

AND THE BEAT GOES ON

by Tracy Krauss

Prologue

“And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually...” Genesis 6:5 KJV

Tom-tom . . . tom-tom . . . Pulsing . . . throbbing . . . the earth reverberated. Dancers leapt to the ancient rhythm, their half naked bodies, glistening with sweat in the firelight, twisted and arched, as the primal beat called to the pulse within. Overhead, the display case of heaven sparkled, the diamonds large and brilliant against their black velvet nest. Accompanying this was a symphony of sound; a full choir of heavenly voices carried on the solar winds through the crystalline canopy of heaven to the sons of earth below.

The heavy scent of giant orchids which bloomed along the outer perimeter of the temple gardens mingled with the spices and perfumes that were thrown into the fire by the temple priestesses. It had all been set in place for his honor; soon to be absolute ruler and son of the gods himself.

High above the ornate alter, around which the dancers poured their carnal worship, a handsome, young, would-be king watched from his seat of honor. His heart beat quickened, for he knew what was coming next. He had once before witnessed the ancient ritual, as a child, when his own father had been crowned king; had become god.

Abruptly, the drum ceased. A hush swept through the crowd of onlookers who circled the stone platform. The dancers and priestesses scattered. From out of the shadows marched twelve beasts. They were human in appearance except for the gigantic wings, leathery like those of a bat, which were folded across their backs and whose tips nearly touched the ground. Each man was tall and well muscled - the finest and bravest in the kingdom. They were the king's guard, especially chosen and groomed from boyhood; a privilege for only the strongest and bravest. They would accompany the king wherever he went – even to the grave. As descendants of the Nephilim - the race of giants born from the union of the gods and mortal women - they feared nothing; not even death.

The guards lined up on the large platform, facing the king, as the chief among them solemnly ascended the flight of stone steps that led from the platform and altar to the king's throne. From here he would have a good view of every spectacle. The guard saluted, turned, and gave the signal to the others.

With precision, the guards stepped back to form a corridor. The heretofore silent crowd could not help but murmur. A wave of 'oohs' rippled through the masses as six burly slaves led the captive forward, shackled, hobbled, and muzzled. Even then, it was a struggle to get the huge beast prostrate upon the altar of sacrifice. Its beady eyes glistened as its leather wings twitched.

A priest came forward, gilded knife held high over the creature's heart. A slave released

the muzzle that had kept the creature silent and the knife plunged directly into the heart of the animal as a piercing scream echoed through the forest, seeming to rebound from the canopy of the brilliant sky.

Other skilled workers moved quickly into place, and with a few precise cuts, the huge leather wings were removed. Next the head was severed, the brains neatly extracted, leaving only the long pointed beak, majestic red crest, and beady eyes intact.

Blood dripped from the newly hewn crown as it was placed reverently in the hands of the chief guard. With dignified solemnity, he carried the grisly trophy up the long stairway to the king. The priest followed closely on his heels. The prized headpiece was placed on the king's head, even as blood continued to drip from its depths onto his hair and beard. The priest, who had brought with him a goblet of the animal's blood rendered from its jugular vein, presented it to the sovereign. He whispered the ancient words of the deity into the king's bloody ear; an incantation meant only for the gods, not mortal ears.

Slowly the new sovereign raised the goblet to his lips. Without wavering he took a swallow from the cup, letting the blood trickle from the corners of his mouth. Lowering the goblet, his handsome face was suddenly spoiled by a malicious grin.

The priest stepped back as four others came bearing the wings, still attached as one piece by the skin of the creatures back. They were strong men, but even they let out a grunt as the heavy cape was settled onto the shoulders of the monarch. He thought for a moment he would not be able to bear the weight of it. Once the wings were properly cleaned and

tanned, they would weight much less and he would be expected to wear them for all public ceremonies. But for this night, he must bear the full weight of the mantle, blood and all.

