

THE ATLANTIS CODE

SOME SECRETS ARE BEST KEPT
FOR EVER ...



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The Atlantis Code
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I

Kom Al-Dikka
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Thomas Lourds abandoned the comfort of the stretch limousine with reluctance and an unaccustomed sense of foreboding. He usually enjoyed opportunities to talk about his work, not to mention the chance to solicit funding for archaeological programmes he believed in and consulted for.

But not today.

Under the sweltering heat of the Egyptian sun in full midday bloom, he dropped his scarred leather backpack at his feet and gazed at the huge Roman theatre that Napoleon Bonaparte's legions had discovered while digging to build a new fortification.

Although the Kom Al-Dikka dig site had been explored for the last two hundred years, first by treasure hunters, then by learned men seeking knowledge of ancient times, the Polish-Egyptian mission that had been established there over forty years ago continued to make new and astonishing finds.

Burrowed into the ground, Kom Al-Dikka stood as a semi-circular amphitheatre not far from the train station in Alexandria. Passengers stepping off the

platform only had to cross a short distance to peer out into the ancient stage. Cars passed nearby on Nabi Daniel and Hurriya Streets. The ancient and modern worlds lay side-by-side here.

Constructed of thirteen tiers of marble that provided seating for up to 800 spectators, with each seat carefully numbered, the theatre's history reached deep into the past and throughout the ancient world. Its white marble stones had been quarried in Europe and brought to Africa. Asia Minor had provided the green marble. The red granite had been mined in Aswan. Geometric mosaic designs covered the wings. Roman houses and baths stretched out behind it. The whole complex was a symbol of the global reach of the great empire that had built it.

Lourds studied the vast stone structure. When Ptolemy was still a young man and his greatest works were ahead of him, Kom Al-Dikka had been here hosting plays and musicals and – if some of the inscriptions on the marble columns had been translated correctly, which Lourds believed they had – wrestling. He smiled to think that Ptolemy might have sat in those marble seats and worked on his books. Or thought about them, at least. It would have been incongruous, like a Harvard professor of linguistics attending a world wrestling event. Lourds was such a professor and he did not follow wrestling. But he loved to think that Ptolemy had.

Although Lourds had seen the place a number of times, the sight of it never failed to stir within him a desire to know more about the people who had lived

here during those years when it was new and filled with crowds. The stories they'd told barely survived these days. So much had been lost when the Royal Library of Alexandria had been destroyed.

For a moment, Lourds imagined what it must have been like to walk through the halls of the great library. Its collections were reputed to include at least half a million scrolls. They had supposedly contained the entire known world's knowledge of the day. Treatises on mathematics, astronomy, ancient maps, animal husbandry and agriculture, all those subjects had been represented. So had the works of great writers – including the lost plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and Menander, artists of such power that their surviving works were still performed. And more. Men – knowledgeable and clever men – had come from all over to make their contributions to the ancient library and to learn from it.

Yet all of that was gone, shattered and burned.

Depending on the latest round of politically correct scholarship, the destruction was either ordered by the Roman emperor Julius Caesar or Theophilus of Alexandria or Caliph Umar. Or maybe all of them, over the course of time. Whoever had been ultimately responsible, all of those wonderful writings had burned or crumbled or vanished along with the secrets and wisdom held within them. At least for now. Lourds still hoped that some day, somewhere, a treasure trove of those works – or at least copies of them – might still exist. It was possible that someone during those perilous years had cared enough to

protect the scrolls by hiding them, or by making copies that they hid once the library was destroyed.

The vast desert surrounding this city still held secrets, and the dry hot sands were wonderful for preserving papyrus scrolls. Such treasures still turned up, often in the hands of rogues, but sometimes under the supervision of archaeologists. Scholars could read only the scrolls that again saw the light of day. Who knew how many more caches were still out there, waiting to be found?

‘Professor Lourds.’

He picked up his backpack and turned to see who had spoken his name. He knew what the speaker saw. He was a tall man, slender from years of soccer. A short-cropped black goatee framed his strong chin and softened the hard planes of his face. His wavy black hair was long enough to hang in his eyes and fall over the tips of his ears. Trips to the barber took too much time out of his day, so he only went when he could no longer stand to go unshorn. That time was getting close, he realized, brushing hair out of his eyes. He wore khaki shorts, a grey shirt, Gore-Tex hiking boots, an Australian outback hat and sunglasses. All well broken in and a bit worn around the edges. He looked, he thought, like a working Egyptologist, much different to the tourists and hawkers in the amphitheatre.

‘Ms Crane,’ Lourds greeted the woman who had called out to him.

Leslie Crane strode toward him. Men’s heads turned in appreciation. Lourds didn’t blame them.

Leslie Crane was beautiful, golden-haired and green-eyed, dressed in shorts and a sleeveless white linen shirt that emphasized her tan and trim figure. Lourds thought she was perhaps twenty-four, fifteen years younger than he was.

She took his hand and shook it. 'It's so good to finally meet you in person.' She had a crisp English accent, and in her lush contralto voice the effect was soothing.

'I've been looking forward to this as well. Email and phone calls aren't a replacement for actually spending time with another person.' Although either of those forms of communication were rapid and kept people in touch, Lourds preferred speaking in person or on paper. He was something of an anachronism in that he still took time to write long letters to friends who did the same in return. He believed that letters, especially when someone wanted to get a point and a line of thinking across without interruption, were important. 'Handshakes do have their advantages.'

'Oh,' she said. As if just realizing she still held his hand, she released it. 'Sorry.'

'No problem.'

'Did you find the hotel suitable?'

'Of course. It's wonderful.' The television company had put him in the Montazah Sheraton, a five-star hotel. With the Mediterranean shoreline to the north and King Farouk's summer palace and gardens to the south, staying there was an incredible experience. 'But it's close enough that I could have walked

here. Though the limo was lovely. A university professor isn't quite the same as a rock star.'

'Nonsense,' Leslie said. 'Enjoy it. We wanted you to know how much we look forward to working with you on this project. Have you stayed there before?'

