

When legend
becomes reality,
anything can happen

ROGUE ANGEL™

Alex
Archer

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ROGUE ANGEL™

Alex Archer

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Prologue

Kaveripattinam, India

509 B.C.

Sahadeva held the porcelain plate and pretended to examine it as he scanned the marketplace behind him. His heart, already beating quickly, nearly exploded when he saw their pursuers.

“They’re still there, Sahadeva.”

Jyotsna’s whisper barely reached Sahadeva’s ears. He felt her trembling at his side. The marketplace offered untold terrors for her. She’d never been in a place so big or so filled with people. Knowing that they had enemies nearby only made things worse.

Carefully, so he wouldn’t incur the ire of the merchant, Sahadeva replaced the plate on the stack. The merchant started haggling, but the attempt lacked passion. Sahadeva’s worn and dirty clothing warned all of the shopkeepers and traders that he lacked money.

After thanking the man and praising his goods, Sahadeva took Jyotsna’s hand and led her toward the alley at the shop’s side. He touched the curved knife in the sash at his waist. He’d never killed a man before. He didn’t even like slaughtering the goats to put on the family table.

But he knew he would kill the men who pursued them in order to protect Jyotsna.

She looked like a child next to him. The top of her head barely came to his shoulder. Even draped in a loose dark-blue sari anyone could see that she had a woman’s curves. Sahadeva worried her beauty might bring trouble to them in the city. A plain *dupatta* covered her head and held her thick black hair out of her face.

Sahadeva was young and slim. All of his life he’d been a goatherd. Nearly a year ago, when he turned seventeen, he’d run away from home to join a group of young men who’d decided to take a boat up the Vaigai River. Legends of gold and silver, of lost fortunes and fantastic monsters, had beckoned.

When he’d left, Sahadeva had known his father would be angry with him and his mother would be disappointed. Three days into the journey, he’d been frightened and doubtful despite the stories of adventure. Nine days later, just when they’d been about to exhaust their stores and forced to return home empty-handed, he’d seen Jyotsna and fallen in love with her.

She’d wanted to see the big world he described. Her father had denied that to her as he had denied it to all his people. Only the warriors had ventured outside the cave city to get food. Occasionally they brought brides and grooms back into their secret village.

Those brides and grooms, he'd discovered, had only been allowed to live there for a short time. Outsiders were put to death once the children were planted. Sahadeva had seen monstrous things among Jyotsna's people. There was no sign of anyone who had come from outside their enclave to live among them.

Jyotsna had captured Sahadeva's heart. And she had been equally drawn to him. Unable to bear the thought of his death, she had warned him of the coming assassinations. Sahadeva talked her into running away with him, and they fled.

Now all of his friends were dead. Jyotsna's father's warriors had killed them mercilessly. Only luck and his knowledge of the terrain along the Vaigai had prevented Sahadeva and Jyotsna from getting overtaken.

But those pursuers were here now. Even Kaveripattinam, as large as it was and open to trade around the world, wasn't enough to hide them.

Sahadeva strode briskly through the marketplace, past the shops and hawkers, through the maze of goods and buyers, until he reached the alley. Voices, whistles, bells and animal bleats sounded all around him.

The buildings flanking the alley blocked some of the heat of the midmorning sun in the narrow expanse. By noon Sahadeva knew the stones beneath his callused feet would be blistering.

At the other end of the alley, he saw the harbor spread out before him. Tall Roman galleys sat on the ocean. And there were more vessels from other countries.

Since he'd been a boy and his father had first allowed him to help drive goats to market, Sahadeva had loved the sea. The sailors with their stories of foreign lands and exotic sights had filled his head. When he'd talked to his father about such things, his father had told him to quit wasting his time dreaming. He'd said a goatherd would never have enough money to buy a ship, and taking passage on one as a sailor was nothing short of slavery.

Things change, Father, Sahadeva thought grimly. He approached a man arranging a cart filled with woven baskets. "Sir," he said. "I'm looking for Harshad the jeweler."

The man stroked his fingers in his long beard then pointed. "Harshad's shop is in the next street. On the right."

Sahadeva thanked him and got moving again. The crowd was thinner. He didn't think the men who pursued them would do anything here, but there were no guarantees. They were desperate men. He'd taken more than Jyotsna when he'd left their city.

A BURLY MAN STOOD guard at the jeweler's door. He looked half-asleep, but the sword through his sash was sharp and nicked from use. Scars showed on his thick arms.

When he started to enter, the guard put his big hand in the middle of Sahadeva's chest and stopped him. "There's no begging allowed in this shop."