The blood, which the priest had mixed with some special herbs, was giving him new strength, however. And the words...those secret words passed down from the outer world of his ancestors . . . words which no human could hear . . . these also gave him power. He was one of them, now. A god among men. He straightened majestically in his seat, as if the weight on his shoulders was nothing more than an ordinary cloak made of woven material. He smiled his bloody smile again, flashes of white peaking through the glistening red, and raised his hand in salute.

A cheer went up from the crowd. The heart beat of the tom-tom was revived. People rushed forward to clap and dance around the flaming torches that skirted the perimeter of the platform, as the dancers resumed their gyrations around the altar of incense. The tempo became frenzied as dancers and spectators alike became more agitated. Some began screaming and wailing; others tore at their clothing, leaving themselves exposed. Just when it seemed the festivities were about to turn into a full fledged orgy, a trumpeting signal brought the writhing crowd to a standstill.

The guards remained steadily at their posts, circling the outer edge of the platform. The tom-tom took up another beat, this time methodical and solemn, as a priestess, waving a fragrant branch of flowers before her, led a procession from the darkness of the forest

into the light of the torches and then up into the centre of the platform. With her were twenty-four maidens, all beautiful in their delicately fluttering garments; all virgins, never even setting sight on a member of the male gender before. They had been raised for this purpose; innocent, yet knowing that their lives held great significance. Now was the time for the fulfillment of that purpose.

The air was heavy with perspiration and heat. The tension and anticipation of the coming spectacle were almost too much for the crowd to bear. The priestess finished her brief words of blessing. One word from the King now was all it would take.

With relish the newly crowned king surveyed the virgins. Beautiful, innocent and ripe, every one. His own lustful desires rose up and he grinned widely. He would also have his pick, but at a later time, in the privacy of his own chambers.

Suddenly, a flashing sheet of light swept across the sky to the east, followed by a deep rumbling much like the mighty cascading noise of a waterfall. The crowd gasped in fear. Perhaps it was a sign of approval from the gods, he thought. He hoped. Somewhere deep within he heard another voice. His father had told him once about a man - a lunatic - who had been building a boat from before his grandfather's time. He was a self proclaimed prophet and said that the earth was to be destroyed by a flood. It seemed ridiculous then and even more so now. The crazy man had been giving his warning for hundreds of years and nothing had happened yet.

Besides, he was a god himself, now. He was absolute ruler, at least in this part of the world. His own ancestors had left the area where the lunatic lived long ago, partly in search of treasure; partly to get away from his teaching. They had settled far away in a prosperous and fertile land. And here they had been met by the gods.

As if in answer to his thoughts, another amazing spectacle lit the sky. This time it was a giant forked bolt of light, followed by an even louder crash. The people gasped again; someone even screamed. He must take control. With a lion like roar, the king lifted his arm, giving the signal. “The gods, my fathers, are pleased! Let the ceremony continue!”

The guards, who had previously been standing at attention around the perimeter of the platform, suddenly jumped into action. Without any delicacy or ceremony, they charged at the group of maidens, grabbing their chosen prey and proceeding to rape them with violence and brutality right before the gaping crowd of onlookers. The mob cheered on encouragement as the fetid orgy continued before their eyes on the platform. Potential escapees were thrown back into the arena for more, as each man exercised his rights to the full. Before long, many onlookers joined in the debauchery; some willingly, others not. It did not matter. This was one night when anything and everything was acceptable. The king looked on in sadistic pleasure, hungry lust burning within his own loins. But gods had control over their desires. He must remember that. His time would come later.

Another sheet of lightning crashed along the horizon, illuminating the spectacle below. This was followed by a forked bolt, spectacular in its intensity and brilliance. Some of

the people started to scatter in fear; others seemed to be spurred on. The king ignored the uncertainty in his own heart. With another roar, he stood with outstretched arms and shouted his approval.

“And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, the end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.” Genesis 6: 12-13 KJV

Chapter One

The African sun beat down on his head in the open jeep as Dr. Mark Graham and his companion bumped along what could hardly be called a road. A local man from the Nbedele tribe, hired on as part of the archeological team, drove the jeep along the hazardous path up the mountain. Hair raising switch backs and steep inclines didn't seem to faze the driver as he maneuvered the vehicle with one hand. Some pebbles cascaded off the trail's edge to the ravine below. Good thing he was used to it, Mark decided, or he might have been tempted to bail.