'No.' Lourds shook his head. 'I'm just a humble linguistics professor.'

'Don't discount your training or your expertise. We're not.' Leslie hit him with a dazzling kilowatt smile. 'You're not just a linguistics professor. You teach at Harvard and were trained at Oxford. And your background is hardly humble. You're the world's foremost expert on ancient languages.'

'Trust me,' Lourds said, 'no few scholars contest that assertion.'

'Not at *Ancient Worlds, Ancient People*,' Leslie assured him. 'When we complete this series, the world will view you as exactly that.'

Ancient Worlds, Ancient People was the name of the show produced by Janus World View Productions, a United Kingdoms affiliate of the British Broadcasting Corporation. It featured interesting histories and people, presented by lively commentators like Leslie Crane, who interviewed recognized scholars in various fields.

'You smile.' Leslie grinned, and it made her look even younger. 'Do you doubt me, Professor Lourds?'

'Not you,' Lourds replied. 'Perhaps I doubt the largesse of the viewing public. And please call me Thomas. Do you mind if we walk?' He thrust his

chin toward a shady area. ‘At least to get out of this damnable sun?’

‘Sure.’ Leslie fell into step beside him.

‘You said you had a challenge to put before me this morning,’ Lourds reminded her.

‘Nervous?’

‘Not so much. I like a challenge. But conundrums do leave me somewhat . . . curious.’

‘Isn’t curiosity a linguistics professor’s best tool?’ she asked.

‘Patience, I think, is the best tool. Though it’s one we often struggle for. Records of a nation’s or empire’s intellectual life – be it history, mathematics, the arts, or sciences – took time for the scribes to write. Unfortunately, it takes even longer for today’s scholars to decipher those ancient works, especially when we no longer have access to the languages in which they were written. For more than a thousand years, for example, no one left on the planet could read Egyptian hieroglyphics. It took patience to find the right key, and then more patience to decipher the code of their meaning.’

‘How long did it take you to crack *Bedroom Pursuits*?’

Out of the direct glare of the sun and in the shade now, Lourds smiled ruefully and rubbed the back of his neck. The translation of those documents had earned him a lot of attention, as much negative as positive. He still didn’t know if the time spent on them was a career milestone or a misstep.

‘Actually,’ he said, ‘those documents weren’t called *Bedroom Pursuits*. That was the unfortunate nickname

given to them by the members of the mass media who covered the story.’

‘My apologies. I didn’t mean to offend.’

‘You didn’t.’

‘But those documents were the histories of the author’s sexual conquests, correct?’

‘Possibly. Perhaps they were only his fantasies. Walter Mitty by way of Hugh Hefner. They were rather vivid.’

‘And surprisingly explicit.’

‘You’ve read them?’

‘I have.’ Leslie’s tanned cheeks flamed. ‘I have to say that they are quite . . . compelling.’

‘Then you also know that some critics called my translation pornography of the poorest sort. An ancient version of *Penthouse*.’

Delight shone in Leslie’s green eyes. ‘Oh, now you’re just being salacious.’

‘How so?’ Lourds raised his eyebrows innocently.

‘A university professor with knowledge of *Penthouse* magazine?’

‘Before I was a professor,’ Lourds said, ‘I was also a college student. In my experience, most male college students have at least a passing acquaintance with it.’

‘Even though that translation got you lambasted among the pedagogue crowd, I know several top professors who say it was an important piece of work on a difficult document.’

‘It was a challenge.’ Lourds warmed to the topic, hardly noticing the passers-by. Voices out in the street offered bargains in Arabic, English, French and local

dialects, but he paid them no attention. ‘The original document was written in Coptic, which was taken from the Greek alphabet. The man who created it also added in a number of letters, some used only for words that were originally Greek. The document, written by a man who called himself Anthony, doubtless after the saint, though the man was more of a satyr, or at least he imagined himself so, at first looked like gibberish.’

‘Other linguistic experts had tried to translate it, but none of it made any sense. You figured out that it was written in code. I didn’t know codes existed that far back.’

‘The first known codes are attributed to the Romans. Julius Caesar used a simple letter substitution, or shift, to mask messages to his military commanders. His traditional shift traded three spaces.’

‘A becomes D.’

‘Yes.’

‘We used to do those when I was a girl.’

‘At the time, the shift was a clever scheme, but even then Caesar’s enemies quickly caught on. So it is today. Substitution codes are no longer used by anyone interested in keeping things truly secret. They’re too easy to crack. In the English language, the most often used letter is E, and the second most used is T. Once you can ascertain those values in a block of text, the rest of the letters fall into place.’

‘But the *Bed*—, that is to say, the piece that you deciphered, was unusual.’

‘Against what we’ve uncovered so far from that time period, yes. Given the content, the writer had every reason to code his words.’

‘The thing that made it even more interesting to me as I read your translation was that the Copts were an extremely religious sect. Even by today’s standards, that document is a bit shocking. So something like that would have been quite...’ Leslie faltered for words, evidently unsure of how risqué to be.

‘Exotic,’ Lourds supplied. ‘Or inflammatory, depending on your point of view. Of course, today’s standards are a lot more confined than they were back in the ancient world – a legacy left over from Saint Augustine, the Victorians and the Puritans, among others. But even by ancient standards, those documents were inflammatory. Possibly even dangerous to the life of the writer. I agree. So he was careful. In addition to the coding, the document was also written in the Sahidic dialect.’

‘What’s the distinction? Isn’t it still a Coptic language?’

‘Not exactly. The Sahidic dialect was an offshoot of the original Copt language.’

‘Which began as Greek.’

Lourds nodded. He liked the young woman. She was quick and knowledgeable, and she seemed genuinely interested in what he had to say. Some of the doubts he’d felt about agreeing to this meeting started to fade. The university was always looking for ways in which to increase its exposure to the public, but

that didn't always turn out favourably for the professors put on the firing line. Most journalists and reporters only listened long enough to hear a sound bite they could use – even taken out of context – to make whatever points they wanted to make. Lourds had seen his share of what could happen when a professor was chewed up by the media. It wasn't pretty. So far, he had held his own, but his work with *Bedroom Pursuits* had come closer to the edge than he'd liked.

