

PULSE

ALSO BY JEREMY ROBINSON

The Didymus Contingency

Raising the Past

Antarktos Rising

Kronos

PULSE

JEREMY ROBINSON

Thomas Dunne Books St. Martin's Press  New York

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS.
An imprint of St. Martin's Press.

PULSE. Copyright © 2009 by Jeremy Robinson. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.thomasdunnebooks.com
www.stmartins.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Robinson, Jeremy, 1974–
Pulse / Jeremy Robinson. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN-13: 978-0-312-54028-9
ISBN-10: 0-312-54028-0
1. Geneticists—Fiction. 2. Antiquities—Fiction. 3. Special forces (Military science)—Fiction. I. Title.
PS3618.O3268P85 2009
813'.6—dc22

2009007583

First Edition: June 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Hilaree, again, my best, still

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writing of *Pulse* created several challenges for me in terms of military and genetics knowledge. I was fortunate enough to be discovered by readers who are not only experts in these various fields, but also willing to consult on a variety of topics that took the book in exciting directions and root my sometimes whacky theories in a bed of hard facts.

Todd Wielgos, senior research scientist with MS Chemistry. Your advice and insight into the world of genetics improved this novel in amazing ways. This book could not have been written without your help.

As for military and weapons advice, I have three patriots to thank. First is Major Ed Humm, U.S.M.C. (Ret.). Your advice on weapons and tactics was invaluable and contributed realism to my depictions of the military. Further weapons insight (and shell samples) were provided by Rick “The Gun-Guy” Kutka. I now know the difference between .45 and .50 caliber bullets. Ouch. And finally, for tips on the mysterious world of Delta, a very special thanks to brigadier general and author of *Sudden Threat*, A. J. Tata.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

viii

Of course, there are bound to be portions of this novel where I stretch the boundaries of science and weaponry. Any such incidents or errors are mine alone.

I must also thank: Stanley Tremblay, my right hand-man who worked with me every step of the way, from research to marketing. Walter Elly, your masterful web knowledge and passion for my books continue to make the daunting process of marketing more fun and exciting. Peter Wolverton, my editor at Thomas Dunne, for making my first experience with big publishing a fun and exciting experience. Elizabeth Byrne, also at Thomas Dunne, for always being a cheerful and speedy aid. And finally Scott Miller, my agent at Trident Media, for discovering me so many years ago and sticking with me while I honed my skills. I hope to work with you all on many more projects to come. Thus begins the quest for world domination!

Lastly, my wonderful family: Hilaree, my courageous wife and biggest supporter. Aquila, my creative and energetic daughter. Solomon, my loving and brave son. And little Norah—who in my last acknowledgments had yet to be born or named—you are beautiful and peaceful. I love you all.

If a man is offered a fact which goes against his instincts, he will scrutinize it closely, and unless the evidence is overwhelming, he will refuse to believe it. If, on the other hand, he is offered something which affords a reason for acting in accordance to his instincts, he will accept it even on the slightest evidence. The origin of myths is explained in this way.

—Bertrand Russell

Where does the violet tint end and the orange tint begin? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first blending enter into the other? So with sanity and insanity.

—Herman Melville

If all else fails, immortality can always be assured by spectacular error.

—John Kenneth Galbraith

PROLOGUE

Nazca, Peru, 454 B.C.

HUNDREDS OF FEET pounded the dry soil, filling the air with the ominous sound of soldiers on the march. But these were not soldiers. They were followers, worshippers of the man whose strange ship had landed on the lush Peruvian shore only a week before, the man who now led them on a trek away from their fertile homeland and across the arid, lifeless Nazca plains.

He marched without cease, without pause for food, water, or rest. With each merciless day their numbers dwindled. The women and children turned back first as hunger and responsibility to their kin overruled their desire to worship the visiting deity. The men who continued following the silent stranger fought against their parched throats and scorched feet, determined to see where the giant would lead. One by one, the weakest men fell to the hard-packed, roiling hot sand and died slowly under the blistering gaze of the sun.

When the man finally stopped in the shade of a tall hill he turned and cast a cool gaze at the remaining twenty-three men—all that remained of the one hundred thirty-seven who'd begun the journey

JEREMY ROBINSON

2

alongside him. They were the strongest and bravest of the tribe, surely worthy of whatever honors the man-god would bestow.

Without a word the giant man removed the lion skin that covered his head and back, pulling the intact beast's head up and away from his own. His sweat-dampened, curly black hair clung to his forehead, but the man paid it no heed. Nor did he wipe away the beads of sweat rolling into his dark brown eyes and into the heavily scabbed gashes running across his chest, back, and legs.

When the giant first arrived on the sandy shore of their village, his resistance to the deep wounds coupled with his tall, six-foot-five height—towering more than a foot above the tallest man in the tribe—had convinced the native Nazcans of his god-hood. The mysterious lion skin that covered his head and back told them he had journeyed from the land of the gods. The club he carried, stained dark with old blood, showed him to be a warrior worthy of respect and awe. But the blood-soaked, woven sack he carried, which wriggled and twisted in his hands and filled the air with a strong copper flavor, revealed he guarded the remains of some ancient evil. At first glance, the size of the object held within the sack made many think he had killed a large boar, but the copious amount of blood constantly dripping from the still-moving body within convinced them otherwise. Nothing mortal could survive so much blood loss.

The giant man knelt and plunged a finger into the hard earth. The small stones and sand that made up the surface of the plains slid away as he outlined a pattern with his finger. After finishing, the man stood again, met the eyes of the men still standing, and waved his hands out over the flat plain at the base of the hill. He then pointed to the central aspect of his drawing, then to a large stone, fifty feet away. The side facing away from the hill looked flat and stood more than ten feet tall and just as wide, but the back side curved out like a boulder. It stood on its edge where the flat side met the rounded, and balanced precariously. To the men it looked like a gnarled, giant melon that had been halved and discarded aeons ago by some ancient god.

The men understood. The strange stone would be the central head of the unearthly creature the man-god had drawn. As the sun set, the men worked in the cooling air. As night came, they labored under torch and moonlight and fought against the frigid, desert air, desperate for food and water, but craving to please the man-god. By morning the oversized reproduction of the giant's drawing was complete. From top to

PULSE

3

bottom it measured five hundred feet; from side to side, three hundred feet. The light brown lines of the drawing stood in stark contrast to the dark pebbly skin of the plains, making the massive illustration truly magnificent.

The men staggered under the fresh blazing sun as it sapped the rest of their strength and sucked the remaining moisture from their bodies. With each drop of blood from their raw hands, their lives ebbed farther away. Each man knew his life would end in the desert, but they fought the urge to flee, believing that the man-god would reward them for their faithful service. They staggered as a group, dazed and bewildered, toward the head of their drawing, where the giant waited.

