

## Prologue – Shards

**12 April, 2003**

**National Museum of Iraq, Baghdad**

**01:30 Hours**

Amir groped his way blindly through the darkness, terrified to turn on his flashlight lest somebody outside might see. Behind him and to his left, his brother Hassan did his best to keep up. Amir moved cautiously, rolling each foot from heel to toe as he walked, to reduce noise and avoid tripping. His night vision was slowly improving and instead of a wall of blackness, he could now see dark shapes against a slightly less dark background. Outside, the sound of rifles cracked and chattered as U.S. troops made their way towards the heart of the city.

He was roughly shoved forward as Hassan stumbled against a pile of sandbags at the base of a statue and almost lost footing himself. Hassan swore.

“I can’t see a damn thing,” he whispered in rapid-fire Arabic.

“Quiet,” hissed Amir. “And be more careful.”

The pair slowly made their way over to a corridor leading to the above-ground storage rooms. Once safely behind cover, Amir turned on the flashlight, keeping the lens covered with his hand and letting only a small sliver of light shine through his fingers.

They continued into the bowels of the museum, heading towards the storage rooms where Amir hoped to find jewelry or gold. He’d stolen the keys from his cousin who was an employee at the museum, and made copies with which he planned to make his fortune. He’d found a good fence and possibly even a buyer, ready to pay top dollar for whatever goods he recovered.

The weak beam from the flashlight only let them see about two meters ahead, but it was enough to guide them to the heavy steel door. Amir fished around in his pocket for the key-ring and tried each one in turn. He’d neglected to label which key opened what door, an oversight he now cursed himself for. Gripping the flashlight under his chin, he finally found the right key and door swung open.

Immediately, he and Hassan went to work. The room was lined with rows of gray metal shelves, almost reaching to the ceiling, upon which rested hundreds of catalogued cardboard boxes filled with vessels, jars and pottery or shards and fragments thereof. They produced several large cloth bags that they had made especially for the occasion and began to comb the shelves, taking anything that seemed like it might fetch a high price. When they had filled the bags with as much as they could carry, they began dragging the bags over to the door.

On the way out, Amir spotted something, lying by itself on a wooden work bench by the door that had been carefully swaddled in plastic bubble wrap and packing tape.

“Start taking these out,” he whispered to Hassan. “I will join you shortly.”

As soon as Hassan had left, Amir carefully peeled away the tape and unwrapped the bubble wrap, revealing a small clay tablet covered with enigmatic pictograms and inscriptions. He stared, transfixed by the intricate swirls and lattices that had been meticulously carved into the tablet’s surface. A tantalizing tingle of power danced up his fingertips as he ran them lightly over the tablet, like faint sparks of electricity drawing him in. Finally wrenching his eyes away, he quickly returned the tablet to its protective wrappings and tossed it in his bag. Locking the door behind them, he and Hassan disappeared into the night.

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**22 July, 2004**

**Somewhere over French Airspace**

**02:54 Hours**

The roar of the C-130's four turboprop engines filled the payload bay, making any verbal communication all but impossible. Not that any of the eight soldiers aboard would have been able to say much through their oxygen masks.

Sergeant Nathan Cale, U.S. Army, surveyed his men, each preparing himself for the High Altitude - High Opening parachute jump that lay ahead. The bay's interior lights flashed twice, then twice again, indicating that the pilot was dropping down to 29,500 feet in preparation for the drop. Cale adjusted his mask and signaled for his men to get ready. They all stood up in pairs, each soldier checking his partner's gear and making sure it was properly and tightly secured. The lights went off and were replaced by dim red emergency lights as the crew chief opened the port hatch. A rush of wind and the bite of freezing cold accompanied the bay's sudden decompression. Cale shivered, not from the chill, but from the rush of adrenaline that always preceded a drop.

The pilot blinked the red lights three times and then lowered the exit ramp at the rear of the bay. Cale took it as his cue to synchronize his wrist-mounted GPS unit with the navigator's console. Their target tonight would be a deconsecrated church on Paris' Left Bank, which was highlighted with a red circle on the GPS's screen. The plan called for them to exit the plane roughly fifty miles away from their objective, and then sail in the rest of the way on their camouflaged chutes. They had to be stealthy about it, since after all, friendly governments tended to frown on foreign militaries performing clandestine operations on their soil. Even if the enemy they would be engaging was literally bent on bringing about the end of the world.

