

A movie poster for 'Relic: Awakened Chronicles'. The background is a dramatic, low-angle shot of a stone building with a large, dark, muscular figure emerging from behind it. The figure has glowing red eyes and is surrounded by bright yellow lightning bolts. The sky is a fiery orange and red, with small white particles floating in the air. The title 'Relic' is written in a large, stylized, glowing font at the bottom, with 'A WAKENED CHRONICLES' in a smaller, simpler font below it.

HARLEY AUSTIN

Relic

A WAKENED CHRONICLES

AWAKENED CHRONICLES:
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INVICTUS

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DECEPTION

VALOR

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NOVUS

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ASCENSION

AWAKENED CHRONICLES

RELIC

HARLEY AUSTIN

HARLEY AUSTIN PUBLISHING

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Published by Harley Austin Publishing | HarleyAustin.com

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-5489-3172-8

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*For my beautiful angel;
the love of my life and the very best friend
anyone could ever hope to have.*

RELIC

PROLOGUE

Roberts lifted himself from the bed of his small cell. It wasn't anywhere near the opulence of the stateroom of what *The Neptune* had been, but it also wasn't even close to some of the Middle Eastern hellholes he'd found himself breaking others out of a decade ago either.

He sighed. Fifteen years he'd spent aboard her, his flagship, the mighty *Neptune*. She'd been good to him, and he to her. There wasn't an equal to that vessel anywhere at sea. They'd taken on Eastern battleships and left them on fire and sinking, with her taking barely a scratch. His team was the best Naval crew on the planet—at least they had been, until that Ragod had dropped her crashing onto the grounds of the White House.

Sinclair. Bastard. Sniveling whelp.

The government called them ‘gods’, but they weren’t—not even close. They weren’t immortal and they sure as hell weren’t invincible. He’d bagged men a helluva lot tougher than this kid. His only mistake was underestimating the kid’s ability. *Fucking teleport*, he fumed silently in his mind.

The bar door of his cell opened automatically, right on time, just as it had done for the past nineteen months while he and his team cooled their jets at a maximum security installation in Florence, Colorado. ADX they called it. The ‘Alcatraz’ of the Rockies. Built to house America’s most vile underworld criminals, the prison was a veritable fortress; designed to withstand an assault from outside as much as it was to quell any kind of riot or disturbance inside. Once you were *in* ADX, you were never coming *out*.

Twenty-three hours a day he’d spend cooped up in the small, soundproof twelve-by-seven-foot room. No contact with other inmates and very little entertainment, unless you happened to be a fan of Jesus, then all of those channels were wide open all day long.

Three armed guards now escorted Roberts in handcuffs to an open-air atrium, where he could feel the warmth of the sun on his skin through a high-domed, thick-bar and screen-wired ceiling. Only today, it wasn’t summer and it wasn’t sunny. The air was chilly cold, maybe a little below freezing. The guards waited, like they always did, for him to walk around the small snowy space, stretching his limbs.

Perhaps they were bored. Or too cold. The guards he’d seen here at ADX didn’t impress him much. They didn’t make much money. That was a good thing. Little money attracted little talent, and that opened the door to offers and rewards—offers and rewards a handful of them had been unable to resist.

Nineteen months he’d spent in the solitude of his cell—and now all of that peace and quite was about to come to end.

The small device slipped from his sleeve. They'd missed it during their pat-down search after cuffing of him. A quick, gentle push of the button and the device emitted a soft flash that melted the links between his cuffs in a near instant of time.

"Hey!" Roberts watched as one of the guards who was actually paying attention began approaching him from across the atrium. His Glock already out and pointed directly at the trained ex-Navy Seal. He stopped a good distance from Roberts. "What was that flash?"

Roberts shrugged. Had the day been sunny, it was likely no one would have seen it.

"Turn around. Slowly." The guard waved his gun.

Roberts turned around, keeping his now freed arms together, the device still in his hands.

"What's that?" The guard ordered.

Roberts moved the black fob-looking device in his fingers. "Just a toy."

"Give it to me," the guard ordered.

"Sure," Roberts agreed. Holding it between his fingers, the guard approached to take it. The guard saw the second flash, but for him, that was all he saw before everything for him went suddenly dark.

Alarms sounded all over the facility as hundreds of guards ran to their posts, grabbing shotguns and other small arms.

"What the hell is going on out there?" The warden entered the control area while his eyes flashed over a war room of monitors showing everyone in their cells and the atriums filling with more of his people.

"Looks like a prison break attempt, Warden."

"Where?"

"Atrium 5".

"Let me see it—"

"Can't. Been trying to. The video's out for some reason."

"Yea. Some reason my ass. Get me online with someone's bodycam in the room!"

"I've got two coming online now—"

Both the technician and the warden watched as one of the officers walked cautiously up to the side of the thick reinforced concrete—where a five-foot hole had been burned cleanly through the twenty-four-inch wall.

"What in the hell—?" The warden breathed slowly; he wasn't exactly sure what he was seeing.

The guard surveyed the still hot smoldering reinforced concrete wall that looked like someone had just cut clean through. Beyond the wall, another three walls had similar holes, including the charged electric fence a hundred yards away.

"Jesus—" the warden stood, his hand moving over his face; he was not believing what he was seeing looking at the walls that seemed to have been slagged into now cooling molten lava. "Who was in there? And where is he now?"

The technician brought up the scheduling records. "Roy Roberts. And," the tech punched in a video number, "there's no one in his cell. It's empty."

"Dammit! I knew that rascal was being far too quiet. Notify the other prisons where the rest of his men are. Tell their wardens to go to lockdown. I don't want—"

"Sir—there's already intersystem messages coming in."

"Oh?"

"Looks like we're too late. Prison breaks also being reported in progress at Allenwood and Beaumont." Another alert faded onto his monitor, "And Lee," the worried tech looked up at the warden.

"Jesus. Dammit!" he fumed, punching the top of the technician's desk. "We should have saw this coming."

"Looks like the same kind of damage, Warden. Images are coming in now from Allenwood."