Despite his fear and the urgency that pressed him, Sahadeva's pride burned. "I'm no beggar." His hand dropped to his knife.

The guard smiled. "You're wearing a beggar's rags, boy. And I wouldn't pull out that knife unless you're ready to die."

Sahadeva swallowed hard and felt his face burn with shame. "I've got business with Harshad." He reached inside his shirt and took out a small oilskin pouch. Another oilskin bag was hidden inside the pack he carried, but thieves wouldn't have wanted it. Still, he never left it unattended. "I have merchandise for sale."

Sunlight glinted off the gold and gems inside the bag.

Jyotsna's fingernails bit into Sahadeva's arm. "What have you done?"

Sahadeva looked into her dark eyes. "I did what I had to so that we could be together."

Tears glinted in her gaze and she looked away from him.

Sahadeva felt torn. He didn't have time to explain. Jyotsna had always lived within her father's village. She had no idea what the real world was like or what it took to live in it.

"Send the boy in here," a man's voice called from within the shop.

Reluctantly, the guard stepped aside.

Sahadeva moved forward. He had to pull on Jyotsna's arm twice to get her to follow him.

Inside, the shop was small and heavily scented with incense. A thin man with graying hair and a beard stood behind a counter. He wore a white tunic. Earrings, rings, necklaces, hair bands and gold and silver bangles hung from pegs on the wall behind him. Jewels sparkled in settings in some of them. Harshad smiled. "Welcome. What may I do for you?"

Sahadeva freed his arm from Jyotsna. He placed the oilskin pouch on the counter. "I want to trade these for gold coins."

The jeweler spread the bag's contents across the counter. Five rings, two bracelets and a loose collection of gems spread between them. Harshad looked at the jewelry with marked interest. "They are of very unusual design. Where did you get them?"

"I found them," Sahadeva replied. "They were in the Vaigai River."

The jeweler looked up. "Where in the Vaigai?"

Sahadeva shook his head. "There isn't any more there."

"Maybe you just didn't look closely enough."

"Then I'll go back and look again."

Harshad frowned. "You've been most fortunate, it seems."

"How much?" Sahadeva asked.

"Are you in a hurry?"

"No," Sahadeva lied. He'd learned at his father's knee never to show impatience during a trade. A hasty man often got the worst of a bargain. A needy man fared even worse.

But what about a man who fears for his life? Sahadeva wondered.

"I could look at these and give you an offer tomorrow," Harshad suggested.

"By that time I could get offers from other jewelers," Sahadeva countered. "I was told I could get a fair price from you."

"Wandering around the city could be dangerous," Harshad said.

Sahadeva started gathering his treasure. "The ships are in. I want passage on one of them. Perhaps I can strike a deal with a captain who would trust his instinct for jewelry."

"Wait," Harshad said. He sighed. "I'm only going to do this because you look like a good boy. Although some might question if you really got these things from the river."

Sahadeva held the bag tightly. He'd come to Harshad because he'd heard the man didn't ask too many questions.

"Come with me." Harshad gestured to a doorway draped by curtains. He stepped through the doorway and waved again.

Sahadeva and Jyotsna followed him.

"Just you," the jeweler said. "Back here I only deal one-on-one."

Sahadeva hesitated, then turned to Jyotsna. "Stay here."

She pulled on his arm. "Don't leave me."

"It'll only be for a moment. You'll be safe." Sahadeva gently pulled her hands from his arm. Doing so almost broke his heart because her fear showed in her liquid gaze. "I'll be right back. I promise."

Jyotsna wrapped her arms around herself. As she stood there, she looked incredibly small.

Sahadeva made himself turn and follow the jeweler to the back room of the shop.

"Sit, sit." Harshad gestured toward a chair on the other side of a small wooden table in the back room.

Sahadeva waved away the thick white smoke given off by the incense. Coils of the fragrant past burned in every corner of the room. He sat at the table. The smoke made it hard to breathe and he immediately felt light-headed.

Harshad clapped his hands. Immediately an old woman appeared through another door and delivered a tea service. She poured *cocum* squash into tall glasses of water, then left without a word.

Sahadeva's taste buds flooded at the drink's scent. He and Jyotsna had subsisted on bread, goat cheese and water. *Cocum* squash was only available in April and May. He'd almost missed the season entirely. He picked up the glass and felt the chill.

"Let me again examine what you have," Harshad said. He smiled once more.

Sahadeva saw the anticipation in the man's face. Harshad clearly wanted the jewelry and gems. Slowly, Sahadeva emptied the pouch onto the table. The heavy gold smacked into the wood. The sound echoed strangely in Sahadeva's ears.