'Sahidic was originally called Thebaic, and was used in literary form beginning around 300 AD. Much of the Bible was translated into this language. Coptic became the standard dialect for the Coptic Orthodox Church. Later, in the eleventh century, Hakem b'Amr Allah pretty much abolished the Christian faith, chasing it into hiding.'

'So much turmoil,' Leslie commented.

'Here as well as around the world. Conquerors often try to destroy the language of a civilization they overpower. Look at what happened to Gaelic when the English conquered the Scots. The clans were forbidden from speaking it, from wearing their hereditary dress, even from playing the bagpipes. Killing their language breaks a conquered people's connection with their history.'

'Takes away their knowledge, you mean?'

'More than that,' Lourds said. 'Language is ingrained in people. I believe it gives them a sense of who they are and where they're headed in their lives. It . . . shapes them.'

‘By that definition, even rap singers create a language.’

‘No. They don’t exactly create it. They’re lifting it from their people, then turning it into a unique art form much as Shakespeare did the English language.’

‘Comparing rap singers to Shakespeare? That would be considered scandalous in some academic circles. Even dangerous.’

Lourds grinned ruefully. ‘Maybe. Probably more a flagrant violation of scholarship than a killing matter. But it’s true. If a section of people divide from the larger majority, they tend to develop their own language. Just as university professors and reporters – each with a defined field – develop specialized words that provide a shorthand method of commentary within that group. Or a culture may develop an entirely new language to avoid being understood by a larger population they exist within. A major case in point is the Gypsies.’

‘I knew they had their own language.’

‘Do you know how Gypsies came about?’

‘Mother and Father Gypsy?’ she guessed.

Lourds laughed. ‘At some point, yes. But in the beginning, they were probably low-caste Hindus recruited into a mercenary army to fight against the Islamic conquerors. Or they may have been slaves taken by the Muslim conquerors. Either way, or even if neither of those two answers are right, the Gypsies became their own people and created their own language.’

‘Subjugation leads to the creation of a language?’

‘It can. Or the destruction of one. Language is one of the most highly evolved tools and skill sets humanity has fashioned. Language can unite or divide people as quickly and easily as skin colour, politics, religious beliefs, or wealth.’ Lourds peered at her, surprised at himself for talking so much. And at the fact that the young woman’s eyes hadn’t glazed over as yet. ‘Sorry. Caught me in a lecturing moment. Am I boring you?’

‘On the contrary. I find myself more fascinated than ever. And I can’t wait to show you our *mysterious* challenge. Have you had lunch?’

‘No.’

‘Good. Then I’m inviting you to lunch.’

‘I’m honoured,’ he said. ‘And hungry.’ And hopeful of getting an interesting meal here, though he didn’t say that to his hostess.

Lourds lifted the backpack he carried and heaved it over his shoulder. It contained his notebook computer and several texts that he felt he couldn’t travel without. Much of the information in them was duplicated in his computer’s hard drive, but he loved the feel and smell of books when he had his choice between virtual and actual text. Some of the texts had travelled with him for twenty years and more.

He walked beside Leslie as they made their way through the foot traffic and vendors, listening to the sing-song voices of hawkers calling out their wares. Alexandria was in full swing, hustling for a living one more day between tourists and thieves.

An uncomfortable sensation of being watched grew in the middle of Lourds' back. Over the years of travelling in foreign countries, including many troubled nations in far parts of the globe, he'd learned to heed such warnings. A time or two, those feelings had saved his life. He paused a moment, looking back, trying to see if anyone in the crowd was showing any undue interest in him. But all he saw was a sea of faces, all of them moving and jostling as they skirted the traffic.

'What is it?' Leslie asked.

Lourds shook his head. He was imagining things. *Serves me right for reading that spy novel on the plane*, he chided himself.

'Nothing,' he said. He fell into step beside Leslie once more as they crossed Hurriya Street. No one seemed to be following them. But the feeling didn't go away.

'Did he see you?'

Standing across the busy expanse of Hurriya Street, Patrizio Gallardo watched the tall university professor striding away. Gallardo let out a tense breath. He still didn't know everything that was going on. His contact, Stefano Murani – Cardinal Murani, these days – was close-mouthed with his secrets. That was how their employers had taught them to be.

Both of them had been recruited by the Society of Quirinus for their respective strengths. Murani had come from an aristocratic family that lived on old money. With that as his stepping stone, he'd gone

into the Catholic Church, quickly rising through the ranks to become a cardinal. In his position at Vatican City, Murani had access to secret documents and papers that had never been in the public eye.

Gallardo came to the Society's attention another way. His father, Saverio Gallardo, was part of an organized crime family in Italy that harvested money from the unwary. Patrizio Gallardo tried the organized crime route, but hadn't been very happy with working under his father's thumb, despite his talent for the trade. He liked the work, and – working for the right person – it paid really well. Anybody could shove a gun in someone's face and demand their money but not everybody had the guts to pull the trigger and wipe the blood from their face afterward. Patrizio Gallardo did. And that was what he did for the Society. It was what he was prepared to do today. All the Society had to do was point.

Today they had pointed at university professor Thomas Lourds.

'Did he see you?' Cimino asked again.

Gallardo glanced at their quarry. This time he didn't stare at the man, just took in the whole street scene. Lourds continued on his way, chatting amiably with the woman.

'No,' Gallardo replied into his small headset mostly hidden by his shirt collar. He was almost six feet tall, a blunt fireplug of a man in his early forties. Browned by the desert sun, scarred from battles against people who had tried to take from him and from people he'd taken from, he was a round-faced man with thick

black hair, unshaven jaw, and a heavy mono-brow arranged in a scowl over close-set eyes. Anyone who met his direct gaze usually crossed the street to avoid his path.

‘We could ambush this man,’ Cimino said. ‘Killing him would be easy. Then we could take what we came for.’