Cale had never heard of the Scorpius Initiative until only several hours ago. The briefing he and his men had received indicated that the Initiative was a doomsday cult, obsessed with the apocalypse and willing to do just about anything to speed along its onset. Whatever they were planning tonight, Cale had been told, would not be subtle. So, he and his team had been flown into Ramstein Air Base in Germany, then from there, taken west to Paris under the guise of a nighttime operations training exercise.

The pilot blinked the red lights again, signaling the jumpers to get ready. Cale synchronized his GPS with the rest of the men in his squad, then they all switched their oxygen masks over to the bottles strapped to their thighs. When the green lights above the exit blinked twice, they threw themselves out the hatch, plummeting into the void.

Cale allowed himself to revel in the sensation of freefall for a few moments, then deployed his chute. The jet black canopy blossomed overhead, jerking him hard in his harness, then the cells filled out one-by-one. He pulled out a small red-lensed flashlight and checked his lines to make sure they were free of tangles then, once satisfied, tried to see if he could spot any of his teammates. He thought he could see a dark splotch below and to his right, but it was impossible to tell in the gloom. They were all wearing black jumpsuits and webgear in addition to their black chutes, so he wasn't too concerned. Checking the GPS, he made a few minor course corrections, sending him straight and true towards the objective.

They landed a little while later, on the rooftop of a nearby building and quickly set about stowing their chutes and breaking out their weapons and gear. Two soldiers were sent off to scout ahead while the rest split up into two teams. Cale took command of Blue team while his second-in-command, Corporal Darius Winter, took control of Red team.

"Sitrep," Cale murmured into his throat-mic.

"No activity going on outside," one of the scouts radioed back. "And nothing on thermal."

"Have we been compromised?" Cale asked. He was worried. If something was going down here, why wouldn't they even post security outside? Was their intelligence flawed? Then, a chilling possibility hit

him. These guys weren't suicide bombers. What if they'd already set their trap and were bugging the hell out?

"Don't think so. My guess is the real party's going on inside."

"And here we are without an invite," Cale said, his professional façade reasserting itself. "Alright, here's the deal. You two form up with Blue team when we arrive and join us as we make our way in the back and head up to cover the top floor. Red team will go around the front and sweep the ground floor. We'll rendezvous somewhere in the middle and sweep the basement together. Weapons are free. Clear?"

A chorus of acknowledgments from the rest of his squad flooded his earpiece.

"Good. Let's roll."

Both teams stormed the building simultaneously, kicking in the doors and quickly spreading out to cover both levels of the old church. Upon entry, Blue team immediately climbed the stairs up to the choir loft while Red team moved in to secure the ground floor.

"Clear!" Cale shouted from the loft, finding nothing.

"Clear!" Winter replied from the ground floor.

Warily, Cale led Blue team back down the stairs and regrouped with Winter's men to raid the basement. The two teams stacked up by the stairs leading down and descended as a single entity.

At the bottom, they found a circle of flickering candles around the body of a young man, dressed in white robes, lying spread-eagle in a pool of blood on the stone floor with his throat slashed. There was nobody else in sight.

"Jesus," breathed one of Cale's men, eyeing the body.

"Clear!" Cale shouted from the left-hand side of the room.

"Clear!" Winter said from the right. "The fuck's going on down here?"

"Whatever it is, looks like we're too late," Cale said.

"This is some voodoo shit, man," Winter said. "Creeps me right the fuck out."

"They can't have been gone long," Cale said, coming back to kneel beside the body. "The body's still warm." He stood to address his men. "Fan out, see what else you can find."

"Hey, over here!" Another one of Cale's men shouted from the far corner of the room.

"What've you got, Alvarez?" Cale asked when he arrived.

"See for yourself, Sergeant," Alvarez said, training his rifle's tactical light on an opening in the wall. "Tunnel of some kind."

"Where's that lead?" Cale asked, studying the manhole-sized opening in the wall.

"No idea," Alvarez said, "It's not in the original blueprints."

"Shit," Cale muttered. He hated unknown variables. "Cooper, check that out and find out where it leads."

"You got it," said the freckled redheaded kid who was the team's pointman. He handed his rifle off to Alvarez and drew his sidearm, switching on the light mounted under its barrel. "Be right back," he said, getting onto his hands and knees and crawling through the opening.

\* \* \*

The tunnel looked hand-dug, the walls rough and crumbling, and smelled of damp earth.

*Must've taken them months to dig,* Cooper mused. He thanked God he wasn't claustrophobic as he inched his way along, belly dragging in the dirt. He couldn't see more than a meter in front of him as the tunnel seemed to slope down at an awkward angle, cutting off his view. He looked back over his shoulder to see he'd gone maybe twenty meters.