He stood next to a deep pit he had dug in front of the large stone, where the two lines from either side of the drawing converged. The men stopped on the opposite side of the pit and waited. The giant raised the sack over the pit, allowing the still oozing blood to drip down into the sand below, where it dried instantly and turned to ash. The men murmured about the strange magic that turned blood to ash, but all remained rooted in place, as much from exhaustion as from a desire to see what might happen next. As the man freed the sack from his grasp, it fell into the pit, landing atop the ashen drop of blood.

Upon striking the hot, dry earth, the sack began to writhe, violently at first, but then more slowly. As the wet blood on the outside of the sack turned white and dry, it stopped moving altogether.

The men waited breathlessly for what might happen next. When the man-god raised his hand and pointed, fear and horror gripped their exhausted bodies. Had they known their fate, not a single one of them would have followed the giant or helped carve his design. Their eyes filled with fear and desperation, but as the giant's grip tightened on his club, they knew flight would serve no purpose. Not one of them would make it outside the borders of their drawing without meeting a blunt end.

The man pointed again, stabbing his finger into the pit. This time the men obeyed, crawling down into the pit. With quivering legs and shaking hands, the men waited to see what would happen next.

The man drank from a wineskin that hung at his hip. The last few drops of the black liquid within dribbled onto his tongue. He swallowed and turned to them again, his body appearing stronger than

JEREMY ROBINSON

4

ever, but his face revealing something more—remorse. The look of regret lasted only an instant as resolve returned to the man-god's eyes.

For the first time since arriving, the giant spoke. His voice shook the sand at the edge of the pit. They didn't understand a word of the man's speech, but found the tone of his voice, the strength of his frame, and the energy of his gesticulations to be inspiring. Confidence returned to the men and several even smiled, as the man-god raised his club to the sky and shouted. They cheered with him, raising their bloodied fists and shouting at the sun.

But their shouts of victory turned to screams as a large object suddenly blotted out the sun above them. Before their tired minds could make sense of the massive object, it descended and crashed with a thunderous boom, after which only the sound of a single pair of sandaled feet could be heard, crunching across the plains, headed east, toward the coast.



GAMMA

ONE

Peru, 2006

TODD MADDOX STEPPED out of the Eurocopter EC 155 and ducked instinctively as the rotor blades continued chopping the air above him. The flight from LAX in Los Angeles to Captain Rolden International Airport in Peru had been uneventful, and the copter ride from the airport to this unknown destination blessedly smooth. But discomfort struck him hard as he exited the copter's air-conditioned interior and entered the humid jungle air of eastern Peru's Amazon rain forest.

His sunflower yellow shirt became like sticky, wet papier-mâché, gluing itself to his body. His styled hair, held in place by a thick film of pricey Elnett hairspray, dissolved into a heavy goo that oozed over his forehead. Out of his dry, Los Angeles element, Maddox grunted and cursed under his breath as he held tight to his briefcase and jogged toward the glass double doors that seemed so out of place in the thick green jungle.

Doubt filled his mind as he neared the doors. Was this worth it? Could he stand all this heat and humidity? The pay would no doubt

JEREMY ROBINSON

8

be amazing and the company, Manifold, was renowned in the world of genetics. But the job description, well, there hadn't been one. Simply a five-year contract and ten thousand dollars for an interview, take it or leave it. He hoped to learn more during this one and only interview, but if the work they wanted him for was anything less than groundbreaking, he'd be on the next flight back to sunny, dry Los Angeles. His job there with CreGen paid well and made headlines occasionally, but the chance to work for Manifold was too good to not, at least, consider. Of course, when he agreed to an interview he had no idea it would take place in the Peruvian rain forest.

The double doors swung open and Maddox ran through like he was escaping a torrential downpour; given the amount of moisture clinging to his dress shirt, beige slacks, and now slick hair, it wasn't much of a stretch.

Inside the hallway, cool, dry air blasted from air-conditioning vents along the ceiling. Maddox's forehead stiffened as the hairspray dried again, several inches lower than when it had first been applied.

"Humidity does a job on each and every one of you metrosexuals the boss brings down here," said a deep voice.

He looked at the man who had opened the door. He hadn't been spoken to with such disrespect since high school. He glared at the man through his Oakley black-rimmed eyeglasses. The man was tall, and given the bulges beneath his form-fitting black shirt, not a scientist. He filled his voice with as much disgust as he could muster and said, "Excuse me?"

"I'm just screwing with you, man." The stranger slapped him on the shoulder—which hurt—and laughed. He extended his hand. "Oliver Reinhart. Head of Gen-Y security here at Manifold Gamma."

"*You're* in charge of this facility?" he asked, wondering if he'd have to put up with this goon long term if he took the job.

Reinhart rubbed a hand over the back of his buzz-cut skull, letting the short hairs tickle his hand. "I oversee security at all the facilities, Alpha through Epsilon. I go where the boss goes."

"Ridley?"

"That's the guy."

Maddox blinked. Richard Ridley reached legendary status when he formed Manifold ten years previous using a three-billion-dollar inheritance. At first no one took his company seriously, but then he began acquiring the best minds in the field, some straight out of MIT, Har-

PULSE

9

vard, and Berkeley. The company soon flourished, making rapid advancements in the fields of genetics and biopharmaceuticals. "Richard Ridley is here?"

"You're a quick one," he said with a smirk. "I can see why he hired you."

"He hasn't hired me."

Reinhart stepped past him and started down the stark white hallway. "He has. You just don't know it yet. C'mon, follow me."

Maddox looked at the burly man's face. A scar ran down his cheek, but other than that, the cleanly shaven face looked, more than anything, young. No more than thirty. Figuring the young Reinhart got his kicks by pretending to be head of security and jerking recruits around by dangling Ridley in front of them, he said, "You look a little young to be head of security. What are you, thirty?"

Reinhart answered the questions quickly. "Twenty-five. We're called Gen-Y for a reason. You won't find anyone over twenty-eight in my crew."

"Doesn't the lack of experience—"

Reinhart paused. He fixed his eyes on Maddox's. "Killers are born, not made."

As though on cue, two more security guards rounded the corner and walked past them, eyeing him and nodding their heads at Reinhart, like friends in a club. Both looked barely old enough to shave, though their bulk and cold eyes confirmed Reinhart's statement. He'd entered a den of vipers.

Still, it seemed irresponsible to hire such young people for security. Then again, eighteen-year-olds were common on any battlefield. Given Reinhart's buzz cut and military posture, he'd probably seen some time in Iraq or Afghanistan before landing the job here. There weren't many military people his age who hadn't. He decided to drop the subject and fell in step behind Reinhart, following him through a maze of hallways.

Reinhart stopped next to a door and opened it. He motioned to the door and grinned. "After you."

Maddox sighed and walked through. The room on the other side stopped him in his tracks. The white marble floor reflected the numerous shades of blue and green from the jungle canopy and sky, which glowed bright above the fifty-foot-long, arched all-glass ceiling. Incan statues lined the ruby red walls and a long oriental rug ran

JEREMY ROBINSON**10**

down the center of the room. The rug led to an enormous reception desk that looked more appropriate for a high-profile Hollywood literary agency than a genetics company. The serious-looking redhead behind the desk looked over her glasses at him and smiled briefly.

