follow instructions you will be treated properly. Do not try to be heroes. If you resist you will be considered an unlawful combatant, and will be killed."

Garin's expression hardened. "Another unfortunate legal precedent we have to thank your government for," he murmured.

"Why are they separating us?" Annja asked under her breath. "Wouldn't it be easier for them to keep control if they kept us together?"

"Dividing the hostages into groups and dispersing them throughout the ship makes it harder for counterterror teams to effect a rescue," he said.

"Oh." Annja glanced down at her feet. She really wanted to ditch the heels. She always hated it in the movies when a heroine tried to run—or do anything more demanding than a runway turn—on heels. She'd hate trying to do anything herself if the crunch came down, encumbered with what she thought of as torture devices.

But the lightweight gold pumps had straps that crisscrossed past her slim ankles halfway to her knees. She knew they looked sexy. But they also meant she had no chance of kicking off the shoes quickly. She would have to bend over—which might cause misunderstanding among their captors. And Annja made it a principle never to court misunderstanding with people toting automatic weapons.

Two men thrust themselves between Annja and Garin, jabbing at them as if their heavy Russian-made assault rifles were pitchforks. They might as well have been, for the alacrity they elicited from people shying away from their menacing black muzzles.

Annja found herself amongst a dozen—ten passengers and two stewards, the latter a man and a woman, both with painfully young faces sheened with nervous sweat. Of the group, six were elderly and four Annja's age or a little older, which seemed a representative sampling of the passengers.

The captives were being split up without regard to who was with whom. One thirtyish man with a blond crewcut tried to stay with a female partner who was being prodded from his side. A terrorist clipped him in the face with the butt of his rifle.

Annja winced. She knew the AKM was nearly nine pounds of hardwood and stamped steel, with a steel plate capping the butt. The man went down as if shot, although a moment later he was being

helped to his feet by a fellow passenger and a steward whose crisp white jacket was never going to be the same with all the blood pouring on it from the man's smashed nose.

A pair of terrorists herded Annja's group to the galleys. One guard preceded them, kicking open the double doors. She caught a glimpse of Garin in a different group going out a side entrance. Then she was in the humid gangway, all white and stainless steel, redolent of cooking food and dishwashing steam. Stewards and chefs in their puffy white hats emerged from side doors, to vanish like rabbits down holes when the terrorists barked at them and pointed their rifles.

As their captors, shouting, herded them down the gangway, figures from the cruise line brochures played through Annja's mind as she tried to encompass the tactical situation. Ocean liner always reminded Annja of skyscrapers toppled onto their sides into the ocean. The *Ocean Venture*'s vital statistics did little to belie that image. Over one thousand feet long and one hundred feet wide, more than two hundred feet from keel to funnel, grossing over 125,000 tons. With fifteen decks she accommodated two thousand passengers and over one thousand crew. She contained gyms, two swimming pools and even a water park.

It really was a horizontal, ocean-going skyscraper, plain and simple.

How many men do they have? Annja wondered. It would take a huge force of highly trained special-warfare operators to really secure something this huge with so many people aboard. She was no professional herself but she was still sure it would tax the resources of a full U.S. Navy SEAL team to do so.

No way did the terrorists—or pirates—have that many men aboard. No way did they have that kind of training and discipline. That was just practical reality, she knew.

So they would try to secure important locations, such as the bridge and engine rooms—and they would grab some hostages. They probably preferred the richest of the passengers—who happened to be attending the fancy-dress ball. She presumed they'd ordered everybody else to go to their rooms and stay there. They'd enforce the order by sending random patrols of men with guns to threaten anybody who poked their heads out.

As Annja's group proceeded, the doors that weren't opened by curious staff were yanked or kicked open by the terrorist in the lead. He seemed to be looking for something. Suddenly he dove into a room. A pair of white-clad staff erupted out like flushed pigeons and raced away down the hallway. Apparently the men had all the hostages they felt they needed.