"I'm sure. Alright. Get me DOJ on the double. And conference in the other wardens. I want to know what the hell they have."

"Calls are already coming in, Warden."

"Alright, patch us in, Andy. This is about to become a very long day."

1

Sunshine broke into the round stone tower room through several of the open French doors draped in fine sheer fabrics that waved softly in the gentle morning sea breeze. The recently remodeled tower armory now turned elegant bedroom with all of the amenities and comforts of a modern home, was quiet, except for the subtle sounds of a now amorous couple making out beneath the thin white satiny cotton sheet of an oversized hand-carved sleigh bed.

"We're supposed to be using protection," Tori kissed him whispering, a smile crossing her lips.

"Hmm mmm," Liam groaned softly. "That's only in the States." Both kissed softly. "Your boss isn't in-charge here. You're on vacation, remember?"

Both laid side-by-side, their arms and legs entwined, with Liam intimately filling her, bare and unsheathed. He moved

ever so slowly inside her, delivering warm tingles both against her clit and over certain very sensitive places deep within her only his god-like member seemed to be able to reach.

The couple moved with each other, their feelings deeply entwined. Liam shimmered his feelings through hers; giving her the full but subtle sensation of how she made him feel. Tori bit her lip to keep from whining too loudly while the sensation floated through her.

"I love watching you do that." Liam moved his hand gently over the side of her face, watching her exhale now.

"Ahhh, God, Liam," she breathed into another kiss. "I love it when you do that ..."

Mac watched as her chopper landed smoothly on the helipad of *The Neptune* that now floated in the docked lagoon of the island somewhere north of Madagascar but not quite to the Seychelles. The private island mountain was technically a nature preserve of the Commonwealth, but all it took was money and a little U.S. Government influence to keep the locals and their municipalities out of the area.

Dressed casually, the demigoddess exited the aircraft, which departed just as fast as it had flown in. Mac kissed her sweetly on the lips as she embraced him and both began walking arm-in-arm into the main living areas of the newly redecorated and refurnished main cabin.

"I was surprised to get your text. Everything okay?" Mac turned to look at her once they were indoors.

"No. I got out here as fast as I could. There's been a prison break, Mac. He's out. Very armed and dangerous."

Mac nodded. "I told you he would. It was only a matter of time."

"You did, Mac. I tried to get all of them sent to maximum security; but they didn't listen."

He nodded. "It wouldn't have mattered even if they had, Monica. You don't know Roberts like I do. He's very patient. Meticulous."

"Temperamental," she added.

Mac nodded. "Only when things are going badly, and usually because other people are screwing up."

"Where are Tori and Liam?"

Mac walked to the windows and pointed to the tall stone tower sticking straight out of the jungle halfway up the short mountain.

"Not much of a castle," she quipped with a smile.

"Oh, it's bigger than it looks—especially from here."

"It looks old."

"Liam and I have been doing some remodeling. It was built around the 1500's, used as a stronghold and watchtower by—well," Mac paused.

"Pirates?"

He smiled. "*Enterprising* sea farers," he corrected.

"We'll need to wake them up." She turned her attention back to him. "There's more, Mac. Roberts didn't just have help from your former gang."

"Monica," Mac interrupted. "Roberts did not have 'a gang'."

"Team." She corrected.

He shook his head. "You still haven't got this."

She gave him a quizzical look.

"Roy Roberts didn't just build some gang, like some off-shore drug cartel. He has a small army, people and friends all over the world. Any one of them capable of knocking over an ADX and not even slowing down."

She nodded. "I know, you've said that. It was in the reports. We still haven't been able to find many of them."

"And you won't. With me feeding you everything I know about them, they've retooled big time by now. Reorganized. Disappeared."

"Your intel was helpful, Mac. But they've done a lot more than just retooled; they've also re-armed."

"Rearmed? With what?"

"One of these." She reached into her bag and produced a palm-sized metal box that she handed to him.

He opened it and examined the small fob device with several inset black buttons. "What's this?"

"We lifted it from one Robert's extraction teams. He didn't make it busting out one of your former team members."

"What is it?"

"Near as we can tell it's a weapon—a Ra weapon."

"Ra—?"

"We got a good twenty or so test shots from the thing before it stopped working."

"What does it shoot?"

"Ions."

Mac groaned, letting himself fall back against the window. "Ah, Jesus—"

"You've seen this before?"

He nodded. "Not looking exactly like this, but I know what something like this can do."

"It cut a five foot hole through two feet of reinforced concrete in only a few seconds."

"I bet it did."

"Roberts' men are now armed, with these," she nodded at the device.

Mac fumed and closed up the box, handing it back to her. "These are unbelievable kinds of weapons, Monica. The ones I've actually seen could drop whole buildings. If the team has these? No one's going to be able to stop them. Something like this makes automatic firearms look like—" he shook his head.

"Bows and arrows?"

"Yea." He nodded. "Exactly."

"We need to find out where they're getting these. And how many they have now."

Mac nodded. "I already know exactly where these came from."

"You do?"

"About ten years ago, I didn't even know what a Ra was. None of us on the team did. We were on another of Roy's treasure hunts, deep in the jungles of Brazil."

"What were you looking for?"

"What everyone's been looking for for centuries in that part of the world—El Dorado."

Monica chuckled. "You're not serious?"

Mac nodded. "We'd found a credible source. Someone who'd actually seen the place, and had been there. They had all kinds of details, Monica. It was more than just a story."

"A city of gold—?" she was still smirking.

"*Not* just a city of gold, but a golden city filled with people, superhuman people. Like gods. People like you."

"A hidden city of halfbloods?" she lost her smirk. The clans were notorious for hiding well. A city of demigods was not outside the realm of possibility. "So, did you actually see this El Dorado?"

Mac nodded. "We did. We lived there, for months; until Roy got bored. But the problem with their people was, once you saw the city, they never let anyone leave."

"Oh." Monica's face held concern now. "So how did you get out?"

"They're very superstitious about the gods. Especially about the new gods."