"You found these in the Vaigai River, you say?" Harshad examined one of the rings.

"Yes," Sahadeva said. He sipped his drink. The flavor was strong and cool.

"You're lucky. Many men have searched that river for treasure," Harshad said.

"I know."

"Some soothsayers still insist there is a secret city with impossible wealth located there."

Sahadeva's heart thudded and his head swelled from the pressure. "I wouldn't know about that," he said.

"It is supposed to be a city of *nagas*," Harshad said as he moved on to examine a bracelet. "Half men, half snakes. Have you ever seen such a thing?"

"No." But Sahadeva knew well the old stories and legends told of such things.

"They lived on an island, it's said. Then the monsoon season brought a wave that broke the island and drove them inland. They tried to live on the mainland, but they worshiped snakes and practiced bloodthirsty rituals. No one would suffer them to live there. So they fled upriver."

Sahadeva listened without comment. He had to force himself to breathe. He wanted out of the room. Anxiety crawled over him at the thought of leaving Jyotsna with the burly guard. It was worse thinking about her father's warriors lurking in the street.

"Do you think these things came from that city?" Harshad asked.

Sahadeva's heartbeat became thunder in his ears. He was certain the jeweler could hear it. "No," he lied.

"Why not?" Harshad asked.

“No one has ever proved that city ever existed,” Sahadeva said. No one had ever found the tributary Sahadeva and his friends had found, either. It went underground for a time, and if Prama hadn’t gone hunting that morning they might never have found it, he thought.

“Still,” Harshad mused, “there is usually some kernel of truth in those old legends.”

Sahadeva said nothing. He pulled at his collar in an effort to get more air. Heat flushed his face. He forced air into his lungs.

“I’ve even been told that the things that have been found from the *naga* city are cursed,” Harshad said.

“Cursed?” Sahadeva’s mind tried to grasp the word but it slipped away.

“I’ve been told,” Harshad said in a quiet voice, “that the *naga* spirits follow anything that was taken from their city. They find them and bring them back after killing those who stole them. Do you believe in curses?”

Sahadeva thought about that for a moment while he finished the rest of his drink. He’d never actually seen a curse in effect, but he’d heard stories about them all of his life. “I don’t know,” he finally said.

“Well, it’s better to keep an open mind, perhaps. When you’ve lived as many years as I have, you’ll learn the wise men don’t have all the answers.” Harshad pushed the jewelry and gems to the center of the table. “Now we must discuss what these are worth to you.”

For the next few minutes, they haggled over the price. Sahadeva knew not to take the first offer. Only a fool and an amateur took the first offer. His father had taught him that, as well.

Finally, they agreed upon an amount. Sahadeva didn’t know if it was fair, but it was more than he’d been hoping to get for the pieces. He was certain Harshad thought he’d gotten the better of the bargain.

Sahadeva wanted only enough to arrange passage on one of the ships in the harbor. He knew he and Jyotsna would have to start over somewhere new. Perhaps Greece or Rome would be a good choice. He might even like to see Egypt. Those countries accepted foreigners.

Besides, he hadn’t shown Harshad the full treasure they’d escaped with.

“I must tell you one thing,” Harshad said at the end of the negotiations. “If these things are indeed cursed, I expect you to take them back. Is this understood?”

Sahadeva readily agreed. He didn’t believe in the curse. Even so, he would be long gone in just a matter of hours if he could find a ship putting out to sea in that time.

“I will return with your gold.” Harshad got up and left the room. He left the jewelry and gems sitting on the table.

Sahadeva felt his head grow heavier. When he turned to look at the window high on the wall, he

senses whirled. He realized the colors seemed brighter than normal, and the sounds coming from outside were leaden and muffled.

Something was wrong.

He tried to stand but his legs were almost too weak to hold his weight. He gasped for air and choked on the thick incense smoke. He tried to sweep the jewelry and gems into the pouch again, but only succeeded in scattering them across the table and the floor.

A cloud of smoke suddenly burst inside the room. A loud hiss accompanied it.

Startled, Sahadeva stumbled back against the wall. The acrid smoke burned his nose and throat when he inhaled it. Incredulous, he watched as a figure took shape.

The head and shoulders of a beautiful woman appeared first. Jeweled combs pinned her thick black hair atop her head. Her garments barely covered her modesty, like the garments Jyotsna's people wore. She stood high-breasted and proud. She peered at him with the slit-irised eyes of a cat. Crimson lips parted to reveal sharp teeth. Her forked tongue slithered out to test the air.