The lead terrorist emerged again. He had long kinky black hair flowing out the bottom of his surgical mask. His eyes, visible through the holes, were dark. They showed a lot of white, like a frightened horse's. Annja didn't think that was a hopeful sign. A hyper-adrenalized state, a finger in the trigger guard, an automatic weapon with the safety off and crowded quarters was a potentially explosive combo.

"In here!" he shouted, gesturing with his rifle into what Annja could see was a storeroom lined with shelves of fat, institutional-sized cans.

Annja strode forward, wobbling only slightly. Sharp pains shot up her calves. She held her head

high and her face impassive.

From somewhere distant came the thud of a single gunshot.

GARIN BRADEN smiled and nodded encouragingly to the dowager with the blue-white hair and the gaudy string of pearls. His group had three gunmen herding nine prisoners, including a little girl perhaps nine. From their stature and quick motions Garin surmised, not surprisingly, all three were young. Two carried AKMs. The third, who seemed to be a sort of officer, carried a handgun, a Beretta or the nearly identical Brazilian Taurus. They were highly excited. Perhaps more than even the circumstances called for. That concerned him.

Something about these self-proclaimed terrorists—or People's Revolutionaries—struck him as phony.

He took no more interest in the conflicts of human ideologies for their own sake than a normal adult in the battles between the red ants and the black. As with cruelty, it had taken him what he now frankly regarded as an unseemly amount of time to outgrow an adolescent interest in that sort of thing. But outgrow it he had, now centuries past.

He took the same sort of interest in politics and its attendant shooting conflicts that a canny sailor or pilot took in the weather—with a wary regard for potentially lethal storms. Unlike airmen and seamen, though, he also sometimes kept a weather eye peeled for potential profits from those situations.

He was particularly suspicious about Spanish-accented revolutionaries cropping up right off the coast of loudly socialistic Venezuela. Indeed, for self-proclaimed revolutionaries to pull so drastic a stunt within air-strike range of Venezuela smacked of an attempt to discredit or embarrass the government—or even a false-flag attempt to justify violent U.S. retaliation.

While Garin knew of the existence of various parties who might have the means and inclination to do such a thing, he doubted that was the case, either. His gut response told him this was really about ransom. Or *extortion* might be a better term, as he was amused to recall having told Annja in what now seemed a hopelessly trivial context, not an hour previously. The hijackers would systematically rummage the ship for valuables—the obvious, such as cash, jewels and credit cards, and the far less obvious, such as high resale-value prescription drugs both from ship's stores and private staterooms. Then they would negotiate a stiff cash settlement from the cruise line to get their ship back, as well as their passengers.

Part of the settlement would entail an agreement by the shipping line not to pursue the matter through the courts, nor to cooperate in any ensuing investigation. It was not legally enforceable, nor would it ever be admitted—but it would be most scrupulously kept. It would be neither the first such deal struck nor the last. Garin knew the cruise lines were obsessed with keeping a positive public image above almost all else.

As far as he was concerned that was fine. The cruise company's craven but entirely understandable capitulation would make it difficult if not impossible to recover the cost of his own

valuables through insurance. On the other hand the sum of it, including the little bauble with which I had chosen to grace Annja's charming swanlike neck, amounted to scarcely more than pocket change.

Should the terrorists actually annoy him, they'd find out that as a true son of the Renaissance Garin had forgotten more about exacting vengeance than these modern upstarts would ever know. His reach, should he really wish to extend it, was as long as his memory.

And the fact he had forsworn cruelty for its own sake hundreds of years ago by no means implied he was averse to making examples of those who crossed him.

"Move it! Move it!" the leader of the gunmen screamed as they pushed the group of captives out the doors of the grand ballroom and into the corridor. Spittle flew out the mouth hole of his mask.

He struck at one older man with his pistol. Garin grimaced. It's not a club, you half-wit, I thought. He hated to see anything done badly, and anyway, his action was inviting accidental discharge. The man was barely in control of himself, and that was the worst thing.

The little girl, wearing a prim but visibly expensive blue silk dress, her blond hair pulled in painfully tight pigtails, suddenly broke away between the other two masked gunmen and raced back toward the doors of the grand salon screaming, "Mommy, Mommy!"