"Newbloods?"

"Yea. It was the first time we'd ever heard about the Reborn."

"Maybe Tori and Liam can help us then?"

"I don't know that that's a good idea, Monica. Roberts made a deal with the chief of the Zuruahã; if they let us out he promised to bring them a newblood, one of these Reborn."

Monica's eyes widened. "So that's what Robert's interest was in finding Liam—"

"Yep. It's also why he made the team available to Treasury. He smelled a god, a young one. Someone he might be able to easily bag and return to El Dorado. Then you showed up with Tori as bait. It was like all the pieces were just falling into place. Just like their prophecy said."

"What prophecy?"

"Like I said, the Zuruahã are a very superstitious clan. They have their own writings about the gods; their own take on the writings of the Ra.

"The Books of the Gods—"

"Yea, those."

"So you think taking Liam and Tori on a mission to El Dorado—god I can't believe I'm even saying this," she mocked herself, "to find Roberts would be—?"

"A *bad* idea." Mac finished. "That's exactly what Roy is hoping you'll do. It's a trap, Monica."

"What does this 'chief' want with a newblood?"

"He never said. But Roy didn't just make the deal to get us out of El Dorado. It's a city of gold, Monica; unimaginable wealth. It's what Roy's been infatuated with ever since we left there."

"You think he's after a reward."

"I'm sure; I'm also sure it's much more than what Liam stole for him."

"This chief must *really* want Liam and Tori if he gave Roberts weapons like these to break him out prison."

"They had powerful weapons, Monica. They didn't look like this," he pointed at the black box, "they looked more like

small pistols and short rifles, and the warriors carrying them didn't miss.

"Warriors?"

Mac snickered. "The Zuruahã aren't exactly your typical modern clan. They've lived in the rainforests of South America for tens of thousands of years. They don't exactly have a need for clothes; they're exceptionally intelligent people, Monica, like you. But their culture still dates back to a more—primitive era."

She folded her arms. "Nice. A whole city full of naked people. I can't wait—" she mocked with a grin.

2

Liam's knees were spread wide between Tori's. Her finely raised ass pulled firmly against his front; his fingers danced over her wet clit while he dove himself eagerly into her from behind. Their skin beaded with perspiration; Tori's mouth opened wider, calling out loudly as emotion exploded all over within her. God she needed Liam's thick hardness filling her tightly right now! She squeezed herself around his cock causing him to whimper audibly. Hearing his soft ecstatic cries stirred something primal within her; she rocked her ass softly, helping to drive him as deeply as possible.

"AHH, TORI!"

She heard his loud ecstatic cries; felt his emotions rocket with soaring ecstasy as his glands emptied suddenly and his thick cock shot his overly plentiful seed into her. There was something about Liam. She needed him; needed him fucking

her; needed him seeding her. She wanted him inside her; she *needed* to have his children!

Exhausted and expended again, Liam collapsed onto her back, his own very muscular ass visibly rocking softly feeling the after-tremors of ecstasy ripple through the both of them.

"God, Tori." Liam held onto her from behind, resting himself on her damp back, one of his hands finding her breast to knead. "No more. Please. I'm really sore."

"Well this looks familiar—"

Suddenly both were aware of Monica standing in their bedroom, their empathy had been so focused on each other that neither had noticed the demigoddess enter their tower, let alone their top-floor bedroom.

Liam looked over his shoulder, then lifted himself from Tori's back; holding onto her hips, he gave her a few more slow thrusts. "Why—" he took a deep and badly needed breath. "Why is it you always manage to walk in on the two of us when we're—"

"—fucking?" she interrupted with the pedantic quip.

Liam groaned.

"Yes—" Tori lifted her chest from the sheets. Liam gave her another fine thrust before slickly dismounting her and sinking back onto his haunches. Both looked a little perturbed at Monica, their skins all but dripping wet and each still half exhausted on the sheets like they'd just finished a 10-K.

"Do you two ever do anything else?" Monica asked, her brow raised.

"We do a lot of things," Tori retorted. "But you always seem to only show up whenever we're—ohhh, never mind." She didn't want to get into with her boss. Hell, she was *doing* her boss back in the States whenever Liam wasn't around.

"We heard the helicopter." Liam began. "I figured it was you. You know Tori's on vacation—"

"Vacation's over, for both of you."

"I don't work for you anymore, Monica," Liam reminded. "In fact, I specifically remember that you were supposed to be tracking me down in Paris."

"Change of plans, guys. Roberts has escaped."

Both were suddenly wide-eyed. Tori's hand went to her mouth while Liam quickly moved beside her ready to teleport the both of them halfway around the world if necessary.

"Pack your things. Mac's readying *The Neptune*. We're setting sail for South America as soon as you're both ready."

"What's in South America?" Tori asked, bouncing off the bed and fixing her exceptionally long hair into a low ponytail.

"Roberts has gotten hold of some Ra weapons. It's how he escaped from prison."

"Monica," Liam began, slipping off the bed as well and standing next to Tori, "I may not be all that versed in Ra history, but I do know about the war. Ra weapons don't work for Humans—or even halfbloods. They're keyed to the genetic signature of the gods. I've never even seen one, actually. Whatever it is, it's not a weapon."

"I'm aware of that as well, Liam. But someone is fashioning devices that fit in the palm of your hand. And I guaran-damn-tee you, these things, whatever they are, make for a really nasty weapon no matter whose hands they fall into."

* * * * *

Roberts was finally surrounded by the remainder of his elite team once again. Only James and Mac were no longer with them. The aging riverboat chugged up river through the Amazon jungle along the winding Purús. James would be an easier replacement; but Mac, that was a tall order. Not just his

first officer, the man held degrees in engineering, electronics, and chemistry. He'd not only fashioned the trap that took out Sinclair, but constructed and wired their freezer cell aboard *The Neptune* that had held the young gods captive.

Now what was he going to do?