‘If we kill Lourds now,’ Gallardo pointed out, ‘there’s a chance that we won’t find the artefact we’re looking for. He doesn’t have the artefact. We have to wait until the woman leads us to it.’

Stepping out to the curb, Gallardo waved a hand.

Three blocks down the busy thoroughfare, a ten-year-old cargo truck surged away from a side street and motored along Hurriya Street. It pulled in at the curb and Gallardo climbed into the passenger seat. The dirty windshield blunted some of the sun’s stare. The air-conditioning wheezed asthmatically and only brought slight relief from the unrelenting heat.

Gallardo mopped his face with a handkerchief and cursed. He looked at the driver. ‘How’s our guest?’

DiBenedetto shook his head and took a hit off his Turkish cigarette. He was young and hard-edged, maintaining a steady morphine addiction that would one day be the end of him. He was a ruthless killer by choice, even worse than Cimino because the drug robbed him of most of his feelings. He only stayed loyal to Gallardo because Gallardo provided enough of the drug to keep the addict happy.

‘He still hasn’t talked?’ Gallardo asked.

DiBenedetto turned and smiled at Gallardo. His

face was young despite the drug-taking. He was twenty-two, but his ice-blue eyes were ancient and alien. If humanity and compassion had ever dwelt there, they were long gone.

‘He screams,’ the young killer said. ‘He cries. He pleads. Sometimes he even tries to guess at what we want to know. But he doesn’t know.’ He shrugged. ‘It’s pathetic. Still, Farok has enjoyed the struggle to get him to talk.’

Gallardo opened the panel that connected the truck’s cab to the cargo area.

Their guest lay in the back. His name was James Kale. He was a television producer on the show *Ancient Worlds, Ancient People*. In his late thirties, he’d been a handsome man before Gallardo’s butchers had got to him. Now his ginger-coloured hair was matted with his blood, his face torn by brass knuckles, one eye was gouged out. They’d also amputated the fingers of his right hand and castrated him.

The last had been Farok’s touch. The Arab was cruel, taking pleasure in the torture he inflicted.

Kale lay curled in a foetal ball, his maimed hand held tightly against his chest. His pants were dark with blood. More blood covered the interior of the cargo space, streaking the floor and the walls, even sprayed onto the ceiling. The producer was balanced precariously on the ragged edge of living, about to take a last plunge into the abyss.

Farok sat with his back against the side of the van and smoked a cigarette. He was in his fifties, a dark, hard man dressed in a blood-stained burnoose. Grey

flecked his beard, but there was blood mixed in there, too. He looked up at Gallardo and smiled.

‘He still insists,’ the Arab said in his guttural accent, ‘that he knows nothing of the artefacts the woman is going to show to the professor.’ He dropped a hand to Kale’s thigh.

Kale yelped and drew his trembling leg away.

Farok moved, caressed the producer’s leg. ‘I have to admit, after I claimed his eggs, I began to believe him.’

The bloody sight disgusted Gallardo. He’d seen such things before. In fact, he’d even done them, and would again if he had no one to do them for him. But he didn’t care for it. He looked at Farok, then drew a line under his chin with his forefinger.

Smiling, the Arab pulled a straight razor from inside his burnoose. Dropping ash from his cigarette, he leaned forward and smoothed Kale’s hair, causing the man to flinch and cry out in fear. Gripping a fistful of hair, Farok yanked his victim’s head back and slashed his exposed throat with the knife.

Gallardo turned away and closed the panel. He concentrated on watching the professor and the television woman.

2

‘Hi. This is James Kale. If you’ve reached this message, I’m obviously not answering the phone. Either I’m busy or I’ve dropped signal. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I’m able. And, Mum, if this is you, I love you.’

Listening to the familiar message, Leslie Crane frowned. James was reliable. He prided himself on staying available to the people he worked with. He should be answering his phone. Unless he’d let the darned thing run out of juice – again. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d done it. Leslie was going to tie the man to his recharger one of these days.

‘Is something wrong?’ Lourds asked. He sat across from her at the small table in the outdoor café where she’d taken him for lunch.

Traffic passed by slowly accompanied by men on camels and horses. Donkeys pulled carts with rubber bicycle tyres heading for the suqs. The open-air markets drew many of the locals as well as the tourists. The locals bought fresh vegetables while the tourists bought keepsakes and gifts for relatives. Even though she’d been here for a few days, Leslie still marvelled at the way the modern city seemed somehow jammed into a way of life that had existed for thousands of years.

The waiter had cleared away their plates after an array of dishes that included *molokhiyya* soup with rabbit, *torhy* casserole made with lamb, grilled pigeon breasts stuffed with seasoned rice, melon slices and grapes, followed by raisin cake soaked in milk and served hot and cups of Turkish coffee.

‘I was trying to call my producer,’ Leslie explained.

‘Is he staying nearby?’ Lourds asked. ‘We could wander over that way and check on him.’

‘There’s no need. I’m sure he’s fine. James is a big boy, and I’m certainly not his mother. He should be at the set. I’ll check in with him when we get there.’

‘So what got you into show business?’ he asked.

‘Do I detect disapproval?’

He grinned. ‘Perhaps wariness is a better word choice.’

‘You don’t like television?’

‘I do. But I often find it self-serving.’

Challenged a little, Leslie said, ‘I love being on camera. I love seeing myself on television. More than that, my dad and mum like seeing me there, too. So I try to do as much of it as I can.’ She grinned. ‘Is that self-serving enough for you?’

‘Yes. And more honest than I’d expected.’

‘What about you?’ she asked. ‘Why are you willing to be part of this series? Does it play to some dark part of your vanity?’

‘Not at all,’ Lourds assured her. ‘If it hadn’t been for the dean and the board of directors prodding me to go, I would have graciously declined. I’m here at

the university's insistence and because it offered me a chance to return to Alexandria once more. I love this place.'

Intrigued, Leslie rested her chin on her crossed hands, elbows resting on the table. She stared into his warm grey eyes. 'But if you hadn't agreed, you wouldn't have been able to enjoy this lovely place.'