As he braced himself for the next jarring pothole, Mark thought about yesterday's meeting with the Zimbabwean government officials. Everything had gone well – on the surface, at least. They had agreed to continue their sponsorship, and renewed their pledge of faith in his abilities as a leader in his field. Yet there was this nagging sense at the back of his mind that something rippled beneath the surface – something hidden either by neglect or design of which he was not aware. It was an uncomfortable feeling. Probably just his general distaste for dealing with administrators. As meticulous as he was himself, it rankled when unnecessary red tape seemed to get in the way of real progress. Added to that, it was not a trip he relished, unless absolutely necessary.

His crew had been meticulously digging under the site of an ancient temple – a sacred site stringently protected by the government of Zimbabwe. The temple site itself had been unearthed decades before, but legend had led to speculation that an even older

civilization had once used the spot. Mark had been honored when asked to assemble a team of specialists to investigate the possibilities without compromising the original excavations. It was painstaking work. But already, after only five months, the team was rewarded with signs that the legends were indeed rooted in fact. Under the temple mount they had discovered an even more ancient burial ground with an intricate system of tombs that seemed oddly more advanced technologically than the layer of simple graves directly above it. This was not entirely unexpected; history often bespoke of a more barbarous people supplanting a superior civilization. But there was more . . . so much more. There was a sense that they were on the verge of something big – monumental, even.

And then the authorities had the audacity to question whether there was any use continuing! They said they were running out of budget and it was taking too long. Fools! Didn't they know there was no way to unearth secrets that had been buried for millennium in just a few short months? These things took time and care. And money.

That was the bottom line. Always was. Mark wished he had the benefit of some nice multi-trillionaire benefactor right about now, instead of a crumbling third world dictatorship. Oh well. For now he had managed to secure another four months contract, having convinced them of the importance of the find to the economic development of the region. But in the end, he doubted it would be enough time and he was a scientist, not a politician.

As the jeep rounded the last corner, Mark spotted one of the tents that had been set up on site as a lab. The archeological site extended over a fairly large area. Several tents and simple wooden structures had been erected to house the necessary work stations and accommodate the crew. Various roped off areas were meticulously squared off for the painstaking process of uncovering tidbits of information, one grain of sand at a time.

Mark jumped from the jeep into the cloud of gathering dust and strode directly to the quarters where he expected to find his coworker, Laura Sawchuk. He left his bags for his Nbedelian assistant.

He had left Laura in charge during his brief absence. Laura Sawchuk, Doctor of Anthropology, was very knowledgeable in a wide field and was also very capable at giving direction and leadership. She had been his colleague on more than one job before and he trusted her judgment and skill for the task at hand. She was also, at present, his girlfriend.

Girlfriend had a somewhat adolescent ring to it, Mark decided. His 'partner' would be a more appropriate phrase – it was the terminology Laura used, anyway. Mark wasn't quite sure how their relationship had advanced to more than just colleagues. Close proximity did that to people sometimes. And loneliness.

He found Laura sitting at a corner along one wall, examining a fragment under a microscope. She didn't look up when he entered. At 36 she was a couple of years older

than Mark himself. Her career always came first; a fact that suited Mark, since he shared her passion for work.

“Laura,” he greeted her, “What have we here?” He tried to get a glimpse over her shoulder at the tiny fragment she was scrutinizing.

She ignored the question. “I thought you were going to be back yesterday,” she said, still not taking her eyes from the eye pieces.

“I was delayed an extra day in Harare,” Mark explained as he pulled up a stool and sat down beside her.

“Oh? That good news or bad?” she asked.

“Good. I managed to convince them to give us another four months.”

“Four months?!” Laura asked sharply, straightening and looking at Mark for the first time since he had arrived. There was a powdering of dust on his skin and hair which almost made him look like he had stepped out of one of those old fashioned sepia photographs – all monochromatic brown. “We can’t possibly be finished in four months.” She reached over and flicked a stray twig from his unruly mass of dark curls.

