

CHAPTER 1

323 B.C. – Babylon

HIGH ABOVE THE SWIFTLY flowing waters of the Euphrates River, warm desert winds carried a lone eagle out of the desert and into the bustling metropolis of Babylon. In the crowded city below, thousands of ordinary people filled the markets and streets as they went about their busy day. The main thoroughfare of Procession Street was lined with shouting street vendors who waved their arms trying to get the attention of their fellow citizens.

But many of the Babylonians were preoccupied with the main entrance of what had once been the palace of the infamous King Nebuchadnezzar II. The grand palace was a towering structure made of bricks from the sands of Babylon, with many of those bricks inscribed with Nebuchadnezzar's name.

Guarding the front of the palace were two of the tall Macedonian warriors from the royal squadron of Alexander the Great, the most powerful general on the face of the earth and a man who had conquered most of the known world, including the legendary city of Babylon itself.

Rumors had spread throughout the city that the great general was dying. Since only the most privileged of Babylon's citizens were permitted to enter the palace, crowds of curious men, women, and children tried to look around the guards and through the massive curved archway.

Within the palace and past the staring masses, groups of emotional soldiers and civilians gathered around one particular hallway. They talked among themselves, some crying and others being comforted. At the end of the hall was the general's bedroom, also guarded by members of the royal squadron. One of the Macedonian soldiers was weeping, and the scene inside the royal chamber was a somber one.

Alexander the Great's generals were dressed for battle, carrying their helmets and wearing their bronze chest plates. They stood in a solemn group around the bed of the most powerful warrior in the world. Alexander's chiseled, muscular body was

wrapped in sweat-soaked silk robes and stretched out in the royal bed. The warrior-king was writhing in pain, and Alexander's physicians walked away from him, shaking their heads in despair.

One of the generals was Perdiccas, a man almost as important as his leader. Alexander reached out to Perdiccas, grabbed the front of his tunic with still-powerful hands, and pulled him close.

With desperate, raspy breaths, Alexander whispered a few words into the general's ear, placed his signet ring into Perdiccas' hand, and fainted. After ten days in a coma, Alexander died.

No one else heard those words, and Perdiccas was assassinated less than three years later.

He never revealed the last words of Alexander the Great to a living soul.

CHAPTER 2

March, 2004 – Babylon, Iraq – Camp Alpha – The Palace of King Nebuchadnezzar II

THE SANDS OF BABYLON swirled in the wind around Khalil, a young Iraqi worker in his late teens who was clad in dusty khaki pants, a ragged shirt, and a scarf known as a keffiyeh wrapped loosely around his face. Khalil ran his calloused hands across the grainy surface of ancient bricks, part of the lower wall of the main palace of ancient Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar II. Some of the desert colored bricks were inscribed with the king's name, and the wall was thousands of years old.

Khalil followed the lines between the bricks with his fingers until he came to a small hole in one of the joints. He pressed his eye up to the hole, but he only saw darkness. With one of the tools given to him by the archeologists, he probed the hole. Some of the ancient mortar loosened, and one brick moved. He feared damaging the wall, but the curious young man could not resist.

Using the tool as a lever, he began to pry the brick from the wall. The remaining mortar turned to dust that dissipated in the wind. The brick popped out of the wall and fell at Khalil's feet.

But he wasn't looking at the brick any more. In the back of the new opening was a clay jar, encrusted with layers of dust. Khalil was shaking when he reached into the hole to grasp the jar. With both hands, he raised his prize toward the sun, gazing at it in the light.

"I must show him what I found," thought Khalil. With his arms wrapped around the clay jar, he walked slowly and carefully to the office of Dr. Ali Al-Hamzi, his supervisor and mentor.

Al-Hamzi was ecstatic with the discovery, slapping Khalil on the back and telling him, "Good work, my young friend, good work. Now we must see what secrets are hidden in your clay jar."

CHAPTER 3

April, 2004 – Babylon, Iraq – Camp Alpha

JACK MASTERS RACKED THE slide on his nine millimeter Beretta and chambered a round. Shoving the handgun into a well-worn holster on his right thigh, the Army captain peeked into the courtyard outside his Quonset hut. He was a little surprised he was so nervous, and he could feel sweat in the palms of his hands.