'And the lovely woman who brought me here.' Lourds' eyes met hers evenly, holding them for a moment.

Warmth spread throughout Leslie that had nothing to do with the afternoon sun. *Oh, you are good, Professor Lourds. I'm going to have to be careful around you.*

DiBenedetto pulled the truck into an alley only a few blocks from the open-air café where Lourds now sat with Leslie Crane. Before they'd come to a full stop, a five-year-old German Mercedes slid into the alley after them. Gallardo caught sight of the car in the side mirror.

He reached under the lightweight jacket he wore and gripped the 9mm pistol in the shoulder holster. 'Pietro,' he called over the headset.

'Yes,' Pietro's gravelly voice responded. 'It's me. Don't shoot.'

Relaxing a little, Gallardo kept his hand on the pistol as the Mercedes slid to a stop behind the truck. He peered through the smoky glass and saw Pietro's impressive bulk seated behind the wheel of the luxury car.

Gallardo slid out of the vehicle. DiBenedetto fell

into step with him. They swung open doors of the sedan and dropped into seats.

Farok climbed out of the truck in a clean burnoose. He'd left the bloody one inside the rear compartment. For a moment, he occupied himself with carefully closing the door behind himself. Even after the back of the truck was sealed, the smell of petrol whipped through the alley. Satisfied with his handiwork, Farok joined them in the car. He stank of petrol as well.

'Everything set?' Gallardo asked.

Farok nodded and passed James Kale's identification, passport and personal effects to him. The corpse had been stripped clean.

'Yes. Everything is set,' Farok said. 'I doused the interior with the petrol and detergent, and I rigged a road flare to the door. When anyone opens the cargo area, the interior of the truck will become an inferno.'

Gallardo nodded. The petrol and detergent mixture was a poor man's substitute for napalm. It would burn hot and concentrated, making immediate identification of the body very difficult – even more difficult than the loss of all his identity papers now in their possession. The truck had been stolen last night in preparation for its use this morning. There was nothing in it that would tie it back to them.

Pietro drove through the other end of the alley and pulled out onto the street, drawing angry honks from the other drivers and startling a camel.

'Cimino,' Gallardo called over the radio.

'I'm here,' Cimino said. 'They're moving again.'

'Are they still on foot?'

‘Yes.’

‘Drop out of the loop. Get someone else in there.’

‘All right.’

Gallardo’s stomach tightened. They’d followed the trail of the artefact that Stefano Murani had charged them with finding for eight months. The trail had finally led them from Cairo, where the artefact had only been a whisper, to Alexandria, where Gallardo should have known it probably was anyway.

The problem with illegal artefacts was that they left no trail, or a spotty trail at best. And if some of them hadn’t moved much, as this one had not – the shopkeeper who had sold it had reported that it had languished on a shelf in a back room for seventeen years – then the trail was masked by the passage of time as well.

Even before they’d killed the producer, three dead men lay along the bloody trail they’d followed from Cairo. All of them had been dealers in rare – and stolen – antiquities.

‘They’re headed back to the studio,’ Cimino said.

A hollow *boom* sounded from the left, in the direction of the place they’d left the truck. Turning, Gallardo saw a cloud of smoke mushroom into the air above the buildings. Sirens sounded soon after.

‘Well, now,’ DiBenedetto mused from the back seat, ‘that didn’t take long, did it? This city is filled with thieving bastards.’

‘A few less of them at the moment, perhaps,’ Farok chimed in.

They exchanged a high five.

Gallardo ignored the bloodthirstiness of his hirelings. It was normal for them, and it was why he employed them. He turned his thoughts to the studio room. He and his men had already been there once in preparation. They knew the layout. Going inside today would be easy.

‘Put them there,’ Leslie directed. ‘While we’re setting up, has anybody heard from James?’

‘No, but he approved the set and the camera layout last night,’ one of the young men, the one running the camera, said. ‘He was going to check out some new locations today.’

‘Thanks, Gary,’ Leslie said. ‘Tell me if he calls in.’ She turned her attention to the arrangement of the objects she wanted Lourds to look at.

Seated at a small desk at the back of the large room, Lourds watched the young woman’s preparations with mounting interest. She’d obviously gone to the effort of making the presentation of the artefacts she’d promised to show him elaborate. They were even recording the event.

A slim man of Egyptian ancestry crossed the room pulling a wheeled aluminium pilot’s case behind him. With an air for the theatrical which would have fitted him perfectly for life on the stage at Kom Al-Dikka, the man produced a key and slid it into the locks holding the case shut. He snapped open the locks and put the key away.

Lourds was only partially distracted by the sound of emergency vehicles attending to a nearby problem.

One of Leslie's crew had reported that there was a vehicle fire of some kind only a few streets over. Official vehicles were, according to the kid, swarming like flies.

Moving slowly, the man reached into the case and removed six objects, placing them reverently on the desk in front of Lourds. When the man was finished, he bowed to Leslie, who thanked him, then he went to stand nearby.

Lourds looked around the room, unable to keep from smiling. Six young men and women stood with Leslie, waiting to see what he would do. He felt like a kid playing his favourite game.

'What do you find so humorous?' Leslie asked.

'This.' Lourds waved his hand at the six objects. 'Every year at the university, students bring me things to read. Usually replicas, though. Not the real thing.'

'My resources run somewhat deeper than the average university student's.' Leslie's voice held a note of determination. She was evidently not prepared to have her investment of time and research casually tossed off.

'That they do.' And Lourds meant that as a compliment. 'Still, this is rather like a stage magician at a dinner party. He hasn't gone there to entertain, yet once other people find out what he does, they want him to do magic tricks so they can "ooh" and "ahh" over them.'

'Or maybe they want to catch him in a pratfall, landing him flat on his arse,' one of the young men

volunteered. His head was shaved and he sported tattoos all over his arms.

‘Is that what Ms Crane is hoping for?’ Lourds asked him. ‘A pratfall?’

The young man shrugged. ‘Dunno. I bet her a few pounds you couldn’t read ’em all. But I think she hopes you get ’em all right.’