“Tell her who you are and she’ll take it from there,” Reinhart said.

Unable to take his eyes off the expansive reception hall, Maddox heard the door whisper shut. Reinhart had left. Though young, the man’s presence concerned him. What would happen if he turned Ridley down? He pushed the question from his mind and focused on Reinhart’s explanation of his job. If he really was Ridley’s personal guard, he wouldn’t be here all the time . . . or would he? No one really knew where Ridley spent his time. Reinhart said “Manifold Alpha through Epsilon,” which meant there were at least five Manifold locations. Maybe more.

His approach to the reception desk was watched by the bloodred eyes of the twelve Incan statues that lined either side of the room. Their twisted and angry expressions did little to calm his nerves. He paused in front of the desk as the redhead held an open palm up to him. She held a phone against her ear, listening. “You can go in,” she said, after putting the phone down. She reached under the desktop and pushed a button. A door to the right of the reception desk slid open silently. He tightened his grip on the briefcase and headed for the door, unsure of what to expect on the other side.

The office was sparsely decorated with more Incan art. Masks hung on walls and statues stood in the corners. Large, green plants made the whole scene look like some ceremonial cave. He realized some of the plants must be mint, as the room smelled strongly of fresh peppermint, the kind his mother had grown in their greenhouse.

At the center of the room sat two black sofas, facing each other. Between them, a short, hand-carved coffee table held two glass teacups, a steaming clay teapot, and a manila folder. Richard Ridley himself sat on the sofa facing the door, his bald head gleaming under the room’s stylish track lighting.

He had seen photos of Ridley in articles and promotional materials from conferences, but he looked taller and more confident in person.

Without standing or offering a hand, Ridley motioned for him to sit on the other couch. Maddox sat down and placed his briefcase on the floor next to him. Ridley poured two glasses of tea, drizzled honey into both cups, then handed one to him. A waft of peppermint filled his

PULSE

11

nose, opening his eyes and causing him to sit up straighter. He took a sip and swallowed. The liquid seemed to invigorate his mind as the peppermint was absorbed into his bloodstream.

“Fresh-cut peppermint tea,” Ridley said, taking a sip and then placing his glass on the coffee table. His gravelly voice was impossible to ignore or mistake. Maddox had heard it before and, expecting it, was able to keep his mind from wondering how a man with such a sinister-sounding voice could be so successful. “Amazing what a simple brew can do for the body. It doesn’t hold a candle to what you’ve been involved in, though it probably tastes better.”

Maddox smiled, trying not to look nervous.

“I’ve been following your work quite closely. Your breakthroughs with the Wnt pathway and limb regeneration in embryonic chickens.”

Maddox’s eyes widened.

Ridley grinned. “Why don’t you explain it to me.”

Maddox grew excited. He never expected to be in a position to explain something to *the* Richard Ridley. “As you know . . . may know . . . the Wnt pathway is a network of proteins that, in essence, tells a growing fetus where, how, and when to grow limbs. But it becomes dormant after birth. Mother Nature’s kill switch so to speak, preventing uncontrolled additions, like a sixth finger growing on the hand when you get a cut. What we tried to do was reactivate the pathway in adults so that when a finger is cut off, the active Wnt proteins tell the cells to grow new ligaments, bones, and muscles, not just a layer of new skin.”

Ridley cleared his throat. “But—and correct me if I’m wrong—the Wnt pathway, while a brilliant attempt, is a rather embarrassing dead end.”

Maddox hunched as his ego deflated. Ridley knew more than he was letting on.

“But”—Ridley wagged a finger at him—“you’re already pursuing a different path, aren’t you?”

A *lot* more than he was letting on.

Maddox remained silent, knowing that any verification of his current work would be a breach of his contract with CreGen and would lead to his firing and probably legal action against him. Just being here, instead of vacationing in the Caribbean where he was supposed to be, would be enough to get him fired.

“You don’t need to say anything. I know it puts you in a . . . situation.

JEREMY ROBINSON**12**

So I'll say it for you. You've managed to regenerate limbs on rats—tails, legs, even ears."

Maddox's eyes widened. "How do you know that? We haven't published—"

Ridley held up his hand, silencing him. "Please. Let me finish. You've also partially regenerated limbs on pigs and sheep, though with less success. But the *crème de la crème* is what *you*, and you alone, have managed to do with . . . humans."

"Now wait a minute," he said, sitting up straight. "The work on sheep and pigs is highly classified. There is no way you could—"

Ridley raised his hands. "And yet, I do. Corporate espionage is a wonderful thing. Don't think your bosses at CreGen haven't sent spies in our direction. If not for Mr. Reinhart and Gen-Y, you'd probably be privy to Manifold's secrets as well." He leaned forward. "I notice you didn't mention the human experimentation."

"That's because there isn't any," Maddox said, looking at the floor.

Ridley smiled, put his glass down and picked up the folder on the tabletop. He opened it and began reading. "Boy. Fifteen years old. Admitted to Mass General Hospital because he sliced off the tip of his left index finger while . . . trying to dissect a frog in his basement. The year was 1986." He looked up. "Sound familiar?"

"How did you get access to my medical history?"

"If I can bypass security at CreGen, do you really think HIPAA stands a chance?" He closed the file and returned it to the tabletop; then, like a striking snake, he grabbed hold of Maddox's left hand. He held it up, inspecting the perfect left index finger. "You regenerated your fingertip. Not on the clock, mind you. On your own."

Maddox yanked his hand away and sat back, crossing his arms.

"No need to get upset. I admire your tenacity, even if it is inspired by vanity." He removed a folded piece of paper from his trousers pocket and slowly unfolded it. "Tell me how and I'll show you what's on this piece of paper."

"What could be on that piece of paper that would make me tell you something like that?"

"Your future," he said. "Aren't you interested?"

Maddox held out for five seconds and then said, "Pig bladder extract. It . . . helps construct the microscopic scaffolding for incoming human cells and emits chemical signals that stimulate the regrowth process."

PULSE

13

“That’s . . . unusual,” Ridley said, then smiled.

“Pig extracts are used in diabetes treatments, producing islet cells that help reverse the disease in humans when transplanted.”

“So you figured they could also help regrow limbs.”

Maddox shrugged. “At the time. Beyond that it’s another dead end. The process doesn’t work.”

Ridley nodded. “Then your research has stagnated?”

He didn’t answer the question. He couldn’t answer the question. It was too embarrassing to admit failure on something he’d spent his life on. Besides, he could see that Ridley knew the answer.