The leader of the gunman shrieked at her to stop. When she didn't he raised the handgun.

Garin frowned. "Wait," he said, and stepped in front of the masked man, holding up his hands.

The man shot him in the chest.

The men deep in the immense ship's brightly lit cargo hold paused in their work as gunfire clattered through the ship. It had a faraway sound, like hail on a neighbor's roof.

"Idiots," remarked one. Like the self-proclaimed revolutionaries above, his head was encased in a ski mask.

The resemblance ended there. The dozen men working in the hold wore casual street clothes appropriate to the Tropics. All of them were much calmer than the raging, rampaging, camouflaged hijackers—even the several who stood guard holding MP-5 submachine guns with their barrels thickened by built-in sound suppressers.

Their leader was a short man with a powder-blue shirt open to reveal a thick thatch of dark chest hair, silver-dusted and growing down toward a hard, aggressive paunch. He took a lit cigar from the mouth of his own ski mask.

"Hey," he said in a New Jersey accent. "Give 'em some credit. It's supposed to be a diversion. What's more diverting than a damn firefight?"

"Or a massacre," a third man said from behind the controls of the front-end loader. The other men laughed.

The first man, who had fair skin, seemed sour. The ponytail sticking from the mask down the back of his neck was dark blond. "It's all good fun until the chopper-loads of SEALs start falling out of the boat from the sky."

"Ship," one of the guards corrected.

"Shut up," the guy with the chest hair on display said. It came out emphatically but without heat. "That's just all the more reason to hurry up and get that bad boy loaded on the forklift." He waved the lit cigar at a large yellow-pine crate lashed to hold-downs.

"Boss," the driver said, leaning out of the little roll cage, "it's a front-end loader."

“Who asked you?” the leader said. “What is this, remedial English? Now move it, you asshole. We got us a boat to catch. Boat, not ship, Mr. Teach and Learn Network. And watch your fingers—the crate weighs a ton.”

THE PISTOL SHOT echoed in the gangway. As Garin fell passengers screamed in horror.

Slowly, Garin picked himself up off the carpeted deck. He reached to the ruffled white front of his tuxedo shirt to the protective shield over his heart. His fingertips came away bloody. He scowled thunderously.

“You stupid bastard,” he said to the gunman. “You’ve got no idea how badly that stings.”

The hijacker’s eyes almost bugged right out through the holes of his balaclava-style mask.

Garin moved. He had no extraordinary physical abilities other than his longevity. What he had was *practice*.

The gunman simply stood stunned, as if he’d taken a bat to the side of the head. He had no chance. Garin skipped forward. He batted the handgun offline with a quick swipe of his right hand. Then, closing fast, he clenched the hand to deliver a back-fist to the side of the mask-covered head with a snap of his hips and all the power of his big, well-muscled body.

The gunman’s head whipped around from the blow. A string of saliva trailed from his bearded lips. A pair of his neck vertebrae snipped one of the arteries threaded through them like scissors.

With an arterial break that close to the brain, incapacitation was instantaneous, death almost sure. The man simply fell straight down as if the tendons holding his joints together had dissolved.

Garin’s left hand had grabbed the wrist of the man’s gun hand. He caught the pistol as it slipped from lifeless fingers. Then he twisted counterclockwise and snapped his arm straight out.

The other two hijackers were still staring in slack-jawed amazement.

Garin shot one between the eyes. His head whipped back. His eyes rolled up. He sank to the deck. Though his finger was still on the trigger of his big Kalashnikov, he didn’t fire. A hit in what counterterrorists call the “ninja mask” region of the head had punched through his *medulla oblongata* and instantly switched off his nervous system.

His partner was a little quicker on the uptake. He grabbed an elderly lady around the waist and tried to shove the muzzle brake of his AKM under her ear. It was a stretch, but he was well-motivated.

“Drop the gun,” he screamed, “or I’ll blow this old bat’s head off.”

From somewhere off through the bulkheads Garin heard a rattle of automatic fire. That will be dear Annja swinging into action, he thought. *I hope.*

Garin swung his arm around until the terrorist's staring right eye, visible inside a curl of his hostage's white hair, was perched like a plum atop his foresight post. He squeezed the trigger.