He'd figure it out later. Right now he had a meeting to keep with the head of the most reclusive of halfblood clans deep within a little known place the locals called Zuruahã. They didn't like visitors; but he was about to bring them something they did want, and they'd be willing to trade more gold than he could ever spend in ten lifetimes to get it.

3

Captain says we're going to have clear sailing around the horn of Africa and then across the Atlantic to Brazil." Mac sat down at the evening dinner table with Liam, Tori and Monica, as servers brought dinner out into *The Neptune's* executive dining room.

"You said we'd be traveling up the Amazon?" Liam spread a cloth napkin over his lap while one of the staff poured a fine wine into his crystal glass. "Thank you," he nodded at the server, picking up the glass.

"We are, to a point. We'll need to leave *The Neptune* moored in Manaus; the rivers start to get too shallow for a ship our size to go further. We'll charter a riverboat to take us up the Solimões about a hundred miles to the Rio Purús. We'll probably be there a good week before getting to our destination."

Tori smiled with some giddiness. "It sounds like a beautiful adventure. I've never traveled a river like this before."

Monica exchanged cautious glances with Mac.

"Yea, beautiful. Man-eating Piranha. Crocodiles. Headhunting cannibals. It's a nice place," Liam mocked.

Mac ignored him. "It is beautiful, Tori. Until we get to Zuruahã. There's no civilization out there. None. It's just the natives and a handful of missionaries."

"Really? Missionaries—?" Liam frowned.

"The government really tries to keep them out of there now. We won't be worried about the indigenous tribes. They'll probably avoid us anyway. It's the Zuruahã *Clan* we're really looking for."

"Are they dangerous?" Monica asked. "We have nothing about them at Langley."

"Apparently, they also have their secrets," Tori chimed in.

"Like the devices Roberts' people used to escape," Liam added.

Mac nodded.

"Can't we just fly in?" Monica continued. "Seems like an awful lot of slow traveling."

"The Brazilian government severely restricts low-altitude air travel over the rain forests of the region. They don't want to disturb the indigenous peoples."

"What are they like, *real* cannibals or something?" Liam asked, backtracking on his earlier joke.

"The human Zuruahã are not cannibals, Liam," Mac continued, "but they're very superstitious, and unwelcoming of strangers. They actually worship the Zuruahã halfbloods as their gods."

Monica frowned. "That's a little arrogant. Letting other people worship you when you know you're not really a god."

"They *are* gods, Monica," Mac assured. "It all depends on your definitions. To these primitive humans, the great shamans of the Zuruahã work miracles."

"But they don't share their modern knowledge with the other peoples." She argued. "It's inhumane to keep them so isolated and unlearned."

"People choose the culture they want to live within, Monica. The indigenous Zuruahã lose members of their tribes all the time to outsiders wandering into their region. The youth especially are infatuated by the missionaries wearing clothes, reading books, writing, outside art." Mac took a sip from his glass.

"Wearing clothes?" Tori raised her glass along with her brow.

"Yea, well," Mac grinned, "the Zuruahã don't actually wear clothes. They paint their skin sometimes, wear crude jewelry, but—would you want to wear clothes in a place that's one hundred percent humidity year round?"

"Maybe a bathing suit," Tori grinned.

"What about the Zuruahã Clan," Liam asked, "I'm sure *they* wear clothes."

"The clan's idea of fashion is still just as primitive. Most of the people we saw last time I was there weren't wearing much of anything."

"Were they attractive—I mean, to you?" Liam asked.

"The human natives weren't," Mac snickered. "But a couple of the clanspeople we met," he nodded, "they were definitely attractive. Very nice looking people."

"How many of them were there?" Tori asked.

"They have a city, actually, buried deep beneath the jungle—a place called El Dorado."

"WHAT?" Liam scoffed. "You're not serious!"

"You didn't tell me this was an expedition?" Tori looked at Monica. "I thought we were going after Captain Roberts?"

"It's both, now, Tori," Monica assured her. "We need to make contact with their shaman; they know the entrance to El Dorado."

"Good way to keep your eyes and ears open," Liam began, "place your own halfblood shaman in the middle of the tribe."

"Exactly, Liam. The shaman isn't the chief of the tribe, in fact, they don't really have any chiefs; just a loose collection of families. But a shaman is very respected by everyone. Whatever the shaman says, the Human Zuruahã pretty much do."

"Then they do keep the humans in the dark, almost like slaves," Monica groused.

Mac's lips drew downward in disgust. "Sure. It's been that way for centuries, probably millennia."

"It still doesn't make it right. They're stifling the people from growing and learning, deliberately keeping them in the dark."

"I agree," Mac took a bite of his dinner. "But it's not my place to walk into a clan of demigods and tell them what to do. I'm still the only human in the room," he reminded them.

"Well, I'm a goddess," Tori fumed. "I'll certainly give them a piece of my mind."

"Let's not forget, these clans people are also armed with the knowledge of the Ra. They have ionic weaponry."

"Yea, weaponry they gave to Roberts," Liam frowned.

"Gave?" Mac was shaking his head. "You don't just give something like that to outsiders like us."

"Then how did Roberts get the devices?" Monica asked.

"He's traded with them. He had something they wanted badly enough to give up some of their advanced weapons."

"Yea, like his gold they got from me—" Liam scoffed.

"No, Liam. I spent months in the company of the Zuruahã. Despite their lack of fashion, these are very modern people. They have more gold than I've ever seen. The whole city is

drenched in precious metals. I didn't get the impression that money was all that important to them."

"So what would be important, I mean, of value to them?"

"That's what we wanted to talk to you two about," Monica's tone grew serious. "Mac says the Zuruahā Clan are very superstitious. They revere the gods, especially the Reborn. Like you two."

"I don't think I like where this is going, Monica—" Tori half glared, her mind connecting the dots quickly.

"Which is why you don't have to go," Mac stated firmly.

"Wait—" Liam began, "So there was a reason Roberts was after me?"

Mac nodded. "I think Roberts agreed to find the chief of the Zuruahā a newblood, a Reborn, in exchange for a reward."

"A newblood? What for?" Liam asked.