“As a young man, before all this,” he said, waving his arms at the room around them, “I was obsessed with maps. I would chart land routes from one point to another, say Beijing to Paris, over and over until it appeared I had exhausted all the possibilities. But then I tried something different, like your pig bladder, I turned the map upside down and new possibilities emerged. But this technique ultimately ended in frustration as I once again ran out of possibilities. Using my father’s resources I turned to a final resource that is both hard to come by and often quite expensive—the ancient past. I purchased ancient maps from dealers around the world, legal and black market. Trade routes were revealed. Secret passages. Tunnels dug and forgotten. Each map revealed more. In this way I came to learn that the ancient past is one of the best ways to uncover secrets in the modern world. It is a belief I hold to this day and a lesson you will soon learn . . . if you’re interested.”

“I . . . don’t know if I can.”

Ridley laughed like it was the stupidest thing he’d ever heard. “You regenerated your fingertip. You have ambition beyond the scope of CreGen, who, may I remind you, takes credit for your discoveries. But you’re stuck, just like we are. You can regenerate a fingertip. So what? Kids under the age of eleven sometimes regenerate severed fingertips. You merely extended the age limit on fingertip regeneration.”

“By twenty-two years!”

Ridley smiled. “Impressive, I know. But it’s not the golden goose, is it? Full limb regeneration. Organ regeneration. Spine, brain, memory regeneration. Those are the real prizes.”

Excitement overtook Maddox’s concerns. He could see that Ridley just might give him the keys to the kingdom, but he had a few requirements. “I want credit.”

JEREMY ROBINSON**14**

“Done,” he replied, handing Maddox the slip of paper he’d just finished unfolding. “My offer. Accept it and I will reveal the past that will take us to the future.”

As Maddox read over the few lines of text, his eyes widened with each word. He was being offered more than the key to the kingdom; this was the key to the universe! Unlimited research funding, a salary that would make him a multimillionaire, and some of the best names in the business would be at his disposal.

“Do you accept?”

Maddox nodded slowly. This was not the kind of proposal to chew on.

“Very good.” Ridley took a sip of tea and got comfortable, his big body stressing the limits of the sofa on which he sat. “The problem with the Wnt pathway is that no one has been able to break what I call the ‘natural barrier.’ Humans can sometimes regenerate fingertips, as you’ve shown, but no one has been able to figure out what molecular pathway triggers this kind of natural regrowth. Pathways for triggering regrowth in other parts of the human body simply don’t exist.”

“You believe I can overcome this?”

“Not at all,” he said with a chuckle. “I would prefer to follow a different path. Something less conventional.”

“How about nAG proteins?” Maddox said. Motivated by the compulsion to impress the man, he continued before Ridley could respond. “When a salamander loses a limb, blastema cells clump around the wound. Blastema cells can form bones, organs, brains—anything. Humans have them as embryos, but stop generating them after birth. The cells grow and divide, eventually becoming the amputated structure. The nAG protein directs the blastema cells, telling them what to become: muscle, veins, skin, etcetera. If we can find the human version of adult blastema cells and trigger the nAG proteins to communicate certain signals, the potential human regeneration is fantastic. But salamanders take more than a month to regrow a limb less than an inch long. The duration would be much longer for humans. Maybe a lifetime. But I’m sure that’s a hurdle we can jump when we get to it. With these resources I imagine I should be able to unlock just about any secret.”

Ridley just cocked an eyebrow. “Not bad. Perhaps worth pursuing while we hunt down my pet project.”

Maddox did his best to suppress a sigh. Inwardly he shouted for

PULSE

15

Ridley to get to the point, but all he managed was a timid, "And that is?"

The big man smiled without a hint of malice for the first time. "The fountain of youth isn't some waterfall out here in the jungle, Maddox," he said, then pointed at his chest. "I want to live forever, and the key to that treasure is locked away inside our DNA. In our genetics. And in our past."

"You want to live forever?"

"Who doesn't?" he said. "But I really just want to live long enough to take this company as far as it can go. I'm an entrepreneur at heart, and my vision for this company has always been beyond its means, even now. You unlock the secret to regeneration and I might just live long enough to see my dreams come to fruition. We'll make a boatload of money, too."

Maddox almost laughed, but then realized the man was completely serious. He'd never considered that regeneration in the extreme could vastly extend lives, never mind immortality.

"How well do you know Greek mythology?"

Maddox folded his hands and leaned back. "Better than most I suppose. It fascinated me as a child after watching *Clash of the Titans*. But my knowledge is based on personal research, not actual academics."

Ridley nodded. "There was a . . . creature. Perhaps one of a kind. Perhaps the last of its kind. Who knows. What's important is that this creature had the ability to regenerate limbs, including its neck and head, very quickly."

"And you think this creature still lives today or its offspring still live today?"

"No. If it were still alive, we'd know. The myth states that it was killed . . . by Hercules."

"I see," Maddox said, wondering if Richard Ridley was losing his mind.

Ridley saw the doubt in his eyes and became very serious. "Do not mistake me for a crackpot, Maddox. I have uncovered manuscripts beyond the legend of Hercules. Documents that have nothing to do with the legend. Records of ravaged herds. Destroyed villages. Missing hunting parties. For centuries no one knew what caused all the death and destruction. Not until Hercules, that is."

He stood, walked to a wall safe, punched in a key code, and opened the solid metal door. He removed a thick glass case that held a single,

JEREMY ROBINSON**16**

aged document. "I bought this document on the black market for one hundred thousand dollars before knowing it was authentic. Knowing what I know now, I would have done anything to obtain it . . . and on two occasions, a rival group, whose identity I have yet to discover, tried to take it from me. It is truly priceless. As some have proven, it's worth dying for." He sat again and held the case out for Maddox to inspect.

"What language is this?"

"Greek. It's been dated to 460 B.C., mere years after Hercules's fabled encounter with the creature. Far too soon for legend to have set in."

Maddox stared at the document. Its age and plainness somehow lent credence to Ridley's claim.

"It makes no mention of Hercules, though it clearly insinuates someone killed the beast. It offers only a description of the creature, so that it might be identified and dealt with properly should one be encountered again."

"An ancient field guide," Maddox said, beginning to feel the first pangs of excitement.

"Precisely. And do you know what I found?"

Maddox waited in silence. He clearly had no idea.

"The description of the creature in this purely historical text is nearly identical to the mythological description. Perhaps the feats of Hercules have been exaggerated through time and legend, but the details of the beast were so fantastic to begin with that no one in the past twenty-five hundred years felt the need to exaggerate its appearance or abilities. Because of this I am compelled to believe that many of the other aspects of the story are also real. Based on the details of the myth, finding the creature's burial place may be possible. If the creature has been well preserved, recovering its DNA would change everything we know about physical regeneration. Mr. Maddox, we must find the Beast of Lerna's final resting place and extract its DNA. The prize is eternal life."

"Lerna . . ." Maddox leaned forward, his eyes wide with realization. "My God. You're talking about the Hydra."

Ridley smiled wide and toothy.

"That's . . . crazy."