The eye vanished in a red splash. The terrorist dropped out of sight behind the woman.

She turned and looked down at her captor. Then she looked back at Garin. She seemed more startled than afraid.

"That was a remarkable shot, young man," she said shakily.

"I learned from the best," Garin said. I wonder what she'd say if I told her that meant Wild Bill Hickok? he thought, amused.

Then he winced. It felt as if he'd been kicked by a mule. His body armor, worn from habit because his business dealings had a tendency to turn nasty, couldn't prevent bruising from the impact of such a close shot.

"You folks should find someplace to hide," he said. He quickly subvocalized commands to his security force, whom he had earlier ordered to stand easy and await events, via a high-tech and well-concealed phone. Events having begun, he ordered them to move quickly to neutralize the other hijackers. He had faith they would do so with discretion and brutal effectiveness. He knew how to hire skill.

ANNJA'S HEART JUMPED into her throat. Garin! she thought. The guard with the long kinky hair was starting to bring up his rifle. His body language suggested he was about to start shooting.

Who are these people? she wondered. Terrorists were vicious by definition and usually crazy, but most of them knew not to massacre their hostages except as a final dying gesture. It not only burned all their bargaining chips, it ensured the authorities, when they inevitably landed on them, would be a vengeful frame of mind. They'd shoot first—and probably not ask any questions. Ever.

Annja was already moving. Her total lack of coordination on those ridiculous spiked heels acted to her advantage. She tottered a couple of quick steps toward the gunman, then stumbled against him.

He caught her reflexively with his left arm. It left him still clutching the Kalashnikov's pistol grip with his right hand, and his finger still on the trigger. But in grabbing her he automatically dropped the weapon offline. It no longer threatened the innocent hostages.

His eyes went wide and his pupils dilated inside his mask as his left hand closed around Annja's right butt-cheek. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "It'd be a waste to shoot a hot *chica* like you."

"I think so, too," she said.

Annja snapped a right backhand into the hijacker's Adam's apple.

He fell back against the bulkhead, clutching his throat and emitting a rattling gasp. If she

succeeded in collapsing his windpipe, he'd be dead in minutes unless he got an emergency tracheotomy—unlikely under the circumstances, however the events of the next few seconds played out. If not, he was still going to be way too preoccupied with a trivial little matter like trying to breathe to shoot anybody.

As Annja turned away from him she formed her right hand in a fist and exerted her will. Obedient to it, the hilt of her sword filled her hand, summoned from the otherwhere where it rode, invisible but always available.

The other gunman had turned to gape back down the gangway at the sound of the far-off gunshot. Turning back, he goggled at Annja, struggling to swing his heavy rifle up to shoot her.

Somehow Annja managed to execute a flawless high-line lunge in her heels. She drove the sword through the man's sternum to the hilt.

He bent over as he took the blade. Or it took him. His eyes stood out of his head. He was literally dead on his feet, his heart virtually cut in two.

Annja let go of the sword. It vanished back to its private dimension. She grabbed the Kalashnikov as it fell.

Letting the man slump, she spun. Blessing the universal thug propensity to carry a weapon with the safety off at all times, she snapped the rifle up.

Still clutching his ruined throat with his left hand, the young man Annja had stunned was raising his own assault rifle to shoot her. She fired a burst from the hip. He fell backward as three metal-jacketed 7.62 mm slugs lanced through his chest and belly.

Glancing around the shocked faces of her fellow hostages, she quickly settled on the young steward with the prominent forehead as the calmest-looking of the lot. "You," she said in a voice that acknowledged no conceivable possibility that he'd do anything but what she told him. "Take the gun. Get the people in the storeroom and guard them."

He nodded and quickly knelt to recover the second Kalashnikov. Its owner was clearly dead, huddled against the base of the bulkhead. Annja wasted no pity on him—he was a victimizer of the innocent. He had gotten what he deserved.

"And watch where you're pointing that!" Annja snapped at the steward.

