

# CHAPTER 1

The tavern was on one of those uncharted islands in the Cape Verde west of Africa where pirates, smugglers and other globe-trotting rogues have gathered for a thousand years to swap tales. Visible only from the secret cove below, the watering hole looked like an old Portuguese galleon lodged into the high cliffs, because, in fact, it was. How it got there was as much of a mystery to Conrad Yeats as the friend he had come to meet.

The two men sat at a small table on the creaky poop deck overlooking the crashing waves of the horseshoe bay, the fiery copper sun sinking on the horizon, Conrad Yeats with his pint of brown ale and Hank Johnson with a questionable but potent local brew. Between swigs Conrad noticed Hank scoping out the boats anchored further off—a rogue’s flotilla of smuggling freighters, pirate ships and playboy yachts with half-naked women sunning themselves in the late afternoon rays. Hank was looking for something or, more likely, looking out for somebody.

That was the trouble with Hank Johnson. Conrad never knew which Hank Johnson he was talking to. Was he the fellow archaeologist, anthropologist and host of the upcoming “Nomad” TV documentary series, here to rub it in after

Conrad's own "Ancient Riddles" show failed to get picked up on the Discovery Channel? Or was he the "exotic matter" seeker from the top-secret Niantic Labs in Geneva, still on the hunt for the mysterious forces that he claimed were shaping humanity? Or was he up to his old tricks as an ex-Special Forces and current PSYOP soldier for the paramilitary contractor IQTech? In that case, Conrad would have to be extra careful, because IQTech's chief, General Montgomery, was an old buddy of his estranged father, USAF General Griffin Yeats.

The only thing Conrad knew for sure was that every one of Hank's superhero suits seemed to attract its own set of supervillains. The guy had so many grenades in the air there was always one going off, and Conrad didn't want to be around when the next one dropped.

"What do you see out there on the water, Hank? One of your transdimensional portals or something?"

"Something." Hank smiled boyishly, the faintest crinkles of age showing around his eyes along with the first flecks of gray in his hair. Conrad, barely into his 30s, wasn't there yet, but every adventure with Hank sure seemed to add a few years. "So how are things going for you, Conrad? Still searching for Atlantis and those—whaddy call 'em— Pillars of Creation that reveal the secrets of all time?"

"First Time," Conrad corrected him. "And I'm here in this netherworld,

talking to you. That's how things are going for me."

Hank nodded his condolences. "I hear your underwater city dig beneath Lake Titicaca tanked, and that Abdil Zawas got the whole damn Peruvian army after you. How much did you lose for your so-called investor?"

"Nothing a spectacular artifact can't take care of. Did you look at my celestial map?"

"Yeah. But tell me what happened in South America. I gave you all those XM maps."

"You know what happened. She happened."

"Sister Serena Serghetti," said Hank with a broad grin as he leaned back on his straw chair. "The Vatican's top linguist, beloved environmentalist, Mother Earth. Mess with that virgin, and you get the wrath of God."

"So I've discovered."

"Look, Conrad, guys like you and me, we've got a better shot at finding the Queen of Sheba than the perfect girl."

Too true, Conrad thought, and part of the steep price he had paid for this life he had chosen for himself. "Let's forget about Serena, Hank. Tell me about this girl of yours that you've been raving about."

"She's Persian." Hank slid his Nexus 10 tablet across the table.

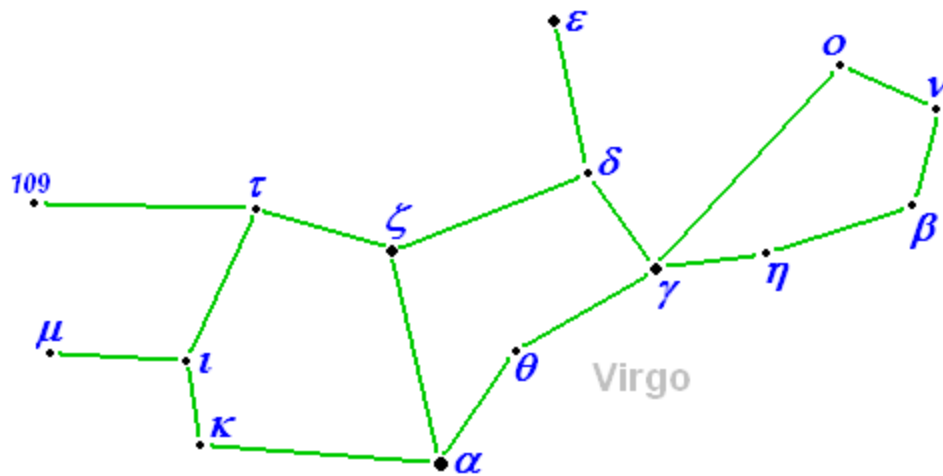
Conrad angled the screen and saw a Byzantine-like painting of a woman reclining in a garden under a tree. Actually, it was an unusual Islamic illustration.