As she moved toward Sahadeva, she rocked from side to side. Her lower half was hidden from sight by the smoke for a moment. When he saw the serpentine body that began at her waist, he tried to scream but there wasn't enough air in the room.

From her midriff down, the woman was a snake. Glittering blue-green scales twisted as she moved. Black-and-red scales created a hard-edged pattern. In the next instant, she lunged at him and her fangs pierced his throat.

S_{AHADEVA} WOKE to a pounding pain in his head. Blood roared in his ears. He felt dizzy, as if the world were shifting beneath him. He opened his eyes and discovered the reason for the movement.

He was in a ship's hold. The light from a candle on a mounted sconce barely penetrated the gloom. He lay in the middle of a pool of vomit that he realized was his own. It had smeared on his clothing and made the fabric stiff. Iron manacles bound his legs to a ring set in the floor.

Where is Jyotsna? The question drove him to his feet in spite of the pain and sickness coiled in his belly. He immediately threw up again.

"Easy, now," someone said from the darkness.

The ship tossed and turned. Timbers creaked in protest. The floor tilted so much for a moment that Sahadeva feared they were going to turn over.

Sahadeva tracked the voice and saw a man in his middle years sitting hunched against the wall. Nine others sat with him.

"Who are you?" Sahadeva asked. "What is this ship?"

"I'm a slave," the man answered. "Like you. My name is Oorjit."

“I’m not a slave,” Sahadeva objected.

“You lie in your own filth aboard a ship that you didn’t book passage on,” another man said. “You’re a slave. When the captain has outrun this storm, they’ll bring us up and start making sailors of us.”

“I’m afraid what he says is true,” Oorjit said. “All of us were taken in Kaveripattinam. The ship captains do this when they need crew and no one is willing to sign on. Lives are cheap in the city. Doubtless you were sold into captivity by someone who profited in the loss of your freedom.”

Sahadeva slumped in disbelief. His first thoughts were of Jyotsna. He’d brought her to the city and told her he could take care of her. He wept when he thought of the horrors he had doubtlessly left her to face.

The ship continued to roll. The movement grew more violent. Water sloshed around Sahadeva’s ankles and he thought it was growing deeper.

“Are you a soothsayer?” Oorjit asked.

Sahadeva looked at the man.

“The book you carried.” Oorjit tossed over Sahadeva’s battered travel pack. “I thought if you could read you were a soothsayer.”

Sahadeva couldn’t believe the pack had been left with him. He doubted the other gems and jewelry remained. He searched the bag and found he was correct. But the book lay there.

“Doubtless they couldn’t find anything in it worth stealing,” Oorjit stated. “Slavers aren’t readers.”

Sahadeva picked up the book and examined it. He’d stolen it from the treasure room in Jyotsna’s village. He knew wise men and kings often paid handsomely for such things.

It was a thick rectangle covered in some kind of hide. Sahadeva thought it was snakeskin, but he wasn’t sure. He felt the binding and made sure the thing he’d hidden there remained. He’d kept the book from Harshad. Sahadeva had intended to use it to buy a business for himself whenever they got to where they were going.

Even though it remained, Sahadeva knew that the future he’d planned was gone. He replaced the book in its protective oilskin and shoved it under his shirt.

“Are you a wise man?” Oorjit asked.

“No,” Sahadeva answered.

“Pity,” the man said. “I think it would be good to have the ears of the gods in this storm.”

Sahadeva didn’t know how much time passed in the hold. The candle flame wavered as the ship heaved and rolled. Several times he felt as though the sea had pitched them into the air. As the sea

fear grew inside him, he knew what was going to happen. It was only a matter of time.

Still, when it did occur he wasn't prepared. The ship capsized. Water rushed into the hold. With his legs chained, he had no chance. Despite his best efforts and his most impassioned pleas, the cruel, uncaring sea swallowed him.

1

Annja Creed stood in a twelve-foot-deep sacrificial pit beneath a gathering storm. The storm, according to the weather reports, was hours away but promised to be severe. From the look of the skeletons on the floor of the pit and embedded in the walls, hundreds of years had passed since the last sacrifice.

The passage of time hadn't made the discovery any less chilling. Even with her experience as an archeologist—and the recent exposures to sudden death that she thought were incited by the mystical sword she'd inherited—she still had to make the conscious mental shift from personal empathy to scientific detachment.

“Are those *human* bones?”

Annja glanced up and saw Jason Kim standing near the edge of the pit above her. Jason was a UCLA graduate student who'd won a place on Professor Rai's dig along the southern coast of India.