"I don't know the answer to that. I do know that the Zuruahā very much respect the gods. They have prophecies about the Reborn. I've only heard about them, I don't know what they are."

"Maybe they want to worship you, Liam," Tori smirked. "Make you their new god."

"He gets enough of that, worshiping himself," Monica snickered.

"I do not! I could use a whole tribe of demigods worshiping me."

"Tribe—you mean city," Mac corrected. "El Dorado's population is well over a million, possibly as many as several million."

"Wow. Monica, I've never read anything at Langley talking about a clan getting anywhere near that big before. Only a few thousand at the most."

"They're usually not, Tori. I know of only one clan that could possibly be that large—the Dark, and they're certainly not advertising how many they have."

"I want you two to stay put in Manaus while Monica and I search further up river to scout things out," Mac continued.

"Ah, not," Liam countered. "A whole city of halfbloods just waiting to worship me and you want me to sit in some third-world Podunk waiting for weeks while you guys adventure in the Amazon? Get. Fucking. Serious."

"Tori, I can't keep Liam out of harm's way," Monica glared at him momentarily, but I also can't put you in harm's way like this."

"Monica, I'm with Liam. I'm not sitting on a boat for weeks while you guys rumble with the natives. Liam and I are just as much of this team as you and Mac."

Mac raised his brow at Monica.

"Alright. I guess that's why I wanted all of us to have this conversation. If it were just some tribe of aborigines with arrows and darts it would have been a no-brainer. But these weapons could easily allow a human to kill a god with one shot and not even slow down."

Both Liam and Tori nodded.

"At the first sign of any real trouble, Liam, I want you and Tori teleported out of the region. Understood?"

Liam and Tori exchanged glances; then he nodded.

4

Tori stood on the side of the long riverboat watching a shore pass by that wasn't twenty feet from their boat. At times the shore was a distant sandy beach, other times the trees and foliage were close enough that they scraped the sides of their boat, and so thick that the branches dipped into the water making the riverbank impossible to see from the water.

They had only seen one fishing canoe in the past three days, and that was about an hour ago. She'd not felt good emotions from the four naked young men watching them chug past. They were all suspicious, disdainful, and only one seemed to feel any curiosity.

Liam approached her from behind, her long hair tied up into her typical ponytail. He rested his boot on the side of the aging boat, watching yet another large mosquito lite onto his

thick arm, pierce his skin, and then fall over dead into the water.

"I think you get a sick sense of pleasure from seeing that," she mocked with a grin.

He smiled. "Riverboat captain says we'll be at their beach in a few minutes."

"And then what?"

"There's a missionary hut not far from the river. An older couple and their kids live there. Mac says we'll see if we can stay with them while we figure out how to get in touch with the tribe's shaman. He can be a little reclusive."

"Did you feel the people on the fishing canoe a while back?"

"I did. Not the friendliest sort, are they?"

"No, they're not. I think we should just avoid the people and look for the clan."

"I agree." Liam pointed up river.

A small sandy riverbank filled with several hewn canoes lined the shore. The boat captain maneuvered the front of the long boat toward the shore and beached the bow. Mac was already at the front with his gear and jumped onto the sand. Both Liam and Tori took up their gear as well and followed Monica onto the beach. All of them watched the captain back his boat away and chug quickly back down the river.

"He didn't stay long," Monica quipped.

"It's illegal for him to even be here." Mac watched the boat disappear around the bend. "If he gets caught, he'll have to share part of the money we paid him with the *federales*."

"Nice place." Monica frowned, looking around. "Where is everyone?" She could feel people all around them in the jungle—hiding.

"They don't like strangers." Mac pointed to a path. "The missionary hut is this way. We won't see any of the indigenous

people until they get used to us being around. Might be a couple of days."

All of them walked into the jungle from the beach. The path was well-worn, hard, dark earth, with a few tree roots that had to be stepped over as they moved single file through the thick foliage.

Tori looked up into the high canopy of trees that obscured the sun. "It's beautiful." She could see and feel all kinds of birds flying and primates swinging high above them.

It was only a few minutes' walk before they came to a small clearing with a large thirty-foot square, thatched roof open-walled hut. It had only one back wall that looked like another smaller hut was attached. Under the roof of the big hut were crude bench seats, like pews, cut from split logs. A rudimentary lectern made from a short palm log stuck into the sand formed a kind of pulpit in front of the pews. A large rough wooden cross draped with a faded red cloth hung on the back wall.

All of them entered the large un-walled hut to get out from under the sun that had grown hot now as midday approached. Three of the team could already feel two people in the smaller hut, just beyond the larger hut's thatched back wall.

"Hello!" Mac called out into the makeshift church hut.

"Someone's in the next room," Monica nodded.

"It's where they live. I'll check it out—"

"We'll all check it out," Monica added.

Mac chuckled. He kept forgetting that he was surrounded by a god and two goddesses.

Making their way into the smaller hut, all eyes drew wide as they gazed on two very startled and fearful young people. From their resemblance, it was clear they were brother and sister. Both wore nothing and both were painted from head to toe with a black, red and white paint depicting ominous primitive designs.

Each had been tied with crude jute ropes to the same support log that held up a corner of the roof.

"What the—" Mac took in the sight. He immediately went to them and untied the reed gags from around their mouths.

"Mr. Macmillan—" the early twenty-something young man breathed quietly. "How—how did *you* get here?"

"Noah—what happened to you?"

"Last night—" he gasped, finally getting over the shock of seeing someone other than the Zuruahã and being able to breath again. "—the tribe—they attacked us."

"Why?" Monica asked.

Mac drew a razor-sharp blade from a sheath attached to one of the belts of his fatigues. He set to work on their ropes.

"They said we were about to bring demons into their village," the young woman spoke. "They took or mom and dad and left us like this, as a sacrifice to appease the demons."

"Sacrifice, huh?" Mac frowned. His knife sank into the ropes like they were butter. Now freed, the young man quickly grabbed some tattered khaki shorts and pulled them on. There were two other women in the room. Sure they'd both seen plenty of Zuruahã men and women unclothed, even each other; but these people weren't the natives!