"Oh! Right. Sorry." Hastily he lifted the muzzle away from Annja's navel, where he was pointing the weapon because he happened to be looking at her. She smiled to take the sting from the tone she used.

"No problem. You might want to shake him down for more weapons and extra magazines."

"Sure." He seemed excited, eyes wide and bright, and dark cheeks flushed, as anybody would be. He seemed in no danger of losing it.

"What about you, young lady?" asked an older man with a salt-and-pepper beard and a substantial

belly pushing out his white vest beneath his tailcoat.

She thought like mad as she finished searching the man she had run through for other weapons, finding none, and spare magazines, coming up with two.

“You never saw me,” she said. Then she frowned. Where am I going to carry the magazines? she wondered.

“But that sword you used,” said a blond woman about her own age in a floor-length blue gown. “Where’d that come from?”

Annja looked at her and forced a conspiratorial grin. “What sword?” she asked, and winked broadly.

She settled on unfastening the dead man’s web belt. It was bloody. She grimaced but pulled it off from under him. She’d learned not to be squeamish since the sword had entered her life. Darn, she thought. And I became an archaeologist so I wouldn’t have to deal with bodies that were still juicy.

She stood up. Everyone was staring at her with a combination of fear and awe. She felt hurried relief that, in apparent violation of the laws of motion, her breasts had not escaped custody in all the commotion.

“Listen, people,” she said, “this is secret stuff, okay?”

Everybody nodded.

“I know,” the young steward said. “You’re some kind of special operator.”

She gave him a smile. “I was never here,” she said. “Okay?”

“Anything you say, ma’am,” he breathed. He seemed to be working on not hyperventilating. She reckoned she had probably tripped the switches for all his adolescent male fantasies at once.

She turned to look at the others again. They seemed mostly to have huge saucer eyes, like all cats who have been awakened to find themselves nose-to-nose with a grizzly bear.

“What you saw,” she said, “is a big bald guy in a tux take these two down.” That was a fair description of pretty much any random member of Garin’s squad of bodyguards. “You didn’t see any details because you were busy ducking like the smart people you are. You really don’t remember clearly anyway—you’re so traumatized and all. Do you understand? This is extremely important.”

They stared.

“Nod,” she said.

They nodded.

“Breathe,” she said.

They breathed.

“Great. Now—you, what’s your name?” She turned to the steward.

“Tommy.”

“Great,” she said. “You nice folks all go in here and do what Tommy tells you. And Tommy will keep watch, and take care of you, and remember his responsibility is to stay with you and not, under any circumstances, to play hero. Right, Tommy?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“And you.” She turned to the female staffer. “What’s your name?”

“Tina, ma’am,” she replied confidently.

“You help Tommy take care of these people and keep them calm and safe. Are we good?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” she said, eyes shining. “Very good.”

Annja nodded decisively. “Okay. I’m going to go deal with some more of these bad guys. And once more, you never saw me, because I was never here!”

“Oh, yes,” they chorused. “Didn’t see a thing.”

It’d be nicer, she thought as she buckled the gory web belt around her narrow waist, if this getup didn’t make me look like a direct-to-video prom queen from hell. But we do what we have to do.

Steam wisped from Annja's mug of hot chocolate as she emerged from the small but well-organized kitchen of her Brooklyn loft. She wore a dark purple sports bra and white terry shorts. Despite the air-conditioning holding the flat summer day's heat at bay, her skin was sheened with sweat from her morning workout.

Finding a spot at one end of her sofa that was clear of books and manuscripts, she plopped down. She picked up the remote from the coffee table, its glass top also loaded down with artifacts, magazines and stacks of printouts. She clicked on the television.

One of the cable news channels came up. There weren't many kinds of daytime television she could bear to watch. Actually, most of her viewing consisted of watching DVDs, either of movies or occasionally whole seasons of TV series. She hated only being able to watch part of a story, and she hated commercial interruptions, although she did find some ads entertaining.

Not like I have much time to watch, she thought.

The modest wide-screen set showed a long, gleaming white ship shot from above. Helicopters swarmed around it, including the shark shapes of gunships. Boats of various sizes surrounded the huge luxury vessel.