Jason was barely over five and a half feet tall and slender as a reed. His long black hair blew in the strong wind summoned by the storm gathering somewhere over the Indian Ocean. Thick glasses covered his eyes, which were bloodshot from staying up too late playing PSP games in his tent. He came from a traditional Chinese family that hated the way he'd so easily acquired American ways. He wore a concert T-shirt and jean shorts. A tuft of whiskers barely smudged his pointed chin.

“They're human bones,” Annja answered.

“You think they're sacrifice victims?” Jason's immediate interest sounded bloodthirsty, but Annja knew it was only curiosity.

“I do.” Annja knelt and scooped one of the skulls from the loose soil at the bottom of the pit. She indicated the uneven cut through the spine at the base of the skull. “Followers of Shakti favor decapitation.”

“Cool. Can I see that?” Jason held his hands out.

Annja only thought for a moment that the skull had once housed a human being. The truth was, in her work, the body left behind was as much a temporary shelter as the homes she unearthed and studied.

Jason's field of study was forensic anthropology. His work primarily included what was left of a body. If anyone at the dig could identify the tool marks on the skeleton, it was Jason.

Annja tossed the skull up to him.

Jason caught the skull in both hands. It didn't bother him that it was so fresh from the grave. His smile went from ear to ear. He rotated the skull in his fingers. "This is the bomb, Annja."

"Glad you like it."

"Think they'll let me keep one?" he asked.

Part of Annja couldn't believe he'd asked the question. The other part of her couldn't believe she hadn't expected it.

"Definitely not," she answered.

"Too bad. Put a small, battery-operated red light inside and this thing would be totally rad. I could even have a friend of mine majoring in dentistry whip up some caps for the incisors. I'd be the first guy to have a genuine vampire skull."

"Except for the *genuine* part. And you'd have to explain why the skull doesn't turn to dust in sunlight," Annja said.

"Not all vampires turn to dust. You should know that," he replied.

"Vampires aren't a big part of archaeology." Annja turned her attention back to the other bones. She didn't think she was going to learn a lot from the pit, but there were always surprises.

"I didn't mean from archaeology," Jason persisted. "I mean from your show."

Annja sighed. No matter where she went, except for highly academic circles, she invariably ended up being known more for her work on *Chasing History's Monsters* than anything else. The syndicated television show had gone international almost overnight, and was continuing to do well in the ratings.

Scenes from stories she'd done for the show had ended up on magazine covers, on YouTube and other television shows. Her producer, Doug Morrell, never missed an opportunity to promote the show.

"You ever watch the show?" Annja looked up at Jason and couldn't believe she was having this conversation with him.

"Sure. The frat guys go nuts for it. So do the sororities. I mean, DVR means never having to miss a television show again."

Terrific, Annja thought.

"Kind of divided loyalties, though," Jason said. "The sororities watch you." He shrugged. "Well, most of them do. The frat guys like to watch the show for Kristie."

Okay, I really didn't need to hear that, Annja thought.

Kristie Chatham, the other hostess of *Chasing History's Monsters*, wasn't a rival. At least, Annja

didn't see Kristie as such. Kristie wasn't an archaeologist and didn't care about history. Or even about getting the facts straight.

When Kristie put her stories together, they were strictly for shock value. As a result, Kristie's stories tended to center on werewolves, vampires, serial killers and escaped lab experiments.

"You can't go into a frat house without finding her new poster," Jason went on.

"That's good to know," Annja said, then realized that maybe she'd responded a little more coldly than she'd intended.

"Hey." Jason held his hands up in defense and almost dropped his newly acquired skull. He bobbled it and managed to hang on to it. "I didn't mean anything by that."

"No problem," Annja said.

"I don't know why you don't do a poster," Jason said. "You're beautiful."

Maybe if the comment hadn't come from a geeky male in his early twenties who was five years her junior and had a skull under his arm, if she hadn't been covered in dirt from the sacrificial pit and perspiring heavily from the gathering storm's humidity, Annja might have taken solace in the compliment.

Dressed in khaki cargo shorts, hiking boots and a gray pullover, she stood five feet ten inches tall and had a full figure instead of the anorexic look favored by so many modeling agencies. She wore her chestnut-brown hair pulled back under a New York Yankees baseball cap. Her startling amber-green eyes never failed to capture attention.

"I don't do a poster because I don't want to end up on the walls of frat houses," Annja said.

"Or ceilings," Jason said. "A lot of guys put Kristie's posters on the ceiling."