Babylon was quiet and spooky at 0200 hours. A desert moon in a star-filled sky only enhanced the mystical nature of the old city. There was a soft breeze stirring the few desert palms, and the ruins seemed haunted at night, filled with the ghosts of ancient warriors almost visible as dusty phantoms in the distance.

Almost everyone was sleeping except the Polish guards who patrolled the camp, but he couldn't see anyone for the moment. Masters began to make his way toward the ancient palace of King Nebuchadnezzar II, located in the heart of a city whose name meant "gate of God."

His personal mission meant he must move with stealth, but he was a well-trained special operations guy. Wiping nervous perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve, he mumbled to himself, "Let's get it done." He could feel his usual self-confidence building, and he moved like a panther from one concealed position to another.

Masters was an experienced combat veteran who had proven he could take care of himself in almost any situation, but this meeting made him more wary than usual. It wasn't long before he saw the Ishtar Gate in the distance. The gigantic blue structure was the entrance to the center of old Babylon.

Unfortunately for Jack Masters, several very dangerous men were also near the Ishtar Gate, hiding in the shadows like jackals and waiting just for him.

The captain looked ahead until he saw the prearranged signal from the contact – a light flashing three times. The light paused and flashed three more times, reflecting off the blue walls of the Ishtar Gate.

Masters responded by clicking his own flashlight three times. Mysterious late-night encounters can create doubts, but this meeting was too important. He walked toward the flashing light when he was startled by several large shapes emerging from the darkness on his left and right.

Realizing he was betrayed, Masters reached for his Beretta, but the rough men were ready. They seized his arms and smashed his chest onto the ground where he spit out an angry grunt of pain. One of the thugs jerked Masters' Beretta from its holster. The captain caught a glimpse of his captors, men who were all wearing dark clothes and Arab keffiyehs that hid their faces.

Remembering the Polish soldiers patrolling nearby, he started to yell for help, but one of the men stuffed a piece of foul-tasting cloth into his mouth. Thick, gray tape was wrapped around his face, sealing the cloth inside his mouth and covering his eyes. He struggled to escape, but the attackers kept his arms pinned behind him. The same sticky tape was wrapped around his wrists and his ankles.

Unable to see a thing, Masters felt an unfamiliar chill crawl up his spine. Although it didn't do any good now, he became angry with himself for getting suckered into such a stupid situation. Like any good soldier, he began to calculate the possibilities of escape, but there didn't seem to be any reasonable options.

The burly ambushers dragged the captain though the Ishtar Gate, treating him as if he were nothing more than a soldier's duffle bag. One of them kicked Masters in the side of the head. He was barely conscious when they stopped a few feet away. Dizzy and in pain, he felt something warm dripping from his nose. He figured it was probably blood. It was.

The icy chill returned, and Jack Masters knew he was in a world of trouble. His head kept spinning, and the piece of cloth in his mouth was beginning to choke him. He gagged and struggled to breathe through his nose, but a steady stream of blood made it difficult to get air.

The terror in his spine moved to the pit of his stomach, and he felt his belly tighten with a sickening, primal fear. Escape, he had to escape. In desperation, with all his remaining strength, he pulled at the tape binding his wrists and ankles. He screamed in frustration through the cloth and the tape that sealed his mouth, but

there was almost no sound. There was also no escape. Masters felt something hard press against his right temple.

The young captain's thoughts flew to her. Those dark brown eyes were shining, and her black hair was flowing behind her like a satin waterfall.

Then she was gone, and so was Captain Jack Masters.

THE POLISH GUARD HEARD a loud noise, and he was sure it was a gunshot. His sergeant called him on the radio and asked, "Josef, did you hear that?"

When Private Josef Malick said he did, he began to run toward the old palace of Nebuchadnezzar, unslinging his rifle from his shoulder as he ran. He heard others running in the same direction.

Malick reached the Ishtar Gate, lifted his rifle to his shoulder, and pointed it into the dark. He inched his way through the gate until he saw the large shape at the bottom of a palm tree.

Two other soldiers arrived at his side, and together they all approached the dark shadow, ready to fire their weapons at any threat.

Josef had never seen a dead person before, but the shadow before them was the body of a man, lying on its left side and wearing the uniform of an American Army captain. The dead man held a Beretta handgun in his right hand, and there was a bullet hole in the right side of his head.

Private Malick felt his hands shake, and he knew he would never forget what he had seen.

"Sergeant!" he yelled into his radio. "He is dead! The soldier is dead!"

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