"Hope, are you okay?" Mac questioned, concern evident in his voice. The young woman stood up after he'd sliced through her ropes. She was grateful to feel the bindings fall away. She nodded, rubbing her wrists. Noah handed her a sheet from one of the small beds, but she ignored it. "Thanks, I'm fine."

"Hope!" Noah quickly glared, pushing the sheet toward her. "There are *other people here*," he said softly but firmly.

"I said—I'm fine." She looked at Mac. "Thank you Mr. Macmillan. For rescuing us."

The young man now looked annoyed, glaring at his sister.

"Hope, I'm Monica," she extended her hand, which Hope shook warmly. "These two are Tori and Liam." Everyone exchanged greetings.

Noah fumed, tossing the sheet back onto the bamboo bed.

"What happened to your parents, again?" Monica asked.

"They were taken by the shaman—" Hope went to the only long counter in the hut, drew some water from a large plastic barrel into a tin cup and took a long drink. Then she refilled the cup and handed it to her brother, who still didn't look happy about his sister parading around the room wearing only body paint that circled and accentuated her private parts instead of hiding them.

"So the shaman's men did this?" Mac asked.

Noah was now nodding after his drink. "They said they'd brought evil into the village."

"Did they now—?" Mac looked askance at the two, no small amount of sarcasm evident in his tone.

"The tribe accepts us, Mr. Macmillan," Noah began, "they're not violent toward us, I mean, not like this; they've *never* done anything like this before."

"Someone's firing a warning shot over our bow, Mac." Monica frowned.

"Seems that way." Mac moved his fingers over the scruff of his chin.

"But—the tribe has never done anything like this before."

"It's not the tribe that's the problem, Noah. It's the shaman, and by extension, their gods."

"We don't *believe* in their gods, Mr. Macmillan," Noah retorted.

"It doesn't matter what *you* believe or don't, Noah. It's what *they* believe that's the problem."

5

Where are Tori and Liam?" Noah moved to the edge of the wall-less large main hut to where Monica was leaning against a thick post. It was dark and a heavy rain was falling, drenching everything in its life-giving water.

"If I know Liam, probably a five-star somewhere."

"I'm sorry—?" Noah wasn't sure if she was joking.

"Oh, they're around." She smiled.

"It's dangerous out in the jungle at night. Especially now."

"They'll be careful, Noah. I wouldn't worry about them."

"I know this is an odd and probably very forward question, Monica, but, are you—married?"

She smiled at the question. At some point she knew something like this would pop up in the conversation. She just didn't expect it quite so soon. With dusty blonde hair and fair

skin, Noah stuck out like a sore thumb among the natives with their near black hair and naturally tanned skins. He was tall, somewhat muscular, a product of the jungle he'd been raised within. She'd sensed his feelings the moment the two of them had met eyes. Yea, this wasn't going to be good. Their attraction wasn't just one way. And he was cute. A little too cute for his own good—or hers.

He watched her sigh.

"Why do you ask?" she innocently toyed with him.

"I was just—curious. I think you're very pretty. I mean, beautiful."

"Tori's prettier than I am." She smiled.

"She's cute. But, she's married to Liam, right?"

"No. They're not married actually."

"Oh?"

"I think they're just dating—sort of." Monica wasn't entirely sure what their relationship status was at the moment. It seemed to bounce around a lot.

"I'd go out with you if you ever wanted to," Noah half fidgeted with the forward line—forward for him anyway.

"I thought Christians only dated other Christians?"

"Not always, I mean, I think it's better if two people are equally yoked."

Monica smiled again. His religious jargon was over the top evangelical, but he'd probably spent his entire life in this tiny one-hut church. Oddly enough, the young man was more than just a little naturally attractive. She felt unnatural draw of his genetic attraction as both stood together watching the rain drip from the edges of the roof.

It wasn't long before she felt his hand smoothing across her back. She knew what was happening. Of all the places to meet and be attracted to someone! This mission was going to be tough enough already, and now she had her feelings being

jerked around by an early twenty-something barely out of adolescence that probably wanted her in a wedding gown.

Still, her attraction to him seemed a little more than just oddly random. All the way out here in the middle of the Amazon? Just coincidence—?

She hoped Liam and Tori were faring better than she was at the moment.

* * * * *

The pitch-black jungle night just looked like day to the two of them as the pouring rain obeyed their will and simply splashed all around them leaving them dry. Instead of walking along the jungle floor, both took to the trees, moving like the primates through the tall dark canopy. But in the soaking rain, not much was moving except the two of them.

“So what was up with Hope today?” Liam landed perfectly onto a huge branch, crouching, looking at the jungle floor below.

“You mean her native outfit?” Tori chuckled, landing right beside him. Both noticed the huge jungle cat perched on the same limb not ten feet from them. It raised itself to its forepaws and then yawned widely with huge fangs.

“Yea, he didn’t seem too keen on her prancing around in front of everyone like she was.”

“Were you attracted?”

“Yea, a little, I think.”

“Liam,” she whacked his arm with a soft backhand. “Hello? Goddess here—”

“Alright, yea.” He nodded. “I was. For a girl she has a nice ass.”

“For a girl?”

“Well—you asked.”

"They're brother and sister, you know." Tori watched the big cat cautiously move toward the two of them on the limb.

"I saw you. You were looking at Noah's ass too."

"So?"

"Just checking."

The big puma began sniffing around Tori's shoulder then began licking her arm. She raised her hand to give the big cat a welcomed scratch under its chin.

"How do you *do* that?" he asked.

The huge puma sat and lifted its chin, eagerly feeling Tori's touch.

"Kitties like me."

"Ah, news flash, that is *not* a 'kitty'!"

"Sure it is."

He watched as the big cat laid his head on Tori's thigh to get more scratches around its ears. "Maybe we should rename you 'Daniele' — then toss you into a pit full of lions to see what happens?" He smirked, listening to the big cat purr loudly.

"Yea, that would be pretty boring," she smiled.