Lightning flashed in the leaden sky and highlighted the dark clouds. Shortly afterward, peals of thunder slammed into the beach.

Jason looked up. "Man, this is gonna suck. I hate getting wet."

"That's part of the job," Annja told him. "The other part is being too hot, too tired, too claustrophobic and a thousand other discomforts I could name."

"I know. But that's only if I stay with fieldwork. I'd rather get a job at a museum. Or in a criminal lab working forensics."

Annja was disappointed to hear that. Jason Kim was a good student. He was going to be a good forensic anthropologist. She couldn't understand why anyone would choose to stay indoors in a job that could take them anywhere in the world.

Lightning flashed again. The wind shifted and swept into the pit where Annja stood. The humidity increased and felt like an impossible burden.

“I’m gonna go clean this up,” Jason said. “Maybe after we batten down the hatches, you can tell me more about who Shakti was.”

Annja nodded and turned her attention back to the burial site. The storm was coming and there was no time to waste.

WITH CAREFUL DELIBERATION, Annja checked the scale representation of the burial pit she’d drawn. So far everything was going easily, but she suspected it was the calm before the storm.

The drawing looked good. She’d also backed up the sketch with several captured digital images using her camera. In the old days, archaeologists only had a pad and paper to record data and findings. She liked working that way. It felt as if it kept her in touch with the roots of her chosen field.

She stared at the body she’d exhumed. From the flared hips, she felt certain that the bones had been a woman. She resolved to have Jason make the final call on that, though.

Lightning flickered and thunder pealed almost immediately after. The storm was drawing closer.

“Annja.”

Glancing up, Annja spotted the elfin figure of Professor Lochata Rai, the dig’s supervisor. Lochata was only five feet tall and weighed about ninety pounds. She was in her early sixties, but still spry and driven. She wore khakis and looked ready for a trek across the Gobi Desert.

“It is time for you to rise up out of there. The rain is coming,” the professor said.

Annja looked past the woman at the scudding clouds that filled the sky. Irritation flared through her at the time she was losing.

“We must cover this excavation pit,” Lochata said. “Perhaps it will not rain too hard and we won’t lose anything.”

“I know. This really stinks because we just got down far enough to take a good look at what’s here,” Annja said.

Lochata squatted at the edge of the pit. She held her pith helmet in her tiny hands over her knees. “You’re too impatient. You have your whole life ahead of you, and history isn’t going anywhere. This site will be here tomorrow.”

“I keep telling myself that. But I also keep telling myself that once I finish this I can move on to something else.” Annja stowed her gear in her backpack.

Lochata shook her head. “You expect to find something exciting and different?”

“I *hope* to.” Annja pulled her backpack over her shoulder and climbed the narrow wooden ladder out of the pit. “I always hope to.”

“I do not.” Lochata offered her hand as Annja neared the top. “Finding something you did not

expect means you didn't do your research properly. It also means extra work and possibly having call someone else in to verify what you have found."

Annja understood that, but she also liked the idea of the new, the undiscovered and the unexpected. Lately, her life had been filled with that. She thought she was growing addicted to it.

Once on the ground outside the pit, Annja stood with her arms out from her sides as if she were going to take flight. The wind blew almost hard enough to move her. Perspiration had soaked her clothing.

"Drink." Lochata held out a water bottle and smiled. "Hydrate or die."

Annja smiled back and accepted the water. The rule was a basic one for anyone who challenged the elements. She opened the bottle and drank deeply.

The dig site was in the jungle fringe that bordered the Indian Ocean. Kanyakumari lay as far south on the Indian continent as a person could go. They were forty miles west of there on a cliff twenty-seven feet above sea level. The ocean stretched to the south under the whirling storm clouds. Whitecaps broke the dark-blue surface.

"What are you thinking?" Lochata asked.

Annja grinned self-consciously. She didn't like to get caught daydreaming. The nuns who raised her in a New Orleans orphanage had worked hard to train that distraction out of her. It hadn't worked.

"I was just thinking about how many ships have been through those waters," Annja admitted.

"Ah, yes." Lochata's eyes glittered. "The Romans, the Egyptians, ships from China's Ming Dynasty."

"Vasco da Gama was the first European to sail the Indian Ocean," Annja said. "He was looking for a trade route around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa."

"The British took over after that," Lochata said. "They brought their ships loaded with cannons and fought wars to control the area. The Dutch East India Company fought trade wars with the French and others."

"It isn't just history out there," Annja said wistfully. "Sinbad sailed those seas, as well."