“I know that,” Mark shrugged, running a hand through his hair, creating a small cloud of dust. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Two days growth of stubble had begun to form.

“But for now I had to take it or leave it.”

Laura leaned forward and placed a quick kiss on Mark’s nose, her streaked brown and blonde ponytail bobbing. “Good to have you back, in any case. Mnanga didn’t kill you, I see, with his reckless driving.”

“Still in one piece, miracle as that is,” Mark nodded with a grin. “What you looking at, anyway?”

“A fragment from some of the plaster leading into the antechamber I told you about,” Laura replied, turning back to the microscope. “It seems to have some kind of metal alloy embedded right in it.”

“Plaster?” Mark asked uncertainly, his brows furrowing.

Laura nodded. “I’m not sure what else to call it. A coating of some kind. Unusual, I know.”

“Very,” Mark agreed. “Most tombs are simply hewn from the rock, not plastered over. Mind if I take a look?” Laura relinquished her seat and Mark took his turn peering into the microscope. “Hm. I see what you mean. I’ve never seen anything like it.” He

couldn't help keeping the disappointment from his voice. He had wanted to be the first into the chamber himself.

Laura picked up on the tone in his voice, "Don't worry. We haven't made a breakthrough into the chamber itself yet. I knew you'd be disappointed not to be here, so we've held back a bit."

"Oh. Thanks. I appreciate it," Mark nodded, obvious relief in his voice as he continued to peruse the tiny fragment.

"Besides, there's been plenty of other excitement to keep us busy."

"Like...?"

"Like the bone fragments," Laura offered.

"Still no word from the lab?" he asked. He already knew the answer. He'd checked back in Harare.

"Nope. But we are starting to see a pattern emerging," Laura said.

Mark's curiosity was really pricked now. He looked up. "What kind of pattern?"

“Come and see,” Laura said, leaving the plaster fragment behind for the time being. She led Mark to a computer station. She sat down in front of the screen and clicked several icons with the mouse. A large blueprint of the dig appeared on the screen. “The strange bone fragments we found first were located here,” she pointed to the location with her finger, “alongside the human remains that appear to have been disturbed - either by some type of seismic activity, or by other humans.”

“Mmhm,” Mark nodded. It was nothing new to him. He had been present during that discovery. “Go on.”

“The next grave we uncovered also contained unidentified bone fragments. Only this time,” she paused for effect. She glanced over at him, ready to gage his reaction. He raised his brows in question. “I’ll bring up a digital photo,” she said, clicking the mouse deftly once again. Several windows opened. “Ah, here we are.” She punched one more key and a color photo came up of a long curved bone. It was broken in two places, with part of the inner section missing. She hit another key and a second picture came up. This time it showed Laura and Rocco, one of the crew managers, holding the bone between them.

“That’s one big chicken wing,” Mark whistled.

“Then you do agree that it looks like part of a wing?” Laura asked, surveying him closely.

Mark blinked and peered at the image again. “Yes . . . it does, doesn’t it?”

“The humerus is almost entirely in tact, with parts of the ulna attached. It looks to be from a very large winged creature. The parts that are left clearly seem to have been placed with the body, intentionally.”

“Large,” Mark mused. “How large?”

“Pretty damn big, that’s all I have to say. Bigger than an albatross or any present species of bird that I know of.”

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Mark asked expectantly. He looked over at Laura, obvious excitement burning in his eyes. “We’ve discovered another Troy – an ancient legend thought to be nothing more than myth.” He pounded the computer table and the monitor flickered momentarily. It was the most emotion he had displayed thus far.

“Watch it,” Laura warned with a smile. “No hitting the furniture! You’re forgetting our power supply isn’t the most stable.”

“What else you got?” Mark asked anxiously.

“Rocco’s team has been continuing on those same graves. He may find the other “wing”, so to speak, and by the look of the placement of those two graves, we’re speculating that there could be a whole ring of graves surrounding the entrance to the antechamber. Providing you want to disturb them.”