Annja grimaced. She didn't have to read the white letters at the bottom of the screen. It was the *Ocean Venture*, where criminal investigators and counterterrorism experts from the Netherlands, the U.K. and the U.S. were still trying to sort out what had happened.

She muted the sound. It wasn't as if they were going to tell her anything she didn't already know. She just felt sorry for the passengers and crew, still stuck on board while authorities grilled them.

"WE'RE CLEAR TO GO," Garin had said, when he walked into her stateroom without knocking.

“What?” she replied, shocked.

He smiled that devil’s smile of his. “I pulled some strings,” he said. “Amazing what’s available to be pulled when one is CEO of one of the world’s largest oil companies. I could get used to it.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You talked our way out of interrogation? What, did you bribe the SEALs? The Royal Navy? All of the Netherlands?”

“None of the above,” he said. “It’s always easier and cheaper to bribe the media. Listen and learn, young Annja.”

The terrorists had never known what hit them. By the time the first SEALs swarmed over the stern from their fast STAB craft in the wee hours of the morning—they’d beat the Royal Dutch commandos by half an hour—the hijackers were all being guarded by Garin’s highly professional security team in the cruise liner’s ballroom. Garin had communicated with the rescuers in advance using the ship’s radiotelephone. Captain Nygard, who had started the rescue rolling by surreptitiously pressing a concealed panic-transmission button when the masked men burst onto the bridge, was very cooperative. One of Garin’s bodyguards, himself a former Royal Marine commando, had dropped the hijacker aiming at the captain’s austere silver-haired head with a head shot of his own. Garin’s calm had prevented any unpleasant incidents. Under normal conditions a counterterror team hitting a hostage situation would automatically kill anyone they saw holding a weapon.

Annja had captured several hijackers. She hadn’t had to kill any more. Having a beautiful woman wearing a bloody and not very substantial evening gown burst in and aim an assault rifle at them got their attention. Especially since the rattle of gunfire hinted how very far wrong things had gone for them.

The presence of almost a score of far more professional armed thugs in the midst of the intended victims had taken the hijackers utterly by surprise. They’d obviously expected the cruise liner to be a soft, undefended target. Civilian vessels usually were.

The total butcher’s bill had been nine hijackers killed, three wounded. Almost twenty more had been taken prisoner. One of Garin’s men had been wounded slightly when a mettlesome but overwrought female passenger, believing him to be a hijacker despite his evening dress and lack of ski mask, nailed him above the right eye with the spike heel of her shoe. I knew those things were dangerous, Annja thought when she heard that.

Once the ship was secured, and the antiterror units converging on the liner had been alerted to the fact, Annja and Garin had returned to their cabins to change out of their incriminatingly bloody clothes. En route Annja wiped down her AKM and magazines for fingerprints and hid them in a broom closet. She showered and then had a fit of the shakes.

A pair of SEALs paid a visit to her cabin half an hour before Garin showed up. She was sitting in a chair wearing jeans and a short-sleeved blouse and the most innocent expression she could muster. They had been briskly professional as they searched her cabin for lurking terrorists, told her to stand up and await further instructions, and left.

She fully expected to spend hours being grilled by spooks and operators from half the nations

the earth. When they had rendezvoused briefly after the ship's recapture, Garin explained that the Americans were coming because they had the closest operational team available. The Dutch were sending men because the ship was in their territorial waters and the UK was getting an oar in because a lot of its nationals were on board the *Ocean Venture*, and anyway it still liked to imagine the Caribbean belonged to the Royal Navy.

And then Garin came waltzing in to tell her they were free to go. A EuroPetro helicopter was descending toward the afterdeck helipad to lift them off.

SITTING SAFE AT HOME in the air-conditioning of her loft, Annja blew at the hot cocoa, as if that would actually do any good, then tentatively sipped. As always it was hotter than she suspected and scorched her lips and tongue.

She winced and set the cup down. It was all part of the ritual.