The three of them now sat perched on the limb, Tori's arm around his new beast friend.

"So what are we going to do about Noah and Hope?" she asked.

"We? Are you —"

"Liam. You awakened me. I have your genetics too. You're attracted — I'm attracted. Or didn't you notice?"

"I guess I didn't notice. Probably too busy looking at Noah pulling his shorts on."

"For a god you don't notice much." She bumped her shoulder into his.

"Nobody's perfect."

6

Mac sipped some coffee from a steel mug that was part of his gear. He was up early. While the natives preferred to sleep in hammocks, he was glad the missionaries preferred actual beds. There were four beds in the living hut connected to the bigger church hut, but only two of the bunks were occupied; one with a sleeping young lady, and the other with a sleeping *couple*. Odd. Mac was sure Noah had fallen asleep in his own bed the night before.

He leaned against the doorpost of their bungalow watching all of them sleep. Hope. There was an independent spirit. He watched her stir, her paint washed off but still not wearing at thing. He'd met her years ago the last time they'd been here. She was a rebellious ten-year-old back then—apparently she was even more so now. He didn't know why she actually preferred to go native. Part of it was probably in response to

her folks depositing her into such a godforsaken primitive hole like Zuruahã. He figured she probably had a native girlfriend somewhere.

Noah's hips rocking slowly against Monica's ass as he spooned her caught Mac's attention. He raised his brow. He lifted the rim of his cup to his lips, taking a quiet sip. He didn't know what kind of sleepy dream the kid was having with the demigoddess, but Mac now had a ring-side seat as both of them slipped deeper into their unconscious interlude. He wasn't actually attracted to Monica, thank God. The two of them flirted and bantered a lot. And she could give a warm hug like nobody's business. Maybe one day he'd actually ask her out.

Mac walked away from the door of the attached hut and into the open church part of the structure. Obviously Roy and the boys had already been here. They'd tipped off the shaman that others were coming. He wondered what kind of lies Roy had told the simple people to turn them against the missionaries? The natives were obviously afraid of them now—to the point of kidnapping their parents and leaving their children at the mercy of the wilds of the jungle.

Children. Ha. They weren't children anymore. He heard her trying to walk quietly out of the living hut while Noah and his new 'girlfriend' made some noise.

Hope stood beside him in a deep yawn and a provocative stretch. He ignored her attempts at getting his attention in her sexy birthday suit.

"Sleep well?" he asked.

"Hmmm," she nodded. "Noah woke me up."

Both could hear that the discreetly amorous couple of last night wasn't being so quite so discreet this morning.

"I think Noah woke someone else up as well." He smirked.

She looked back into the hut room. Through the doorway, she could see the legs of her brother entwined with the woman he'd been sleeping with, moving in a soft rhythm.

"He's never like this." She folded her arms; her pert white young breasts and soft pink nipples resting over her arms. He'd seen her already. He didn't need to see her again. Mac looked out into the jungle.

"Like what? You?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He sighed, wondering where the two gods he'd sent out on recon last night had ended up.

"Not nothing. You said that for a reason."

"Hope," Mac sighed. "What are you now, twenty?"

"Almost."

Mac never looked at her. "You need someone to pay you some attention. Someone your own age."

"There isn't anyone around here my age."

"Plenty of young men around here."

"Savages. No thanks."

"Exactly my point. Last time I was here I could tell you wanted out of here." Mac drew another sip from his cup.

"I can't. My parents need me."

Now he looked at her. "Hope. Your parents made decisions for themselves. Now that you're older, you have your own life to live. Noah as well. Just because your folks invested their lives into some mission doesn't mean you have to."

"They're older, Mr. Macmillan. Who will take care of them—if we leave?"

"Let Jesus take care of them. If he's really their god."

Hope smiled. "You have any kids, Mr. Macmillan?"

"Nope. At least, none that I know of."

"Well, you should. You'd be the perfect parent."

Mac chuckled at that thought.

* * * * *

It was well past one in the afternoon before Liam and Tori wandered out of the jungle and back into the shade of the large bungalow. Both looked freshly showered and dressed in different clothes than what they'd left with.

"I hope you two were able to find something—and I don't mean at Bloomingdale's," Mac glared at the pair.

"Sorry," Liam began, "the alarm went off late."

Both Noah and Hope sat along with the rest of them at a crude table, but one that was filled with fresh bananas, coconut milk, and other jungle delicacies. Liam and Tori sat together across from Monica and Noah, who seemed to be sitting very close together.

Sure, Monica, away one night and you already move in on my would-be boyfriend, Liam leveled an empathic quip.

Call it a professional courtesy. I'm keeping Noah out of the way while you two scout around. Preferably not from the Ritz Carlton! She glared.

"Did you two find anything last night?" Mac crunched some dried banana chips.

"Some—" Liam nodded. "There's a row of stone idols about fifty yards apart as you move further south."

"You don't want to go in there—" Noah locked his fingers with Monica's. She could feel real trepidation coming from him. "That place is evil—only dark spirits live there."

"How do you know?" Liam asked.

"Only the shamans can go in there. And come out alive. It's the realm of the enemy."

"What enemy is this?" Liam raised a brow.

"The Devil, Liam," Mac interjected. He knew Noah was serious, but he wasn't believing a word of it. He already knew who and what was in that part of the jungle. They weren't exactly evil, and they certainly weren't demons, well, not spirit

ones anyway; they just didn't like strangers snooping around their temples.

"Tell me you're not going to go in there?" Noah squeezed her hand.

"Unfortunately, Noah, that's exactly the reason why we're here."

"You'll never come out of there again," he warned. "I've seen it happen. You're not the first people to visit here. No one ever comes out of there."

"Well I guess that means we're on the right track, then." Mac grinned.

* * * * *

"Keep your voice down, someone might hear us." Noah warned. Both crouched low in the jungle well away from the church, sitting between some large rocks that formed tall walls, almost like the bottom of a narrow crevasse that was open at either end. It had been a favorite hideout place for the two of them, ever since they were kids. "We have to *do* something. We can't just let them go into the those burial grounds. They'll be killed!"