“Nice, Hank. What am I looking at?”

“Just flip the picture and you’ll see.”

Conrad used his finger to swipe from left to right. The illustration curled up like a page to reveal on its reverse side the celestial map he had forwarded to Hank—the constellation Virgo reclining in the heavens.



He flipped the page back and forth. Hank's girl in the garden was the terrestrial match of his celestial Virgin in the sky. They were perfectly aligned. Hank's girl was a royal, a queen, and probably associated with a king's fortune somewhere.

"She got a name, Hank?"

"Bilqis."

Conrad froze. Bilqis was the Arab name for the legendary Queen of Sheba.

"I thought you said guys like us didn't stand a chance with girls like her."

"No, I said you had a better chance with her than the good Sister," Hank said, grinning at him. "The secret is flowers."

Conrad took a closer look at the flowers in the painting. Then he followed

the woman's gaze to the hoopoe bird nested in the ferns at her feet. The ferns were connected to a long, snaking root that ended at the tree over her head. The root, he realized, was a representation of the Nile River.

*It was a coded map.*

Conrad glanced up at Hank, who said nothing but nodded knowingly as he took another swig.

It all made sense now to Conrad. The tree was Jerusalem, where the Bible said the Queen of Sheba delivered four tons of gold to King Solomon in his Temple in exchange for his wisdom. The long root from the Jerusalem tree represented the Nile as it wound through ancient Egypt and Nubia, from whence the Queen of Sheba's gold was mined—or thought to have been.

*King Solomon's mines.*

So Hank obviously thought he had found them, and that they were, in fact, the Queen of Sheba's mines.

Hank said, "I think we're dating the same girl."

"Maybe," Conrad told him. "We have alignment between the celestial and terrestrial maps. But you're looking for the ingress to her bank, and I'm looking for the entrance to her tomb. Each hides something different, and each is in a different location."

Hank narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“If I’m figuring out this illustration correctly, the flowers you’re interested in represent locations in the Congo.”

“Maybe.” Hank glanced around to make sure they weren’t being overheard. “It’s certainly rich in gold.”

“Yes, but I think my lost Pillars of Creation are buried inside her lost tomb, which is buried under her lost palace, which I think is buried here.” Conrad pointed to the hoopoe bird in the ferns that the Queen of Sheba was staring at. “The hoopoe was Solomon’s messenger bird, and here it is...in ancient Nubia.”

“The Sudan,” Hank said. “How do you get that?”

“The alignment of your terrestrial map to my celestial chart,” Conrad explained, and showed Hank on the tablet pointing to star 109 Vir. “See how this lines up with this?” Conrad opened Google Earth, telescoping down to the ancient city of Meroe along the east bank of the Nile. “This is where legend says your girl built her palace. And where there was once a lost palace, there is probably a lost tomb beneath it. And inside that tomb are the lost secrets of Solomon.”

“I’ll be damned,” Hank said, at least acknowledging Conrad’s ingress.

“Yeah, well, if we open the wrong door, Hank, we might well be.”

Hank waved his hand dismissively. “The only difference is mine hides a



whole lot of something, and yours hides a whole lot of nothing.”

That wasn’t true, Conad thought, and Hank knew it. However much he wanted to drape his discovery in “exotic matter,” the plain fact was that Hank was after the Queen of Sheba’s gold. Conrad, meanwhile, was after the centuries-old secrets she had gleaned from King Solomon—secrets about the very creation of the world that she took to the grave with her.

*Knowledge, as King Solomon believed, was a hell of a lot more valuable than gold.*

“Look, Hank, if you want to go to your ingress while I go to mine, that’s fine,” Conrad told him. “I just need to know that if I find some relic we can use your friend Azmadi to fence it.”

“What about Abdil?”

“I pay him out of what I find,” Conrad told him confidently.

Hank nodded. “And if you turn up nothing?”

Conrad sighed. “I’ll come to your site and help you out. Assuming you find something. You get my apologies, and I get some of your gold.”

“Agreed.” Hank took a last swig, set his empty pint on the table and then glanced at his watch. “Sorry. Got a date with a lady.”

“Our Persian princess?”

“She’s next. This one is threatening to sail away tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a matchmaker job from Montgomery,” Conrad said, figuring that nobody was going to hear him over the guitarist at the bar hacking away at a spirited version of “Break On Through.”

“Yep, Conrad. You got your people. I’ve got mine. We all sing for our supper.”

Conrad watched Hank walk away and could only wonder what kind of date it was this time. Then he began to ponder life with Abdil off his back and the possession of the knowledge of the ages.