Ridley chuckled. "And that's exactly what I'd expect a scientist to say." He locked his eyes on Maddox's. "The great scientists of human history

PULSE

17

all had something in common. Einstein. Galileo. Da Vinci. Hawking. . . . Imagination. They are all brilliant scientists, but they also had the guts to tap what was previously considered fantasy, science fiction, heresy. If the human race didn't pursue the impossible we'd still be staring up at the moon having never set foot on it."

Maddox knew he was right. He'd gone down that path when he regenerated his own finger. But even if the Hydra had existed, they would still have to locate its grave and extract viable DNA. It just didn't seem possible.

"Let me put it to you this way: Would you rather take a risk on something, that if successful will propel your name to the top of the list of great scientists, or would you rather it play it safe and return to a company that takes credit for your work? Remembered or forgotten?"

"You really believe in this?"

"I'm staking my eternal life on it."

Maddox smiled. He would have said yes because of the pay alone, but if Ridley turned out to be right, he might not only get his name into the history books, but also live long enough to see it. "I'm in."

TWO

Nazca, Peru, 2009

ON THE PREVIOUS Monday, George Pierce had begun his workweek as usual. At eight a.m. he lectured to his ancient history undergrad class at the University of Athens. The subject had been the rise of Athenian influence. Lecturing never thrilled him and the subject was bland; the real interesting work usually happened postlunch, when he oversaw the archaeological efforts on a recently discovered shipwreck off the island of Antikythera, where a fortress had also been discovered. They had found evidence of repeated attacks on the citadel, with perpetrators and defenders being identified as Rhodians, Spartans, Macedonians, and Romans going back to the time period Pierce most loved, 2000 B.C. and earlier—the time of myth and legend—which is why the shipwreck fascinated and excited him.

He had yet to voice his theory on the ship's identity, as it would be extremely controversial. He had evidence that supported his ideas, but nothing concrete. For that he would need the ship's nameplate or, even more unlikely, a log book. But three months of recovering artifacts and cataloging them at the university had yielded little. His

PULSE

19

single most compelling piece of evidence, an iron medallion, was being kept safe and secret by his colleague Agustina Gallo, one of the few people he trusted in all of Greece.

As was now usual, his Monday came and went with no further discovery of any great importance. Pierce returned home to his university campus apartment, sat down, and opened his e-mail. After reading the single e-mail in his in-box, he canceled the ancient history class three weeks from the semester's end and put Agustina in charge of the Antikythera excavations.

Less than a week and more than eight thousand miles later, he arrived in Nazca, Peru, where he stared at crude Greek letters carved into a stone, stunned and silent. Slowly, he reached out and felt the symbol scratched into the stone above the inscriptions. He'd seen it before, but would keep its meaning to himself, for now. He moved on to the letters, tracing them with his fingertips, convincing himself that what he saw really existed. He'd been searching for signs of the great ancient civilizations completing the journey to the Americas long before Columbus—the Vikings and Romans in the northeast United States were nearly common knowledge among his peers—but the Greeks in South America . . . in *Peru*, now that would rewrite history.

The e-mail he received disclosed a report about a new nine-headed geoglyph, a massive drawing in the earth created thousands of years ago, from a friend in the U.N. who oversaw worldwide heritage sites. The 175-square-mile region in which the famous Nazca lines were found had been declared a world heritage site in 1994. The very first Nazca drawings, discovered in 1929, didn't reach true worldwide fame until planes began flying over the desolate region and people began spotting more geoglyphs—a lot more. From the air, massive line drawings in the desert floor emerged that could not be discerned from the ground. Some, reaching lengths of a thousand feet, could not be seen in their entirety below an altitude of fifteen hundred feet. The geoglyphs came in all shapes and sizes, from spiders to monkeys to men and deities. The discovery of any new geoglyph in the region was immediately reported to the U.N., not because important information might have been gleaned, but because even though the region was officially “protected,” looters still pillaged most finds long before researchers set foot in the country.

As a precaution, all archaeological finds had to be cataloged, researched, and removed to secure locations before news of a new find

JEREMY ROBINSON

20

reached the looters, who would descend like vultures. The geoglyphs rarely held anything more interesting than potsherds and crude digging tools, but surveying and photographing the ancient drawing before the image was marred by the looters' tire tracks was equally important.

During the initial aerial photography session, a large stone that looked like half an egg rising from the desert at the end of the odd creature's central neck leaped out at the photographer. A geoglyph with a three dimensional feature had never been found before. The following day, a team hurried to the site, inspecting the stone and the area around it. All were amazed when they found an inscription on the stone, but no one could read it, though one young college intern recognized the language—Greek.

The discovery had been made one day before Pierce received the e-mail. Given his previous work with the U.N. World-Heritage Commission and his expertise on ancient civilizations, Pierce had been called to the scene. After three plane flights and a long, bumpy, and dusty jeep ride, he arrived on site, where a small base camp had been set up on the hill that overlooked the glyph. He'd exited the jeep only ten minutes ago and, upon seeing the nine-headed glyph, had run down the hill to where he now stood. He stared at the Greek inscription on a stone that couldn't possibly have come from Greece, which meant that someone from Greece had been to Peru, to this very spot, more than two thousand years ago.

He turned to Molly McCabe, the U.N. heritage commission archaeologist who'd first documented the site from the sky. The Irish woman had been researching the glyphs since the late eighties and had spent more time in the desert than anywhere else. Generally, the Nazcan geoglyphs were her area of expertise, but she couldn't even recognize Greek, let alone read it.

"You're sure the site was untouched? This has to be a hoax," he said.

"No tire tracks for miles around," she said. "You can't hide those here. No wind. No rain. No erosion. Once something scratches the surface it stays scratched. That's why the geoglyphs have lasted for thousands of years. If someone had been out here in the past two thousand years with a vehicle or so much as a donkey, the evidence would still be plain to see. I suppose someone could have walked here, but only a fool would do that."

PULSE

21

“Why’s that?” he asked, as he gently brushed the inscription clean.

“It’d be a death sentence. You couldn’t carry enough water to get you here and back to the world without dehydrating. You’d be a dried-out husk within a month.” McCabe huffed and ran a hand through her long, gray ponytailed hair. “So?”

“So . . .” he said. “What?”

“What the hell does it say?” she said, throwing her hands up.

“Right. Sorry.” Pierce usually took his time with new discoveries. If he had things his way the whole glyph would be fenced off then segmented into a grid of strings so the location of any discovery could be marked and later scrutinized. He preferred to work slowly and methodically, but he also understood that time was an issue. With each passing day they risked word reaching looters, who had perfected the art of the nighttime raid, focusing on expensive research equipment as much as ancient relics.

He looked at the inscription again, marveling at the text.

Εδω ειναι θαμμενος το θηριο πιο ασχημη. Φλογα και το ξιφος του Βορρα εκανε αθανατο κεφαλι, παντα κατω απο την αμμο και πετρα. Να προειδοποιησει ολους που διαβαζουν αυτα τα λογια. Λαβουν σοβαρα νποψη τους φρουρους 'ανοικτα ακρα και να κρατησει στεγνη τη γη φοβουνται σας μετα το τερας και τη γευση τους μεγαλειωδαις εκδικηση

The carving was crude, but the stone, like the surrounding desert, hadn’t been weathered in two thousand years. The inscription was still as legible as it had been when it was first inscribed.