Venturing forward, Cooper reached the end of the tunnel, its opening appearing in what had until now been the floor. He poked his head through the opening, his pistol following shortly after, and scanned left and right. The beam of light revealed a wall of old, brown bones, inset with two rows of human skulls grinning blankly out at him. Directly below him on the muddy ground lay the rust-colored shards of a clay object of some kind, too clean to have been there for very long. He thumbed his radio.

“Bad news, Sergeant. This tunnel leads to the Catacombs.”

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Back in the old church’s basement, Cale cursed. They had planned for such a contingency but he’d been secretly hoping they wouldn’t have to resort to it. Even with the maps for the documented passages loaded onto each man’s GPS, the over-600 kilometers of tunnels made their chances of locating the members of the Initiative effectively nil. Still, there were only so many ways the cultists could have gone and they couldn’t have gone far in the five minutes or so that had elapsed since their assault began.

“Alright, secure the area as best you can. We’re coming in after you,” Cale said.

“Roger,” Cooper replied in Cale’s earpiece.

“You first, Sergeant,” Winter said, gesturing grandly to the tunnel’s entrance.

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When all eight of them had made it through the tunnel, they split up into teams again with Blue team heading north and Red team heading south.

“Damn, we’re not getting any GPS signal down here,” Alvarez observed as Blue team fanned out and began sweeping the tunnel, Cooper leading the way.

“Just stick together and keep your eyes open,” Cale said.

They continued down the pitch black tunnel with only the beams from their tactical lights sweeping left and right, up and down to guide the way. Gradually, the tunnels began to get more and more flooded until they were sloshing through almost ten inches of water.

“Well, here’s the first exit to street level,” Alvarez said as they reached a ladder. “Best opportunity for escape.”

“Alright, let’s check it out,” Cale said, swinging his light up the length of the ladder only to find it stretching off into the darkness further than the light could reach.

“Christ, that’s a long way up,” Private Foster said, incredulously.

“Suck it up, soldier,” Cale said, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and grasping the rungs of the ladder.

Just then, he thought he heard a staccato burst of gunfire, echoing from somewhere back along the tunnel in the direction that they’d come. The others must have heard it too since they came to alert immediately and raised their guns to low-ready, scanning for threats. The gunfire came again and this time there was no doubt whatsoever in Cale’s mind.

“Let’s get back there, now!” he shouted, and took off, with his squadmates close behind. “Sitrep!” he called into the radio as he ran. He got some garbled static in response and cursed. No reception. They raced full-tilt back along the tunnel, following the sound of gunfire as it got louder, then gradually petered out.

When they finally reached the scene of the shooting, they discovered a horror show. There wasn’t an intact body to be found – limbs and entrails were scattered all over, some even smeared on the walls, and blood stained the ground a deep crimson. Their weapons were strewn about haphazardly, some of them wrenched into barely recognizable twists of metal.

"Grenades?" Alvarez ventured.

"No," Cale said. "We'd have heard the explosion, and there'd be blast residue."

"What then?" asked Foster.

"I haven't a goddamn clue," Cale said. "Stay sharp."

The four men shifted into a diamond pattern, facing outward, each watching the other's back as they slowly moved down the tunnel in the direction Red team had originally been heading.

"So what's the call, Sergeant?" Foster asked, clearly trying to keep his voice in check.

"What's the matter?" Alvarez said between rapid gulps of air. "You're not scared, are you?"

"No," Foster said, a tad too defensively.

"Well, I am," Cale broke in. "But we keep going. So shut up, both of you, and focus on getting us out of here alive."

"Sorry, Sergeant," Alvarez said.

"Cooper, where's the nearest exit?" Cale asked. No response. "Cooper? Wake up!" Cale turned, expecting to find Cooper directly across from him, probably frozen in shock, but the man was gone.

"Cooper!" Alvarez called, eyes darting wildly back and forth. "Where are you, man?"

"Over here!" Cooper's voice called from further up in the darkness. "I think I found an exit to street level!"

"Jesus Christ!" Alvarez said, jogging over to where Cooper stood, examining the entrance to a narrow passage branching off to the left. "Don't scare me like that, man! We gotta stick together!"

"Sorry," Cooper said, "I just—" Which was all he managed before what looked like a roiling mass of fanged tentacles shot out of the shadows ahead and wrapped themselves around Cooper's waist, yanking him back into the darkness.