‘I don’t mind having a few extra pounds, Neil,’ Leslie responded. ‘I’m confident Professor Lourds is exactly what Harvard claims him to be: proficient in all known ancient languages.’

‘Proficient,’ Lourds corrected, ‘in several.’ *Though I can find my way through all*, he amended to himself. It wasn’t bragging. He could.

‘Sounds like he’s laying out his excuses, he does,’ Neil said, grinning.

The building was one of the older ones in the city. Air-conditioning here was an afterthought. As a result, the room was comfortable, but not hermetically sealed like the hotel environment Lourds had left. They were in a corner office. One set of windows overlooked the grey-green Mediterranean and the other had a fine view of downtown Alexandria. Lourds was willing to bet he could probably see Kom Al-Dikka from the window.

Leslie had told him the office had been stripped and set up to handle the television show’s production needs. A small set, lit and ready to go, occupied one side of the room, which was blocked off from the windows so they could control the light. It was decorated to look like someone’s study, with bookcases

full of fake books behind the desk where Lourds had been told he'd sit. The desk was larger and better than the one he had in his office at Harvard. Covered with computer equipment that looked capable of launching spacecraft, it looked like it fit the rock-star status the programme aspired to lend him.

The other side of the room, and the majority of the space, was filled with cameras, boom microphones and sound and audio equipment that lined shelves. Bundled wires snaked in all directions and looked as though they were barely being kept under control. The whole room was, Lourds found, somewhat intimidating.

Lourds picked up the first item, a wooden box about six inches long by four inches wide by two inches deep. Colourful hieroglyphics were traced on the top and sides. Lifting the lid, he found a small figurine of a mummy.

'Do you know what this is?' Lourds turned the small box around to display the contents to the group of television personnel.

'A *shabti*,' Leslie said.

'Very good. Do you know what a *shabti* is?'

'A good-luck piece that was left in an Egyptian tomb.'

'Not exactly.' Lourds tapped the figure. 'A *shabti* figurine was supposed to represent the deceased's major domo, someone who would work in the after-life for him.'

'It's one thing to know what it is,' Neil suggested, 'but it's another to read the writing.'

‘It’s from chapter six of the *Book of the Dead*.’ Lourds studied the inscription, not wanting to assume in case someone had altered the writing that should have been there. But everything was as it was supposed to be. He read the hieroglyphics easily. ‘If N is called up to do any work that is done there in the underworld, then the checkmarks (on the work list) are struck for him there as for a man for his (work service) duty be counted yourself at any time that might be done to cultivate the marsh, to irrigate the riverbank fields, to ferry sand west or east. “I am doing it – see, I am here,” you are to say.’

Leslie glanced down at her notebook, then handed it over to Neil.

‘So he got one right,’ Neil said, handing the notebook back. ‘For all you know, he memorized that passage.’

Lourds moved on to the next item: a replicated papyrus written in Coptic which looked entirely too familiar. He glanced up at Leslie. ‘This is from the coded document I translated.’

‘It is,’ she agreed. ‘Since they didn’t have a books on tape version, I thought I’d like to hear an audio presentation.’

Neil looked at her. ‘Is this the kinky thing you told me about?’

‘Yes.’ Her brilliant green eyes never left Lourds’.

A challenge, then? Lourds was amused and interested to see how far she’d let him go. After all, he’d had to present the piece a fair number of times at different committees, including the dean’s house for a celebra-

tion on the translation's acceptance. The reading, rendered with an orator's skill that had developed naturally from Lourds' years as a teacher, had been a major hit and had set academic tongues to wagging scandalously. She didn't know his world at all if she thought mere words could embarrass or frighten him here.

He read the first section of the document aloud, then translated it. Leslie stopped Lourds before the first session of foreplay got serious. 'All right,' she said, blushing. 'You know the text. Move on to the next one.'

'Are you sure?' Lourds said. 'I'm quite familiar with this.' He purposefully didn't clarify whether he was familiar with the text . . . or the technique presented. His words were every bit as much a challenge as hers were.

'I'm sure,' she said. 'I don't want the network bigwigs twitching.'

'Wow, man,' Neil said, grinning from ear to ear. 'That's brill. Didn't know porn could sound so . . . so . . . bitching.'

Lourds didn't bother to correct the misrepresentation of the piece. It wasn't intended to be porn – not exactly. It was more a diary of the writer's experiences – a reminder of his past. But read aloud now, its use had changed. Once a listener heard words, the words as well as the meaning became subjective, applied to what that individual's view was on life and the moment. For Neil, it probably was porn.

The third piece was Ethiopian, written in Ge'ez, which was *abugida*. As a grapheme form, transcribed in signs, it denoted consonants with inherent trailing vowels. Besides Ethiopia, the form was also used by certain Canadian Native American tribes – the Algonquian, Athabaskan and Inuit – as well as the Brahmic family of languages – south Asia, south-east Asia, Tibet, Mongolia. It had penetrated east as far as Korea. The piece was a length of elephant tusk used by a trader to record his journey into what was then called the Horn of Africa. From what Lourds gathered from the record, it had been intended as a gift to the man's eldest son, a marker and a challenge to go further and dare more than his father had.

Evidently Lourds' translation matched what Leslie had in her notes, because she kept nodding as he read.

The fourth piece seized Lourds' attention completely. It was a ceramic bell, probably once used by a priest or shaman to call a community to prayer or announcement. It was divided into two sections: there was a clapper at the top and a reservoir for holding herbs at the bottom. A ring at the top invited speculation that it had hung from a shepherd's crook or a similarly shaped staff. The piece had the bur-nished look of an object that had been handled and cared for continuously over many centuries, perhaps even over millennia. The reservoir might even have held oil at one time to provide an ancient lantern for the bearer.

The inscription on the bell truly set it apart from

the other pieces Lourds had sitting before him. In fact, the most fascinating aspect about the bell was the writing that went around it.

He couldn't read it. Not only that, he'd never seen anything like it in his life.

In the alley behind the building where the television people had their rented rooms, Gallardo got out of the car. He stepped quickly to the back of the vehicle, followed by Farok and DiBenedetto.