She still remembered the surreal feeling as the blue-and-white Dauphine leapt gracefully off the *Ocean Venture*'s deck while Dutch commandos on guard stood by as unresponsive as statues, as their camouflage battle dress wasn't being whipped and their very eyeballs blasted by helicopter rotor wash.

"Why are they letting us go?" she asked Garin.

He smiled. "I told them something far more compelling to their minds than mere truth," he had told her. "I told them what they wanted to hear."

The media, courtesy of Garin's bribes or not—Annja took what he told her with a grain of salt, although experience had shown her that the more outrageous what he said sounded, the more likely it was to be gospel truth—were asserting that the would-be hijackers had fallen for a multinational sting operation designed to trap modern-day pirates of the Caribbean. It wasn't as far-fetched as it sounded—on the flight to Curaçao Garin explained what a huge and growing problem piracy was worldwide, although largely unreported even by the sensation-hungry news media.

She could also see how the nations of the multinational antipiracy task force would be more than happy to take credit for what they believed had been accomplished purely by Garin's security team. They couldn't be happier than Annja. She'd spent way too many uncomfortable hours answering pointed questions from sweaty men in uniforms.

For their part, the "People's Revolutionary" terrorists had reportedly confessed to being pure pirates, interested only in looting the wealthy passengers and gouging a vast hush-payment out of the cruise lines to get their ship back. She knew not to take anything in the news at face value—she'd seen what *really* happened far too often. But she suspected that much was straight. She hadn't bought the "revolutionary" line from the outset, and gathered Garin hadn't, either.

Garin. At least he seemed to be done with her semi-coerced services as escort. That was a relief, too. She hadn't really been able to enjoy the cruise anyway....

To what extent Garin would consider she had returned his favor was an open question. But then so was Garin. He had off-handedly explained that he had felt compelled to act when a little girl broke away to try to rejoin her mother, from whom she'd been separated. "Don't think it was a good deed on my part," he'd assured her. "I was simply worried that, once the hijackers started shooting, they wouldn't stop."

It was entirely plausible but she didn't believe it for a minute. Sitting in her own living room she still wasn't sure what to believe. Sometimes Garin seemed an embodiment of evil. Sometimes he seemed merely to be totally selfish—and she had seen enough authentic evil not to buy into the currently dominant wisdom that the two were one and the same. Many of the worst monsters she met believed what they thought was right so selflessly that they didn't care how many people they had to kill for their own good.

Sometimes Garin seemed almost chivalrous. She suspected that was illusion, too.

But she didn't *know*. I don't know anything where Garin's concerned, she thought. Except that our destinies are entwined, and going to stay that way so long as I carry the sword.

The TV switched to show a man with one of those boyish-gone-middle-aged hardcase faces under a crewcut the color of a steam iron. The screen identified him as spokesman for the Cruise Line International Association. She guessed he was about to very earnestly, and with great sincerity, lecture across his bow tie about how the cruise lines would never, ever pay hush-money to terrorists.

She'd had enough. She turned off the television and picked up a recent copy of *The Journal of Forbidden Archaeology*. Thumbing to an article on crystal skulls, she began to read.

MEETINGS WITH the *Chasing History's Monsters* staff ate up Annja's afternoon. Her producer Doug Morrell, had been in fine form, flitting around the meeting room like a butterfly.

"I don't really think," Annja found herself saying at one point, "that we need to address the issue of whether the Loch Ness Monster is actually a shipwrecked alien from a water world." Although he gets credit for unusual imagination for that one, she thought.

"GIRLFRIEND," Clarice Hartung said, leaning forward over the table, "I don't see how you manage to eat that much and stay that slim."

Annja chewed the mouthful she had bitten out of the specialty of the house—a prime roast sandwich, blood-rare, on toasted sourdough, with just a touch of horseradish—and shrugged. "I most certainly seem to have trouble keeping weight on," she said.

Clarice shook her head in mock despair. She was a production assistant on *Chasing History's Monsters*. She had milk-chocolate skin, a cloud of reddish-brown hair that was more curly than frizzy, big dark brown eyes and a wide smile. "I'd kill for a problem like that."

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