"You just don't want *Monica* going into those grounds."

"I don't want *any* of them going in there."

"I can't believe you actually slept with her last night—"

"Yea, so?"

"Would you have done that if mom and dad had been around?"

"What do you think? Of course not."

"I just can't believe you had sex with her."

He nodded. "I—" then he shook his head, "I can't believe it either. It's just, whenever I'm around her. Honestly, Hope, she's like a Siren. The way she calls to me—inside. I think this is like what you told about you and Lilu."

Hope nodded. Lilu wasn't just another of the tribe. She was the daughter of a shaman. Somehow both Hope and Lilu had connected, not just as friends, but on a much more personal, emotional level. Lilu's father had forbade her from seeing the missionaries, but it didn't stop the two of them from finding each other, deep in the jungle. Lilu wasn't a savage. She spoke English, well. And she was kind, not like the other tribespeople who seemed to only think about themselves.

"What are you going to do?" Hope looked into the eyes of her brother.

"I don't know. But I can't let them go in there."

"Lilu would know what to do—"

"Can you talk to her?" Noah asked "See if she knows where the warriors took mom and dad?"

Hope nodded.

7

Another day had passed. Mac readied his backpack with provisions for a few days' travel on foot. The church was empty and the missionary kids nowhere to be found. He didn't know where they'd gone and he didn't have time to go looking for them. He hoped they'd have sense enough to stay away from the natives.

All four trekked through the thick jungle along trails long cut by the people who had lived here for thousands of years; untouched by civilization. It was those same people that Tori and Liam along with Monica assured him were all around them. They were all being watched at a distance by many eyes. Mac couldn't see them, but even without their empathy, he knew they were there.

It wasn't long before they came to one of the tall stone idols; this one nearly completely covered in jungle vines and half

sunk leaning into the ground to its waist, like the thing was walking in quicksand.

Both Tori and Liam looked up at the tall stone carving that towered a good fifteen feet above them. The carving was primitive and the face frowned an ugly angry look.

"This is it, kiddies—" Mac looked up.

"You know who you're talking to right?" Monica winced at him.

"I forgot, grandma's here too."

"That little quip is going to cost you, Mac."

"I can't wait," he parried.

All of them now felt someone coming out of the forbidden jungle beyond the large idol. Tori and Liam looked at each other as the *someone* rounded the edge of the vine-covered stone.

"Noah?" Monica began. Then she folded her arms looking at the old revolver in his hand; it was pointed at all of them. "What on Earth?" It wasn't really a question.

"I can't let you go in there." His hand was visibly shaking with the gun.

Mac rolled his eyes turning around in vivid disbelief, "Ah, Jesus H. Christ," he mumbled.

Monica approached Noah carefully. A seasoned negotiator, she was going to have to talk the kid off the ledge, so to speak. "Noah, what are you doing?"

"Trying to keep you alive."

"Nothing is going to happen to us."

"Not true. They'll kill you. It's what they do to everyone."

Monica looked askance at Noah. "They?"

"They're not demons. Okay?" the gun shook in his hand. "They're the shamans."

"How many of these, shamans are there?" Monica asked.

"I don't know. Fifty; a hundred maybe. They have power. They're probably watching us right now!"

"Well," Mac smirked, "my kind of people then." He pushed past Monica and found the barrel of the revolver planted firmly in his chest. "I can't let you go in there Mr. Macmillan."

"Jesus, Noah, would you just—" Mac moved fast, even for a Human. The gun was all at once in his hand leaving Noah's hand empty of the weapon. "It helps if your finger is actually *on* the trigger when you're threatening people." He scowled at the youth.

Mac then tucked the revolver into the back of his fatigues. The weapon was vintage *Smith and Wesson* circa late 1800's. Damn thing was worth a small mint to the right collector.

Noah placed his hand on Mac's chest now. "Please! I can't let you go in there! They'll *kill* you."

"I have some news for you, Noah. I've already *been* in there. Ten years ago."

"You—you have?"

Mac grumbled. "Here," he then half lifted the barely twenty-one-year-old skinny youth by his arm and half tossed the kid past Monica and into Tori and Liam who caught and steadied him from falling. "He stays with us now. Keep him out of trouble."

Monica nodded to Tori her approval of Mac's orders.

"C'mon," Tori began moving again past the giant idol, leaving Liam and Noah to bring up the rear.

Noah was still half holding on to Liam; he was both surprised and a little annoyed at Macmillan's gruffness.

Liam straightened his shirt, patting him on the chest. "Don't worry about him; he's got a lot on his mind," Liam consoled as both began following, moving past the ring of idols and into the forbidden jungle.

* * * * *

"So what's supposed to be so dark and scary in here anyway?" Liam asked ~~talked with~~ Noah while their party trekked through the now barely there path of the rain forest.

"I've never seen it; but I think my parents may have. The forbidden jungle conceals the fortress of the Zuruahã."

"A fortress?" Liam's brow lifted.

Noah nodded. "Even before settlers and Conquistadores began flooding into the Amazon looking for gold centuries ago, the Zuruahã had built a city to their gods. Now the shamans are the only ones allowed within it. Their idols guard the way."

"So no one is allowed in except these—shaman, huh?" Liam smiled to himself. Noah's feelings were really unsettled about these shaman and their 'fortress', whatever that was. After seeing the scattered small huts the natives had build in and around the riverbanks, he wasn't exactly sure what a Zuruahã fortress might look like. Still, the stone idols had been impressive and tall.

"What do they do there? These shamans?" Liam continued their conversation while hiking through some large overgrown leaves right next to Noah.

Noah pushed past the giant leaves. "I've heard they sacrifice the people of the other tribes; as tribute and as a warning not to encroach on the lands of the Zuruahã. Some of the other tribes have wandered into this place," Noah looked around, very unsettled, "and they were never seen again."

"This fortress have a name?" Liam's voice was intentionally casual.

Noah nodded. "It does. El Dorado."