“Hmm. Like guards,” Mark commented.

“Right. Here’s another interesting find from the same grave,” Laura said, referring to the next photo. “It appears to be some kind of head piece or mask, probably worn expressly for burial. It’s pretty badly decayed and was in danger of disintegrating into dust if we tried to remove it.”

Mark just stared at the screen

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“I know what you’re thinking, okay?” Laura interrupted his thoughts. “About that legend – don’t go spreading rumors until the lab has done a full analysis. I’ve had a hard enough time convincing Rocco to keep his feet on the ground. You know how he can be. We could all be discredited if we aren’t careful. First we need solid lab work as to the type of bone, then solid dating on both the human and non human fragments.”

“You don’t need to remind me about procedure, Doctor,” Mark stated in a business like tone. “I am still chief archeologist on this dig.”

“Of course,” Laura agreed, giving Mark a sideways glance. “I wasn’t trying to offend you. You seem awfully touchy.”

Mark sighed and ran a hand through his thick, unruly hair. “My apologies. I guess I’m just tired after the trip.”

“More like your nerves are shot after Mnanga’s driving,” Laura offered.

“Right,” Mark agreed with a chuckle. “Plus, I hate being out of the loop. I feel like all the important discoveries are being made when I’m gone.”

“You need to relax,” Laura said, coming up behind him and kneading his neck with her fingers.

“Hm . . . that feels good,” Mark said, closing his eyes.

“Of course. And I’ll make it feel even better a little later on,” Laura promised with a suggestive smile.

“Oh? That’s definitely worth coming back for,” Mark said with a smile of his own. He closed his eyes and allowed her fingers to do their magic on the stiff cords in his neck. Suddenly he opened his eyes. “I’d like to take a look, myself,” he said, all business once again. “At that bone. It’s been stored and numbered with the rest of the artifacts?”

“Of course,” Laura shrugged, dropping her hands and walking away with a sigh. She turned back to the computer. “I expected you’d want to have a look at everything. I just thought you might want to wait and start fresh tomorrow.”

“With only four months grace, I don’t think we can spare the time. I better be off to inspect the rest of the work in progress,” he said with obvious relish, rubbing his hands together. He rose and turned to leave.

“Mark,” Laura stopped him.

“Hm?” Mark turned.

“I missed you.”

His nod of acknowledgement was barely perceptible. He was already out the door.

Mark strode to where he hoped to find Rocco Cortez, one of the crew chiefs. He’d been talking to various other crew chiefs along the way and was brought up to date on most of the developments already, so it was just a matter of seeing it for himself. He was physically weary from his trek, but his mind was on high alert.

By far, the dominant feature of the entire site was the ancient temple ruins. It had been reconstructed in places and consisted of an outer and an inner courtyard, with the chambers of the temple itself in the center. Much of the building had been constructed of rock quarried from the surrounding area. Mostly what was left, after being uncovered, was the foundation, with only a few walls remaining intact. But the location of the altar and several other important features, could be clearly identified from what remained. The original archeological excavations had taken place over thirty years ago. What Mark and his team were interested in now was not the temple itself, but what lay hidden far beneath it.

This type of excavating was very painstaking and precise. In order to get at the layers beneath without disturbing the top layer, the team had to tunnel underneath using an elaborate system of braces, all the while ensuring that they did not destroy a potentially important find. They started well away from the temple mound itself, creating a crater like moat around one side of the site. From here they could open up the side of the hill underneath, exposing subsequent layers as they went. It was backbreaking work with an element of risk, but the thrill of discovery outweighed the drawbacks.

“Rocco,” Mark greeted his colleague, pumping his hand vigorously. “I hear there have been some exciting discoveries in my absence.” Rocco was a short, somewhat stocky man of Puerto Rican descent. He wore his graying hair in a haphazard ponytail, and sported a thick black mustache.

“Hey, my friend,” Rocco responded enthusiastically. “She showed you the photos?”

“Yeah. Pretty amazing,” Mark nodded.

“See the real thing yet?” Rocco asked, surveying his boss out of the corner of his eye.