He translated the lines of text, writing down letters in his small notepad without reading the results in full. McCabe bounced a nervous leg next to his face as he crouched to translate the lowest line. He glanced at her leg and noticed it was quite fit for a woman in her fifties.

“Twenty years ago, George, you might have had a chance,” she said with a grin. “Now I prefer men my own age.”

Pierce smiled and made a final note. “You can’t make an exception for me, Molly?”

“George,” she said, leaning close to his face.

“Yeah?”

JEREMY ROBINSON**22**

"Read the damn inscription."

Pierce chuckled and read through the inscription that he'd translated. His face fell flat. "It's a hoax."

"George, I guarantee you, this is not a hoax. What does it say?" Her voice was a barely contained shout.

Pierce read from the small notepad. "Here is buried the beast most foul . . . Fire and sword did sever the head immortal, forever entombed beneath sand and stone. Be warned all who read these words. Heed the screaming guards within and keep dry the earth lest you wake the monster and taste its mighty . . . vengeance."

McCabe's brow furrowed. "It's a grave?"

Pierce rubbed his eyebrow while he thought. Then, like a horse at the races, he bolted back up the incline. McCabe chased after him. Gasping at the hot, dry air, they stopped at the top of the hill where the U.N. World-Heritage base camp had been set up—a small village of tents and trucks. He turned around and looked at the geoglyph with new eyes, which quickly widened. "It's the Hydra."

She squinted. "Hydra?"

Pierce looked at her, his orange-tinged brown eyes blazing. "The Lernaian Serpent. The nine-headed swamp-dragon. Child of Typhon and Echidna."

She shook her head. It was all gobbledy-gook to her.

He took her by the shoulders and spoke quickly. "Herakles—"

"Who?"

Pierce sighed. No one knew the man's real name anymore. "Heracles. He was the bastard son of Zeus and Alcmene, a human woman. Because of this, he suffered the wrath of Hera, Zeus's jealous wife, who eventually made him go insane. He killed his wife and children. To overcome the madness he stayed at the court of King Eurystheus, seeking purification. He remained there for twelve years and during that time faced twelve trials, or labors. His second trial pitted him against a nine-headed creature called the Hydra. . . . He killed it by—" He froze like an ice cube defying the intense heat of the Nazca plains.

"What is it?" she asked.

"He killed it by severing its central head—its immortal head—and cauterizing it before it could grow a new body." The possibilities spun through Pierce's mind as he continued speaking in a monotone, trancelike voice. "Most legends say that he buried the head under a large stone. . . . How old is this site?"

PULSE

23

“Carbon dating came back at four hundred to five hundred B.C., why?”

“Some scholars, including me, believe Hercules was a real person who lived around four hundred fifty B.C.” His eyes widened. “The time fits. Boating in Greece became very important during that time period. Their victory at the battle of Salamis against the Persians was primarily because of their naval might. It might actually be possible that an expedition lead by Hercules reached the shores of Peru.”

“The ancient Greeks had sailboats?” she asked.

“Yes,” Pierce said, rubbing his eyebrow. “Cargo ships. They weighed up to one hundred fifty tons and made the Greek empire very rich from trade. But it may not have been a cargo ship. There was one ship at the time, renowned for its crew and vast explorations. You may have heard of it. The *Argo*.”

She stifled a chuckle. “As in Jason and the Argonauts? I saw the movie, George. Ray Harryhausen may have been a genius with clay, but it’s just a story.”

Pierce looked at her, grinning. “You should do some research on scientists the U.N. sends to help you, Molly.”

McCabe’s smile vanished. “What . . . ?”

“A year ago I discovered an ancient Greek crew manifest for a ship named the *Argo* in a tomb dated to four hundred B.C. Looters had taken the major artifacts, but the manifest, along with other rotting documents, remained hidden in a crevice. Forty men were listed on the manifest. One of them was Hercules.”

“Why didn’t I read about this?” she asked. “Didn’t you publish?”

“The manifest was stolen.”

“By who?”

He shrugged casually, not wanting to retell the story about the two cloaked men who broke into his lab, knocked him unconscious, and stole the manifest, or explain who he thought they were. Nor did he want to tell her about the Antikythera excavation and the sunken ship they’d found, despite it’s bearing on this conversation. His trust took time to earn. “Who knows? But I promise you, it was real. Hercules existed. He wasn’t the son of Zeus, but he lived and breathed . . . and maybe, just maybe, visited Peru. The proof could be down there.” Pierce pointed to the stone.

McCabe grabbed his shoulder. “George.” He met her eyes, which were squinting as she smiled. “We need to get under that rock.”

JEREMY ROBINSON

24

He nodded slowly, still stunned.

“And George,” she said. “We’re going to need security. If word of this gets out there will be no stopping the looters. They’ll come in numbers a U.N. badge can’t repel.”

Pierce snapped out of his haze. “If you have a satellite phone, I know just the man.”

THREE

Ostrov Nosok, Siberia

FOUR INVISIBLE SPECTERS slid across the frozen sea. Concealed from head to toe in white, military-issue thermal armor, the Delta team moved toward their target—a terrorist training camp. The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army had opted for the deserted wasteland of Russia’s Siberian north rather than the boiling deserts of their native Yemen. It was unknown how long the camp had existed or if Russia knew of its presence, but one thing was clear . . .

“It’s time to blow this place sky fucking high,” said Stan Tremblay, call sign “Rook,” into his throat mike, which allowed the others to hear him despite the whipping arctic winds. “Talk about maximum shrinkage—it’s so cold out here I might have to change my name to Susan.”

The four prone figures shook slightly with laughter. From a distance they would be indiscernible from the surrounding snow and ice, of which there was an abundance surrounding the U-shaped island. Up close they’d look like nothing more than clumps of snow, disturbed by the wind. The only fault in their camouflage was the two

JEREMY ROBINSON**26**

one-inch slits in their antiglare snow goggles, but an enemy would have to be within five feet to see the aberration. By then it would be too late.

A dull roar from behind caused the group to become motionless once again. Shin Dae-jung, call sign “Knight,” focused on the noise. A vehicle was approaching quickly across the ice, coming from behind and closing on their target. “Motion on our six,” he said. “Heads down. Don’t move.”

The four Delta operators planted their faces in the snow, judging distance and speed from the whine of the engine and the vibrations in the ice beneath their bodies. It was going to pass by them—and close.

“Deep Blue, this is Knight. Do you see incoming target?”

After a faint hiss and click, the cool voice of a man they had never met, yet who watched out for them from above via satellite, came loud and clear through the team’s specially modified AN/PRC-158 personal role radio. The radio, which could be used for both voice communication and data transmissions, contained GPS chips that allowed the team to be tracked around the world. The only catch was that there was a one-second delay. “Copy that, Knight. Zooming in on him now. Still one hundred yards out. Looks like two on a snowmobile. They’re heading straight for you.”