"Shit! Contact!" Alvarez screamed and began blindly firing bursts into the space where Cooper had been seconds earlier. Cale and Foster ran over and Cale knocked the muzzle of Alvarez's rifle upward.

"Cease fire!" He hissed. "You'll hit Cooper!"

"What'd you see?" Foster asked, breathlessly.

"I don't know!" Alvarez said. "It looked like... like tentacles or something! Like a squid, but... huge!" He shook his head in stunned disbelief. "Grabbed Cooper and pulled him away!"

"Alright, you two get the hell out of here," Cale said, pointing down the passageway Cooper had found. "I'll get Cooper."

"Sarge—" Alvarez began.

"Go!" Cale shouted, and the two men darted off into the passageway.

Cale leveled his rifle and started down the tunnel, the narrow beam of light constantly scanning the space in front of him. "Cooper!" he called, praying for a response.

Something moved in the periphery of his vision and he snapped his light over to catch a fleeting glimpse of something large and wet slip down the tunnel. He flattened his back against the opposite wall and switched off the light, doing his best to control his breathing. *What the hell was that?*

A low rumble like the sound of rocks in a dryer sounded somewhere further on down the tunnel.

*Not good.*

He looked back, straining to hear if Foster and Alvarez had done as he'd instructed, but was greeted with nothing but silence. Praying that meant they'd made it safely to the surface, he checked to see his helmet camera was still recording, then brought his rifle back to bear.

"Alright, you son of a bitch," he said to the darkness. "Let's dance."

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Alvarez cursed as he threw his full weight as best he could against the manhole cover blocking his path. Foster kept checking below them, nervously.

"I think it's been sealed shut," Alvarez grunted. "I can't get it open."

"What do we do?" Foster asked.

Alvarez gave one last impotent shove before admitting defeat. "Fuckin' thing's fucked," he spat. "We'll have to find another one."

"Aw, fuck that, man!" Foster said, eyes wide. "Here, let me try."

The two awkwardly exchanged places, Foster having to climb over Alvarez on the ladder to reach the manhole. Foster gritted his teeth and set about slamming his shoulder against the heavy cast iron.

"I can't believe nobody thought to pack a crowbar," he muttered.

A splashing sound in the water below made Foster's breath catch in his throat. "What the fuck was that?" Looking down when he got no answer, he couldn't see Alvarez. "Rico? You okay, man?" He called, fighting the rising panic.

He barely had time to scream before a massive, toothed tentacle whipped out of the gloom and clamped itself around his head, dragging him down into the darkness.

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Cale moved slowly, stalking the murderous creature by sound, more than anything. His boots sloshed through the murky puddles as he moved, the brackish effluvia seeping through and soaking the soles of his feet. He stopped every few meters, his mouth open to augment his hearing, trying to get a fix on the creature's location. The light on his rifle was still off so as not to give himself away, leaving him blind, and with the GPS unable to connect to any satellites, he knew he was on his own down here.

Somewhere off in the distance, he thought he heard a gut-wrenching scream, abruptly cut off. He wasn't sure, but he hoped to God it was just his mind playing tricks on him. But if not... He was pretty certain the creature had gone this way, unless...

*Shit, could there be more than one?*

He adjusted his grip on the rifle, his palms getting slick with sweat. What the hell was he up against? Doomsday cults were supposed to be terrorists, or something... human at least, trying to bring about the apocalypse using bombs and chemicals and other tangible things. Things he could fight. This, on the other hand... it was death you'd never see coming.

He never did.

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**1 August, 2004**

**The Pentagon**

**10:36 Hours**

"Is this all we've got?" Asked General John G. Briar, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He and the other Joint Chiefs were seated around a conference table in the Tank, the Pentagon's secure second-floor briefing room, watching the footage from a helmet camera recovered from the Paris catacombs.

"I'm afraid so," replied the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Mathis Cullen, whose team had recovered the footage not twelve hours ago and who was now directing the briefing.

The footage itself was grainy and dark, and even with the nightvision filter on the camera at the time, there wasn't much to see. The audio, however, was hauntingly clear, catching every tense word, every last scream.

"What are we even looking at?" Admiral Joseph Keller, Chief of Naval Operations, asked. "Do we even know what happened to them?"

“You know as much as any of us do, Admiral,” Cullen replied. “All we’ve got to go on is that they were attacked by what they described as...” he paused, flipping through the pages of the video’s official transcript, “Tentacles or something. Like a squid, but huge.”

“How delightfully vague,” Keller said, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair.

“Well, you’re the Navy man,” General Frank Vitullo, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, said wryly. “Shouldn’t you know a thing or two about squids?”