“Just heading over there now,” Mark informed. The two men started walking together toward the storage and cataloguing compound. “So what do you think?”

Rocco shrugged noncommittally. “You probably don’t want to know.”

“Come on, Rocco. I trust your judgment.” Rocco looked skeptical and kept his mouth shut. Mark smiled encouragingly and slapped the older man across the back. “Don’t let Laura scare you off. She even warned me about keeping the discovery under wraps until the final analysis report comes in.”

Rocco considered his answer for a moment. “Seems obvious to me. In keeping with local legend, plus the size, shape and wing span . . .”

Mark nodded. “I know. I just can’t quite wrap my brain around it yet. It seems impossible.”

“Wait until you see it,” Rocco responded.

“So you seriously think we’ve unearthed the remains of a long extinct variety of flying dinosaur?”

Rocco nodded. “Very Pterodactyl like. I’ve seen them before.”

Mark grunted and let out a small disbelieving laugh. “No wonder Laura is so paranoid. The sooner we get a positive ID, the better. I just wish I’d been around personally to document the whole thing.”

“You don’t trust us?” Rocco asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Mark explained. “It’s just that this could either be the biggest scientific discovery of the century or the biggest hoax. We’ll either be famous or made to look like laughing stocks. Any slip in procedure and we could be completely discredited.”

“They’ll try it, don’t even fool yourself into thinking they won’t.”

Mark glanced sideways at his long time friend and trusted colleague. “You sound pretty skeptical. And who are ‘they’?”

“The establishment.”

“The establishment,” Mark repeated sardonically.

“In this case, the scientific community,” Rocco clarified.

“Oh?”

“Sure. They accept only what fits into their own preconceived theories. Anything outside the box gets tossed.”

“That’s hardly fair,” Mark laughed. “If that’s the case then what’s the use? We might as well pack up right now and go home. Discovery is what this is all about.”

“There, my friend, is where you are sadly mistaken,” Rocco replied knowingly. “It’s really about the capitalist regime that rules us all. Money. Profit. Bottom line. That’s where the real power is. We’re all just pawns in a big game of chess, fed whatever information the powers-that-be think we can swallow. Just enough to keep us quiet and satisfied. It’s a conspiracy.”

“Someone definitely put something nasty in your cereal this morning,” Mark said with a laugh.

“I’m serious,” Rocco responded

“I know,” Mark said, sobering. “That’s what worries me.”

They had reached the compound, a large canvas walled structure. Mark greeted the guard with a perfunctory nod and entered without comment. Rocco followed closely on his heels.

“It’s numbered and documented right along with everything else from my quadrant. I did it myself,” Rocco said, leading the way now in the dim interior of the make shift compound. It consisted of rows of metal shelving lined with labeled trays and clear plastic bags of artifacts. “Right here.” He searched the area with his eyes, squinting. “What the . . . it was here yesterday. I knew you’d want to do the preliminary lab work yourself. What did she do with it?!” he blurted, letting out a string of expletives in Spanish.

“Whoa, whoa! Who do you mean?” Mark asked. “Laura?”

“Has anything been crated for transport to the States yet?” Rocco demanded, ignoring the initial question.

“Is that what she suggested?”

“Yep. I told her to wait until you got back. I told her you’d want to see it for yourself,” Rocco spat, shaking his head in frustration.

“I take it you two had some disagreements on the subject,” Mark noted.

“You could say that,” Rocco admitted.

“So just what else has been going on in my absence?” Mark wanted to know. He wasn’t feeling too happy at the moment. Laura had just finished telling him she had saved the bone for him to look at. Why would she lie to him about it?

“Go ask your second in command,” Rocco directed with a wave. “She’ll tell you what ever you want to hear, I’m sure.”

“I don’t like the sounds of this. The last thing I need are my two most valuable crew members at logger heads with one another.”

Rocco just shrugged, “Talk to her about it. I just did my job. Numbered and documented, just like it’s supposed to be.”

“I intend to talk to her about it,” Mark said, in no uncertain terms. He turned and strode from the compound.