Lochata laughed. "My, my. Bringing up fictional characters. You are the romantic, aren't you?"

"I try not to be," Annja said. "But if you think past this moment, if you see into the past, it's hard not to be." She paused as she watched the storm-tossed waves. "A lot of those ships didn't make it across the ocean. Storms took them, they were lost in sea battles and sometimes ships just went down."

"Or perhaps sea monsters got them," Lochata said laughing.

“I don’t believe in sea monsters.” Over the past few years, Annja had learned to believe in a lot of things, but she hadn’t yet crossed paths with a sea monster.

“Perhaps not,” Lochata said. “But the sea is a cruel mistress. She takes what she wants. She breaks the weak and the foolish. And she gives back only what she wants to.”

Surprised, Annja looked at the older woman. “I didn’t know you were a poet.”

Lochata smiled and shook her head. “Not me. My husband. He’s been in the merchant marine since he was a boy.” Concern touched her dark features. “I worry about him a lot these days, but I won’t give up the sea. A few years ago, things were not so dangerous out on the water. There are too many pirates out here now. They take what they want, and they kill and destroy.”

Annja didn’t say anything. She knew the professor was right. Before leaving her home in Brooklyn, she’d researched the area’s past and present. The Indian Ocean pirates plying their trade were every bit as dangerous as the Shakti followers who had sacrificed so many innocents to the cruel goddess.

“We need to get everyone together,” Lochata said as she gazed at the storm clouds above them. “I think this is going to be a bad one.”

The wind picked up and rattled through the nearby trees.

“I thought monsoon season was over,” Annja said.

Worry tightened the lines of the older woman’s face. “It should be. I think this is something else.” She looked at Annja and smiled. “You don’t believe in curses, do you?”

Considering everything she’d been through since she’d found the final piece of Joan of Arc’s legendary sword, Annja wasn’t sure how to answer the question. Receiving the sword had changed her perspective on a lot of things.

“Not really,” Annja finally said.

“Neither do I,” Lochata agreed. “But we’ve been disturbing the final resting places of the dead. That’s taboo in almost every culture.”

2

“You’re in India?”

Annja held the satellite phone to her ear and strained to hear. “Yes, Doug. India.”

Doug Morrell, her producer, was twenty-two and excitable. He asked questions, but he only heard what he wanted to hear.

“India, as in half-a-world-away India?” Doug asked.

“Yes.” Annja stood in the main tent and gazed out at the jungle. She and Professor Rai had gathered the dig team together.

Normally a break in the dull routine of digging would have been welcome. However, now they were all trapped in the leaking tent and hoping it would stay erect against the gale-force winds.

A torrential downpour slammed the surrounding jungle and reduced visibility to little more than a few yards. Beyond that everything turned gray and disappeared in the dark night. Annja could barely hear Doug over the crackle caused by lightning strikes and the heavy rain pounding against the canvas.

“What are you doing there?” Doug asked.

“I signed on to do a dig with Professor Lochata Rai.”

“Uh-huh. So what’s he digging up?”

“*She.*”

“Okay. What’s *she* digging up?”

“Professor Rai got permission from the Archaeological Survey of India to look for a Shaka sacrifice site.”

“Did you just say *sacrifice*?” Doug’s voice rose.

“I did.” Annja regretted telling him that detail at once. If she hadn’t been distracted by the building storm she wouldn’t have.

“*Human* sacrifices?” Doug asked.

“And animal.” Annja heard a keyboard clatter to life.

“Are you digging up human or animal bones?”

“Today we uncovered a pit containing several human skeletons.”

“Bodacious.” Doug’s excitement grew. “Always interested in pieces on human sacrifice. Who do you say was doing the sacrifices?”

“Followers of Shakti.” Annja spelled it out for him. She glanced back into the tent and saw the dig crew seated around long folding tables on a collection of lawn chairs.

Everyone on the crew was young. Most workers on archaeological excavations were interns or students. Generally there was barely enough money to fund a team with provisions, much less to make a profit. They sat playing board games, reading or telling stories. None of them acted like the stories worried them, but Annja knew they were concerned.

She was concerned.

“Shakti,” Doug said. “Consort of Shiva.”

“That’s her.” Annja sipped green tea from a bottle. It was one of her few extravagances for the dig. “That’s not something you would know. You’re looking on the Internet, aren’t you?”

“You gotta love Wikipedia,” Doug said.

Annja had written or corrected more than a few entries on subjects on the site.

“Wasn’t Shiva the god of death or something?” Doug asked.

Annja really didn’t want to get into a lesson on Hinduism. That would be a long discussion and Doug would only hear what he wanted.