Pietro released the trunk latch from inside. The lid rose slowly, revealing the duffels stashed within. Unzipping the top duffel, Gallardo took out a Heckler & Koch MP5. He added a specially modified silencer to the weapon as Cimino joined them.

Cimino was a thick, squat man who spent all his time in gyms. His drug of choice was steroids, and he kept himself painfully close to overuse, staying just this side of healthy and sane. His square head was shaved. Aviator sunglasses bisected his face.

'They're inside?' Gallardo asked.

'Yes.' Cimino picked up a machine pistol as well.

'Security?'

'Building only. Not much of that.' Cimino threaded a silencer into place on his weapon with practised ease.

'Sounds good to me.' Farok armed one of the machine pistols, then dropped it into a canvas bag and slung it over his shoulder.

'All right,' Gallardo said, feeling a thrill sizzle through his stomach in anticipation of the action and

the success he knew was soon going to be his. He tapped the bag, then entered the building's side entrance.

Feeling as though someone was pulling a fast one on him, Lourds examined the writing more closely, thinking perhaps it had been inscribed recently upon an ancient bell – which would have been foolish under the circumstances because such an act would have destroyed the bell's huge intrinsic value – to fool him. If it was a forgery, it was a masterpiece. The inscription felt smooth to the touch. In places it was even worn to the point that it was almost faded.

Yep. If it was a fake, it was a damned good one.

Operating by instinct, Lourds reached into his backpack, which was beside his chair, and took out a soft graphite pencil and a tablet containing sheets of onion-skin tracing paper. Placing a sheet of paper on the bell, he rubbed the pencil against the surface, creating a negative image of the inscription.

'What are you doing?' Neil asked.

Lourds ignored the question, consumed by the puzzle that was before him. He took a small digital camera from his backpack and took pictures of the bell from all sides. The camera's flash, especially when used on smooth ceramic, didn't always allow the image to pick up shallow markings. That's why he'd done the rubbings.

He was engrossed. He didn't even notice when Leslie approached and stood on the other side of the desk.

‘What’s going on?’ Leslie asked.

‘Where did you get this?’ Lourds asked, turning the bell in his hands. The clapper *pinged* softly against the side.

‘From a shop.’

‘What shop?’

‘An antiquities shop. His father’s shop.’ Leslie nodded toward the man standing against the wall. The man looked a little worried.

Lourds pinned the man with his gaze, not wishing to be trifled with. If that’s what this was, of course. He was halfway convinced that this wasn’t a joke. It felt far too elaborate. The bell felt real.

‘Where did this come from?’ Lourds asked in Arabic.

‘From my father, sir,’ the man said politely. ‘The young lady requested that we put something old in with the other items. To better test you, she said. My father and I told her we could not read what was written on the bell either, so we didn’t know what it said.’ He hesitated. ‘The young woman said this was all right.’

‘Where did your father get this bell?’

The man shook his head. ‘I don’t know. It’s been in his shop for years. He tells me that no one seems to be able to tell him what it is.’

Lourds switched back to English and looked at Leslie. ‘I want to talk to his father. See the shop where this bell came from.’

Leslie looked surprised. ‘All right. I’m sure we can arrange that. What’s wrong?’

‘I can’t read this.’ Lourds looked at the bell again, still not believing what he knew to be true.

‘It’s okay,’ Leslie told him. ‘I don’t think anyone’s really going to believe that you can read all those languages. You knew a lot of others. The people who watch our show will still be impressed. *I’m* impressed.’

Lourds told himself to be patient. Leslie truly didn’t understand the problem.

‘I’m an authority in the languages spoken here,’ he told her. ‘Civilization as we know it began not far from here. The languages used here, living and dead, are as familiar to me as my own hand. Given that, this writing should be in one of the Altaic languages. Turkic, Mongolic or Tungusic.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘It’s a family of languages,’ Lourds explained, ‘that encompassed this area. It’s where all language here sprang from although the subject is hotly contested by linguists. Some linguists believe the Altaic language resulted from a genetically inherited language, words and ideas – and perhaps even symbols – that are written somewhere in our genetic code.’

‘Genes predispose language?’ Leslie arched a narrow eyebrow in surprise. ‘I’ve never heard of anything like that.’

‘Nor should you. I don’t believe it’s true. There’s another, more simplistic reason why so many languages at the time shared common traits.’ Lourds calmed himself. ‘All those people, with all their different languages, lived in close proximity. They traded with one another, all of them in pursuit of the

same things. They had to have common words in order to do that.’

‘Sort of like the computer explosion and the internet,’ Leslie said. ‘Most of the computer terms are in English since the United States developed much of the technology. Other countries simply used the English words because they had no words in their own language to describe the computer parts and terminology.’

Lourds smiled. ‘Exactly. A very good analogy, by the way.’

‘Thank you.’

‘That theory is called the *Sprachbund*.’

‘What is the *Sprachbund*?’

‘It’s the convergence area for a group of people who ultimately end up partially sharing a language. When the Crusades took place, during the battles between the Christians and the Muslims, language and ideas were traded back and forth as much as arrows and sword blows. Those wars were as much about expanding trade as they were about securing the Holy Land.’

‘You’re telling me that they ended up speaking each others’ language.’

‘The people who fought or traded, yes. Bits of it. We still carry the history of that conflict in modern English. Words like assassin, azimuth, cotton, even the words cipher and decipher. They come from the Arabic word *sifi*, which is the number zero. The symbol for zero was central to many codes. But this artefact shares nothing with the native languages of

this area – or with any language I’ve ever heard or seen.’ Lourds held up the bell. ‘In those early years, craftsmen – especially craftsmen who wrote and kept records – would be part of that *Sprachbund*. That’s a logical assumption. But this bell . . .?’ He shook his head. ‘It’s an anomaly. I don’t know where it came from. If it’s not a forgery, and it doesn’t feel like one, what we’re looking at is an artefact from some place other than the Middle East.’

‘What other place?’

Lourds sighed. ‘That’s the problem. I don’t know. And I should know that as well.’