“Are they a problem?”

“Armed, but not looking for a fight. . . . Wait. Queen, you’re about to become roadkill. Might want to roll to your right.”

“Copy that,” said a crisp, feminine voice. Zelda Baker, the lone female member of the team, call sign “Queen,” waited motionless as the snowmobile and its two occupants barreled toward her.

“Two rolls to the right,” Deep Blue said. “On my mark. Three . . .”

She tensed, waiting for the signal and hoping that Deep Blue took the one-second delay into account. The vibrations in the ice shook her jaw and the sound of the engine roared in her ears.

“Two . . .”

For a moment she wondered if she’d hear Deep Blue’s signal over the racket, but then a voice came through, loud and clear, “Go!”

Queen rolled twice to the right, keeping her limbs tight and movement quick, she buried her face in the snow just as the snowmobile passed on her left, its track rolling over the edge of her sleeve. A moment later, the whine of the engine slowed and then idled.

PULSE

27

“No one move,” came the whispered voice of Deep Blue, as though the men on the snowmobile might hear him through the team’s ear-pieces.

Twenty feet from the team, the two men turned around on their seat. They scrutinized the snow with squinted eyes. Their bodies were concealed behind thick layers of thermal garb and furs. Each had an AK-47 strapped to his back. As the engine idled one of the men stood and held his AK at the ready. He stepped toward the team, scanning the snow.

The voice of Deep Blue returned. “When I say your name, it means they’re not looking at you and I want you to take the shot.”

The heartbeats of the four Delta operators remained steady and strong, each waiting to be given the signal that would trigger the taking of two lives. Not that either man’s death would weigh heavily on any of their consciences. These men were murderers and terrorists and the team’s whole purpose for being here was to kill every last one of them. But the plan had been to catch them all inside the facility while they hid from the elements, and blow them to bits, not to engage them in an unnecessary firefight. Under normal circumstances a Tomahawk cruise missile strike would do the trick, but being on Russian soil, a missile attack would be interpreted as an act of war. Better to hit them from the ground and keep things off the radar . . . literally. By the time the Russians discovered the site, it would be nothing more than frozen ashes.

“Hold on,” Deep Blue said. “You’re clear.”

None of the four heard the engine rev up or leave, but if Deep Blue said they were clear, they were clear. All four looked up just in time to see the closest man slump to the ground, a gurgle escaping his slit throat, which loosed gouts of blood onto the snow. Behind him stood a white wraith, staring at them through two thin slits.

“Miss me?”

“King, how in the hell did you get here?” Rook said as he stood.

Jack Sigler, call sign “King,” cleaned his faithful seven-inch KA-BAR knife in the snow. Behind him, the second man was leaning on the snowmobile, a slow trickle of blood still draining from his neck. “Been here for five minutes. Wanted to see if you guys talked about me behind my back.”

“Bullshit,” Rook said, dusting the snow from his white, second-generation FN SCAR-L assault rifle with attached 40mm grenade

JEREMY ROBINSON**28**

launcher. Out of the five, he was most in love with his weapons, which also included two .50 caliber Magnum Desert Eagle handguns, one strapped to each hip beneath his snow gear. They were as children to him—very deadly children.

“Motion at the target site,” Deep Blue said. “Looks like you’ve been made.”

King lifted the head of the man who had died upon the snowmobile; his blood had already frozen in a pool around the vehicle. He opened the man’s jacket revealing his slit throat and a throat mike. “Damnit. I’m getting really tired of these third-world jerks getting their hands on this kind of technology.”

“It’s the damn private sector,” Rook said. “Highest bidder gets the tech. They don’t give a rip who gets killed as a result. If they don’t pull the trigger, innocent blood isn’t on their hands.”

King reached into his pocket and pulled out a small device with a touchpad and small screen. “Won’t be any innocent blood spilled today.” He began punching buttons as he spoke. “How many outside the complex?”

“None yet,” Deep Blue said, “but you’ve got a Sno-Cat with five, maybe six unfriendlies on their way out.”

“Copy that,” King said as he finished pushing buttons. Behind him, the island transformed into a volcano as a plume of fire and smoke mushroomed into the air, accentuated by a resounding boom. A shock wave kicked up a wash of snow that momentarily obscured their vision. When the snow cleared, a smoldering island lay in the wake of the blast, with several secondary explosions from fuel supplies still erupting across the land. But at the center of it all, charging straight for them, was a white, tank-treaded Sno-Cat. One man leaned from the window, taking aim with an AK-47, while two men on top brought their own AKs to bear. All three began firing.

The team dove to the snow, knowing they would disappear from view. “I’ve got this,” Knight said, as he crawled up behind the snowmobile, using the vehicle and its lone, dead occupant as cover. He unslung his PSG-1 semiautomatic sniper rifle and took aim at the Sno-Cat. He knew the vehicle wasn’t meant for a firefight, so it most likely didn’t have bulletproof glass. Looking through the sight he found the driver’s head. He could see the man shouting at the others.

Knight slowly squeezed the trigger and a single round burst from the weapon, its retort echoing across the open expanse and drowning

PULSE

29

out the popping AK-47s. He watched through the scope as the windshield held its own, denting inward slightly where the round struck. Bulletproof glass. Damn.

Knight took aim again, preparing to unleash a semiautomatic barrage of sniper rounds. The Sno-Cat was moving and jostling on the ice, which made the shot even more difficult, but few people on the planet were his equal with a sniper rifle. He held his breath and squeezed off fifteen rounds in rapid succession. The windshield became awash with white pockmarks, but the one in the middle grew wide as eight of the fifteen rounds found their mark, striking the same place as the first round and punching a hole in the bulletproof glass. Three rounds in all made it through the window, but only the first made contact. There wasn't a head left for the second two to strike.

Even without the driver, the Sno-Cat continued toward them. More than that, without the driver, the Sno-Cat wouldn't stop once it reached them. AK-47 fire continued to pepper the snow around the group, but as is so often the case with terror groups, they had atrocious aim and little self-control.

Rook looked down the sight of his assault rifle. "I have to do everything I s'pose. Bend over, ladies, here it comes." A dull pop signified the launching of a grenade. The two men on top saw it coming and leaped from the roof of the Cat. The others took the grenade's full force as it ripped through the Cat and turned their bodies into little more than Campbell's Chunky Soup.

The two survivors clambered to their feet, clutching their AK-47s, and beat a hasty retreat back toward the island's rocky shoreline in search of cover.

"My turn," Queen said.

As the two men made a beeline for the smoldering complex, they fired aimlessly over their shoulders, peppering the ice behind them and posing no real threat to the team.

Queen heaved the dead man off the snowmobile. A sheet of frozen blood lifted away with his body and shattered when he fell to the ice. She took his seat and said, "You'd think with a big secret training facility, these guys would be better shots."