“Yes,” she replied. It was the simplest answer. Annja knew, as with all Hindu gods, Shiva was much more than one thing.

“This human-sacrifice thing has potential. We haven’t done a piece on a god of death in months,” Doug said.

“I’m not doing a story,” Annja said. “I’m here to work a dig.”

“I know, I know. I was just wondering if there was a way we could get a twofer.”

“I’m not interested in a twofer. I came out here to work.”

“Hey, don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”

Annja swallowed a sharp retort. She couldn’t complain about the television show. *Chasing History’s Monsters* had been good to her. Real archaeology didn’t pay a lot. To be part of Lochata dig Annja had had to pay her own way over. The community meals were free and the cot was a loaner. She had to buy her own bottled green tea.

The television show offered the glamour and glory. It also came with a paycheck that enabled her to do things like this dig.

“Okay.” Annja stared out at the dark sky. She couldn’t see the edge of the cliff. The crash of the surf against the rocks below remained audible.

“Okay what?” Doug asked.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Annja Creed stalks mysterious cult that carries out human sacrifices.”

“This particular cult’s been dead for hundreds of years. Probably more than a thousand.”

“They gotta have descendants, right?” Doug asked.

“Possibly, but I wouldn’t know how to get in contact with—”

“I’m looking at a news story that says these Shakti cultists have been up to their old tricks in different parts of India.”

“Old tricks?” Annja asked.

“Creative license on my part,” Doug said. “Makes them sound more devious and threatening. Up their coolness quotient, trust me. Anyway, there are Shakti cultists springing up. No human sacrifices have been found yet, but that may be because they’ve hidden the bodies. Or buried them.”

Annja could tell Doug was selling himself on the idea.

“Maybe you could take some footage of the local jungle as you make your way through the forgotten trail.”

“If it was a forgotten trail,” Annja said, “I wouldn’t know about it.”

“Of course you would. You’re a world-famous archaeologist.”

Annja smiled a little at that. If Doug hadn’t been trying so hard to flatter her, she might have enjoyed his efforts. But she’d known him long enough to be aware that he seldom did anything without an ulterior motive.

“How much longer are you going to be there?” Doug asked.

“A few more weeks.”

“See? You can work in a piece on human sacrifices,” he said.

“I’m busy. When you work a dig, you’re putting in eighteen-to twenty-hour days.”

“Don’t you have a day off?”

“When I do, I like to have it as a day off.” So far there hadn’t been one of those. Annja watched one of the students run back through the jungle from the cliff area. The young woman’s boots splashed across the drenched ground. Panic pulled her face tight. She was one of Professor Rai’s students and knew the area well. If she was frightened, there had to be a reason.

“Doug,” Annja interrupted as he launched into a guilt-inspiring speech, “I’m going to have to call you back.” She closed the phone and put it into her pocket. She knew Doug hated being hung up on and wasn’t surprised when he called right back. Annja ignored the ring tone and lunged out into the driving rain.

Lochata ran out to meet the student and reached her before Annja. The older woman grabbed the younger one by the shoulders and forced her to calm enough to talk. They spoke rapidly in their native tongue, and Annja didn’t understand a word. The student kept gesturing toward the cliff.

Her boots heavy with the mud that had collected on them, Annja joined the professor and student. Rivulets ran down the bill of Annja’s baseball cap, and she was drenched at once. She reached into her pocket elsewhere and felt the sword. The hilt felt familiar in her hand and she took comfort in it.

From the reddened state of the student’s eyes, Annja knew she was crying. But the tears mixed with the rain so quickly they disappeared at once.

“What’s wrong?” Annja asked.

Lochata gathered the young woman into her embrace for a moment, then spoke soothingly to her and pushed her toward the main tent. Immediately the professor headed toward the cliff. “She says the sea has withdrawn,” Lochata stated.

“Withdrawn?” Annja matched the older woman’s stride.

“Receded.”

“An outgoing tide will do that.”

“She says this is more than just the tide.” Lochata’s face looked grave.

Annja studied the irregular line of broken rocks at the foot of the cliff. They had been at the dig site for five days. She’d walked out to the cliff on several occasions to take a break from digging through the hard-packed earth and stared out at the ocean.

She’d never seen the rocks or that much of the sea bottom before. As she watched, the water seemed to draw back even more.

“The sea’s never done that before,” Annja said.

Lochata’s face drained of color. She turned to face Annja. “Tsunami,” she said, and the hammering thunder overhead almost swept her words away.

Fear shook Annja.

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