Realizing he had consumed more ale than he thought, Conrad made his way to the bathroom. It was in the back of the tavern, down a long tunnel carved out of the cliffs. The urinals were modified urns, and the walls and ceilings were covered with ancient treasure maps for the tourists.

As Conrad studied a copy of the 1513 Piri Reis map of an ice-free Antarctica, a plank beneath his feet creaked. He looked over his shoulder but saw nobody.

All of a sudden the floor gave way beneath him. His head banged on a trapdoor, and he plunged into darkness.

A quarter of a mile down the beach, Hank looked out at the *Sea Academy* gleaming regally in the bay at twilight. The ship billed itself as a floating university for international students, and Hank had been eyeing it for a reason. Conrad guessed it right: he had a job to do for Montgomery.

The *Sea Academy*'s silhouette looked like the warship it had once been before being reconditioned into a floating university/summer tourist boat and smuggling ship. Stories varied about what the *Sea Academy* did in its military career, but pretty much all agreed that she had had a checkered history of undercover ops, humanitarian missions and false-flag postings.

No wonder Hank felt a kinship to her. Too bad she'd be an underwater tourist attraction by morning.

Hank stripped down, waded into the waves and swam toward her hull. She looked to be 55 meters long with a shallow draft. She could go a long way up a good-sized river—the modern equivalent of a paddlewheel. With a few artillery pieces and decent recon, she could stand up against anything she was expected to encounter. She could hold enough men, ammo and gear to drop off a “toehold camp” pretty much anywhere, serving as the base until the actual camp was

finished.

She could do basically the same near any island.

Like this one.

As the hull rose up like a giant whale on top of him, Hank had another one of his flashbacks—or flash-somethings—that had dogged him since Afghanistan. This one must have been triggered by a story he'd heard. In his head he saw a WWII battleship going down, and suddenly he was trapped with the crew deep below in watertight rooms with no chance of escape. The captain was telling them what they already knew: their fate was sealed. All Hank could hear was his own voice saying, "Leave the lights on, we're playing poker."

*Was this some guilt trip for ridding the world of this floating front for nasty bad guys? Because the Sea Academy was no honorable battleship, these guys were fighting no "good war," and nothing was stopping them from jumping ship when it went down.*

Hank shook the image out of his head and carefully attached a C4 charge beneath the *Sea Academy's* waterline, armed the fuse and quietly swam back to shore.

Minutes later he was rising from the surf. He towed himself off and put on a dry shirt from a bag on the beach. Checking the illuminated dial of his black

Victorinox Dive Master watch, for a nanosecond he felt like James Bond in the beginning of *Goldfinger*. If only there were a beautiful girl in a bathtub waiting for him.

Conrad awoke in darkness, aware of the smell of the sea and the unmistakable bobbing of a ship on the water. His hands were tied behind his back to some kind of rail. Then something like a hood was ripped off.

Standing on the polished deck of the yacht before him was the foul face of Abdil Zawas, two of his goons behind him. One was methodically coiling a long whip.

“Think you can use my money to find some priceless idol and keep it for yourself, Yeats?”

Conrad saw he was on the deck of Zawas’s yacht. “I was just going to give you a call and tell you I found it.”

“Is that so? Tell me where this idol is.”

“I could do that. But you still need me to dig it up. There’s a curse.”

Zawas laughed. “That curse is me, Yeats,” he said, leaning close. “I would

have picked up your friend Mr. Johnson, but then he has a habit of attracting trouble.”

The word was barely out of Zawas’ mouth when suddenly a thunderous explosion lit up the harbor and rocked the yacht.

There were whoops and cheers from the tavern high in the cliffs. Zawas and his men ran to the other side of the deck to watch the *Sea Academy* light up the night.

*Thank you, Hank Johnson.*

Crew members from the harborside bars scrambled to get to the sinking ship. But rather than offer aid, their aim from what Conrad could see was to strip the ship of any and all valuables.

“Johnson!” Abdil cried out.

Then came a second, deafening explosion, sending Abdil ducking into a cabin as glowing debris rained down.

“Toldya there’s a curse,” Conrad called out.

Zawas came out from hiding, dazed and furious, waving the whip as he marched straight at him. “Show me the idol, Yeats!” he yelled like some movie villain. “Or I show you the whip!”

But a third explosion hit, rocking the deck and sending Zawas down on all

fours. By now Conrad had freed himself. He climbed over the rail and jumped ship into the waters, leaving behind a tangle of empty ropes and a raging Zawas cursing after him into the night.

## NIANTIC LINKS

[Queen of Sheba coded painting](#)

[“Nomad” TV trailer](#)

[Hank Johnson DOD Debrief - Part 1](#)

[Hank Johnson DOD Debrief - Part 2](#)

[IQTech Company Profile](#)