“There is something else,” Cullen broke in. “We found it at the end of the tunnel where it connected to the catacombs from the church.” He clicked a remote and the video minimized, revealing a photograph showing a collection of jagged, rust-colored pieces. “These shards make up part of an ancient clay tablet. Our preliminary tests show that the tablet is pre-Sumerian, so that means it’s over four thousand years old.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Vitullo asked.

“That tablet was intact when it was stolen from the National Museum of Iraq just over a year ago. We found a catalogue number. Tracing it back, we learned that the Iraqis were in the process of cataloguing and translating it. Of course, they never got the chance to finish, but what little they did decipher refers to an ‘all-consuming shadow’ and ‘devourer of souls.’”

Vitullo raised a skeptical eyebrow. “You think a clay tablet took down eight United States soldiers?”

Cullen shook his head. “Not the tablet itself, but perhaps whatever it was referring to.”

He gestured to a small, unassuming man seated at the back of the room and beckoned him forward. The man adjusted his glasses and stood, smoothing down the front of his shirt before approaching the General.

“This is Doctor Rashid al-Attar,” Cullen said. “He’s on loan to us from the Smithsonian and he’s probably the most knowledgeable man in D.C. about ancient Mesopotamian culture and language. Doctor, would you mind repeating what you told me earlier regarding the tablet?”

Attar cleared his throat. “Certainly, General. But first, perhaps I should begin with a little bit of history to give what I’m about to say some context.” He turned to face the assembled Joint Chiefs. “You see, the Sumerians believed in the power of words, and that with the right words, one can do anything. They believed that by invoking the correct sequence of memes and ideas, one could affect physical change in the world. For the sake of comparison, think of a magician reciting a spell.

“To the Sumerians, memes were extremely powerful tools and they were usually inscribed onto clay tablets which were guarded very carefully. As you can probably imagine, such powerful tools would also have made for powerful weapons. This brings me to my point regarding that tablet you recovered. What if the Sumerians were not the first ones to develop this belief system? And what if the pre-Sumerians who made the tablet were predisposed towards using words and ideas as weapons – a kind of memetic warfare, if you will?”

Attar paused, the five other men in the room eyeing him strangely. Cullen jumped in to fill in the blanks.

“Think of it this way,” the General said. “All this time we’ve been working under the assumption that doomsday cults are trying to jumpstart Armageddon by getting their hands on nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Modern stuff. But lately, we’ve been making it harder and harder for them to do that, so they revert to old stuff. Really old stuff. Stuff we wouldn’t even think of knowing about.”

“But what good would all that hocus pocus stuff do them?” Keller asked.

“When faced with an enemy expecting you to be technical, you go primitive,” Cullen said. “It worked for the Viet Cong, it worked for the Provisional IRA—”

Vitullo slapped his hands down on the table. “What a crock of horse shit! I’m sorry, but do you honestly believe that eight of our men were killed by *magic*? You want to carve that on their tombstones? You want to tell that to their families? That’s a goddamn disgrace to their memory and you should be ashamed for even considering it!”

“There’s no need to get upset, General,” Cullen said, deadly calm. “As you pointed out, eight American soldiers are dead, yes, but we still have no real idea how it happened. That means the threat is still out there. Now, I don’t know about you, but anything that can wipe out an entire squad with ease and then escape undetected has me plenty worried and I don’t think we can afford to dismiss any possibilities when the evidence is as bizarre as it is. True, we can’t conclusively prove paranormal involvement but neither can we disprove it. Those men we lost were all professionals and I find it highly unlikely that they would make up what they saw, especially if it was in the middle of ripping them all apart. This isn’t to say I believe one-hundred percent it was supernatural but what I am saying is, if it was, we need know and have to be prepared to counter it.”

Vitullo turned to face Briar, his eyes pleading with the Chairman for sanity. Briar sat calmly, his fingers steepled, silently watching the exchange.

“He does have a point,” Briar said, shifting his gaze to meet Vitullo’s.

“You can’t be serious!” Vitullo gaped.

Briar shrugged. “Why not? Like he said, we can’t prove it one way or the other. But if it was something paranormal, we should be taking all necessary steps to safeguard this country against it. At the very least, we should be investigating the possibility.”

“Yeah? On whose dime?” Vitullo asked.

“That’s what a black budget’s for.”

Vitullo looked ready to say something he’d soon regret, but Briar glanced down at his watch.

“In any case, please excuse me. I have a meeting with the President. I’ll be sure to bring this matter to his attention.”

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