"Blowing yourself up doesn't take much aim," King said.

She revved the snowmobile's engine. "Right." The snowmobile burst forward. She brought it around in a wide turn, building speed, and then was off like a bullet, streaking toward the fleeing men.

JEREMY ROBINSON**30**

"Hey, King," Knight said, holding up a white Heckler & Koch UMP submachine gun.

King sighed. It was Queen's weapon. And he knew she hadn't forgotten it. The woman was the smallest member of the team, but like the savage wolverine—a terrier-sized weasel capable of taking down a moose—what she lacked in size she made up for in ferocity and brute strength. It wasn't always easy to see past her feminine face, but the woman was built like a powerhouse, so much so that no one on the team dared arm-wrestle her. It wasn't certain she'd win, but if she did, the loser would be cursed by a lifetime of taunting from the others.

Queen closed in on her targets. The men, now out of ammo, simply ran for their lives. If the men had conserved their ammo, she would be dead, but the men had as little sense as they did time to live. Queen was upon them.

The man closest to her—the one she intended to kill first—tripped and fell into a heap on the ice. He ruined her plan, but then she was always open to improvisation. She opened the throttle and plowed over the man just as he picked up his head. The front of the snowmobile struck the man's head with a sickening crunch. It was sloppier than she liked things to be, but she couldn't argue with its effectiveness. She returned her focus to the other man, whose frantic run carried him quickly across the ice.

Queen stood on the seat of the snowmobile as she prepared to attack. The man looked over his shoulder, his eyes wide with fear and confusion. It was obvious he'd expected to be gunned down. Upon seeing her charging toward him, no gun in sight, he stopped and stood his ground.

At least he's brave, she thought. And then, as she closed to within twenty feet she reached up and pulled back her white hood and goggles, letting her wavy blond hair flail in the wind like the tentacles of an enraged squid. She wanted him to know she was a woman.

When a smile crept onto the man's face, she knew her free hair had had the desired effect. He was underestimating her.

Queen leaped into the air and flew toward the man, arms outstretched and wearing a smile of her own. The man reached out to catch her, no doubt intending to squeeze the life out of her, but he'd never get the chance. As she collided with the man, she wrapped one

PULSE

31

of her thick arms around his neck, squeezed, and then used the impact of their bodies striking the ice to suddenly increase the pressure.

The result was a loud crack as the man's spine snapped. His brief encounter with Queen was akin to being hit by a bus. She stood, waltzed back to the snowmobile, and headed back toward the others. She glanced down at the man she'd run over as she past. His neck was bent back at an extreme angle.

"Piece of cake," Queen said as she rejoined the team after a quick drive past the burning Sno-Cat wreckage.

Knight held out her weapon. "Show-off."

She took it with a smile that, combined with her bright blue eyes and blond hair, could disarm most men—and terrorists—with a glance. She looked past Knight to the silent member of the team. He'd said nothing and moved little since the combat had begun. "Hey, Bishop, not in the mood today?"

Erik Somers, call sign "Bishop," shrugged. "Didn't see the need." He hoisted his belt-fed M240E6 machine gun onto his shoulder, while holding a chain of white bullets. The rapid-fire stopping force of his weapon alone would have been enough to stop the Sno-Cat and take out the men who'd fled, but he was a man of few words and reserved action.

Queen shook her head. She loved to see Bishop in action, and was always disappointed when he held back. He was a one-man wrecking crew. Still, she did enjoy taunting him when a mission finished without him firing a shot. "For such a big man you must have a pair of raisins between your legs, Bish," she said as she turned back toward the others, unaware that a speeding projectile was headed straight for her head.

When the snowball hit, Queen dove, rolled, and made ready with her submachine gun. But there was no enemy, just Bishop, whose chest shook with laughter.

Queen stifled a smile, dropped her weapon, and pounded toward the unmoving Bishop. "You lily shit bird . . ."

"Save it for later," Deep Blue's voice said over the headset. "That blast lit up the infrareds like the Fourth of July. If anyone had a bird over the area, they'll come looking. Hump it back to LZ Alpha double-time and come home."

Queen pointed a finger at Bishop. "You're lucky." She did her best to

JEREMY ROBINSON**32**

sound pissed, but the smirk on her lips revealed otherwise. Bishop remained still and silent.

Deep Blue spoke again. "And Queen, put your damn hood back up."
"You heard the man," King said. "Let's go home."

"King, I just got word that your two-week jaunt has been approved," Deep Blue said. "That means you're all getting some R and R. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Where you off to?" Queen asked.

"Peru," King said. "An old friend needs my help."

"You going to see action?" Rook asked. "Should we come with?"

The four of them looked at King at once. He couldn't see their eyes through the small slits in their goggles, but he could tell they all wanted in . . . *if* there was action to be had.

"Thanks, but no," King said. "Should be a walk in the park."

"Bogies twenty miles out and closing," Deep Blue said. "ETA, five minutes."

"But now it's time to run," King said.

The group broke into a sprint toward the forested coastline where a still-classified UH-100S stealth Blackhawk transport helicopter, piloted by some boys from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, also known as the "Nightstalkers," stood ready to speed them away.

King took one last look over his shoulder. He'd counted seventy-five men and women in the camp. The explosives he'd planted had killed the majority of them. Two more had fallen to his knife. And yet the number of dead on his hands this day was a drop in the bloody bucket he'd filled during his ten years with Delta. For the briefest of moments he grew weary of the death and violence.

Then he remembered who these people were, what they had done, and what they would do if they weren't stopped. He had witnessed the horrors of war, the blood and havoc. Fellow soldiers had died in his arms on several occasions, some riddled with shrapnel, others missing limbs or simply sprayed down by bullets. War and its tragedy were familiar to him. But they paled in comparison to the horrors wreaked by terrorists. To kill a soldier in battle was something he could justify, something he could live with, but to slaughter innocents, to willfully infect the world's population with fear, was madness that served the needs of a few radicals.

In his line of work, civilian casualties were sometimes unavoidable,

PULSE

33

but he abhorred the news of innocents caught in the crossfire. It stood against everything he fought for. That the organizations he fought against served to inflict as many civilian casualties as possible, that they cheered and celebrated the deaths of innocents, infuriated him. He'd seen the remains of men, women, and children blown to pieces by suicide bombers who targeted cafés, markets, and schools. He could identify the glazed look in the eyes of a man willing to take his own life in order to spread fear and spark wars. He recognized the heart of his enemy as evil.

So he waged his war against terrorism as a member of Delta, never hesitating to pull the trigger if it meant saving innocents. It was gruesome work, but necessary. Noble even. As King forged across the ice he looked back one last time at the ruined island. Another terror network brought to its knees. With seventy-four potential suicide bombers inside the complex and the average number of deaths caused by each suicide attack placed at ninety-five, he'd just saved roughly seven thousand innocent lives.

"Checkmate," he whispered.