‘You think we have a real find here, don’t you?’ Excitement gleamed in Leslie’s eyes.

‘A find,’ Lourds agreed tentatively, ‘or an aberration.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The inscription on that bell could be . . . humbug, for lack of a better term. Simply nonsense made up to decorate the bell.’

‘Wouldn’t you know, if that were the case? Wouldn’t it be easy to spot?’

Lourds frowned. She had him there. Even an artificial language would require a basis in logic. As such, he should be able to spot that as well.

‘Well?’ she pressed.

‘I should be able to tell. This looks authentic to me.’

Leslie smiled again and leaned toward the bell, regarding it with intensity. ‘If that’s truly written in a heretofore undiscovered language, then we’ve made an astonishing find.’

Before Lourds could respond, the door was suddenly ripped from its hinges. Armed men burst into the room, aiming their weapons at the people inside.

‘Everybody freeze!’ a man yelled in accented English.

Everybody froze.

Lourds thought he recognized an Italian accent in the man’s words.

The four armed men pressed into the room. They used their fists and their weapons to drive the whole television crew to the floor. All of Leslie’s people cowered there and remained still.

One of the men, the one who had spoken, crossed the room in long strides and grabbed Leslie by the arm.

Lourds stood instinctively, not able to calmly sit by and watch the young woman get hurt. But he wasn’t trained for this kind of thing. Sure, he’d spent time in rough parts of the world. But he’d been lucky. The worst violence he’d ever experienced personally was a dust-up in soccer.

The man put the machine pistol’s barrel to Leslie’s head. ‘Sit back down, Professor Lourds, or this pretty young woman dies.’

Lourds sat, but the fact that the man knew his name unnerved him.

‘Very good,’ the man said. ‘Put your hands on your head.’

Lourds complied. His stomach turned sour. Even as wild as it had sometimes been while he’d been in unsettled lands studying languages, he’d never had a gun pointed at him.

‘Down,’ the man ordered, dragging Leslie to the ground. When she was down, the man looked at the items on the desk. Without hesitation, he took the bell.

And that’s when he made his first mistake. He and his men took their eyes off Leslie.

Before Lourds fully realized what was happening, she pushed herself to her feet and flung herself at one of the men. She knocked him over and took his gun, then dived beneath the heavy desk at the back of the set in a single fluid motion.

Her move took the thieves by surprise. Clearly they weren’t expecting a mere woman to put up much of a fight. They had underestimated her, but they were clearly professional because it didn’t take long for them to catch up.

The sounds of gunfire filled the room as the desk took punishment it was never intended for. Bullets filled the air with wooden splinters.

Leslie fired back. Her shots were much louder than their attackers, and she clearly knew what she was doing. Bullet holes tracked the walls behind the four men, coughing out puffs of plaster dust that looked surreal to Lourds.

Meanwhile, the crew scrambled for cover.

So did the thieves.

No! Lourds thought. *No artefact is worth the deaths of all these people.*

Then he heard the familiar ping of Leslie’s sat-phone.

He could call for help.

In the middle of the chaos, Lourds rolled across the floor and dived behind the desk with Leslie.

'I'll talk. You shoot. Or we'll both die.'

'Good point,' she said.

She handed over the phone, already keyed to an emergency number. More gunfire. And then a scream. Lourds hoped that it was one of the robbers, not one of the crew, who had been hit.

When a burst of startled Arabic came across the line of the phone in his hand, Lourds started talking. Before he'd finished his second sentence, the sound of sirens outside intensified.

Help was on the way.

And the robbers could hear it, too.

They took off, one of them leaving a blood trail.

Leslie took off after them, holding her fire until she could get a clear shot.

Lourds followed, just in time to pull her out of the way as a final volley from the thieves splintered the office door.

On the floor, terrified but still whole, Lourds wrapped his arms around Leslie. He felt the sweet press of female flesh against his body and decided if he had to die in that instant that there were worse ways to go.

He held onto the woman, trapping her body under his.

'What do you think you were doing?' Lourds demanded of Leslie. 'Do you want to get killed?'

'They're getting away!' Leslie tried to pull free from his grasp.

‘Yes, and they should. They should get far away. They have automatic weapons, they outnumber us, and the police are coming – most of the force if the sound is any indication. You’ve already saved our necks. It’s enough. Put that gun down and let the professionals take over.’

Leslie relaxed in his arms. For a moment he thought this was the point she was going to remonstrate with him and call him a coward. He’d discovered that good sense was often confused with cowardice in the heat of the moment by people watching from the sidelines.

Two of the young men from the production crew poked their heads up from where they were hiding. When they weren’t shot on the spot, Lourds deemed it safe enough to stand. He did so, helping Leslie to her feet.

Walking out to the hall, Lourds stared at the bullet holes that marred the hallway’s end as well as the walls, ceiling and floor. The bad guys hadn’t been sharpshooters, but they’d certainly sprayed enough bullets into the general vicinity to make a statement.

‘Call the police,’ Lourds told one of the young Arabic men. ‘Tell them that the thieves have gone, and the only ones left here are us. We want them aware of that when they get here or things could get exciting again.’

One of the crew, already pale, turned white and dived for the phone.

Leslie pulled away from Lourds and ran to a window. She looked out over the city.

Lourds joined her, but he saw nothing.

‘We lost the bell,’ she said, ‘before we even knew what it was.’

‘That’s not entirely true,’ Lourds told her. ‘I took copies of the inscription on the rubbing as well as taking a full set of photos of the bell with the digital camera. We may have lost the bell itself, but not the secrets it contains. Whatever they are, they aren’t totally beyond our grasp.’

But he had to wonder if pursuing the puzzle wasn’t going to put them back in front of someone’s guns. Somebody had wanted that bell enough to kill him and the entire crew for it. Would they kill to squash research about it as well? That wasn’t what being a professor of linguistics was about.

Nor was talking to a hundred revved up Egyptian cops.

But, judging from the sounds of the footsteps in the hall, it looked like he was about to learn all sorts of new things today.