

The Mayan Mystery

by Pamela McCaughey (2006)

Based on UFO (1969-70)
Created by Gerry & Sylvia Anderson and Reg Hill
And the A-Team (1983-1987)
Created by Stephen J. Cannell

Chapter One

"In 1972, a crack commando unit was sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn't commit. These men promptly escaped from a maximum security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the government, they survive as soldiers of fortune. If you have a problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can hire the A-Team."

"I dunno, Hannibal, maybe this isn't a job for the A-Team," Face Templeton told his boss and group leader, "You'd think the local constabulary could handle it."

They were sitting together with team-mate B.A. Baracus in a small four seater-Cessna, piloted by Mad Dog Murdoch, their perennially insane flyboy, headed to Mexico's Chiapas state.

"From what we were told, the local authorities don't think it's necessary to get involved. They think the villagers have blown these recent disappearances out of proportion, and that they've taken the local shaman too seriously."

"Well, they did find those bodies with their guts ripped out," observed B.A. moodily. He hated flying at the best of times, and doing this one last mission before the A-Team faded into obscurity had not been his idea.

"I don't buy the view that animals ravaged those bodies," Hannibal replied, lighting up a cigar, despite the over the shoulder dirty looks he was getting from Mad Dog, "Miguel said they looked too neatly cut up for animal activity."

"So, if that's true, why aren't the local police paying more attention to this?"

"I don't know. There's been reports that some drug lords have decided to set up shop in the area, and they might not like any of the locals getting nosy. Those guys have enough money to bribe the police to look the other way. Plus, reports of dead bodies turning up isn't doing the tourism business any good. The people in the village depend heavily on Palenque to bring in most of what money they earn every year. Their whole economy is at risk until this thing is solved. That's where we come in."

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"Paolo flew een from New York earlier today. He ees waiting for us een Palenque," Omega operative Emita Avila explained to the silver-haired man sitting beside her in the El Camino, "And, Padilla, Leettle and Gallant are also een route. We should be able to make our first recon meession tonight after dark."

"When did this business get started?" Straker asked, shifting in his seat. Emita had

requested he not smoke in the car with her and he was nervous without his tobacco crutch.

"A week ago. Some off season touristas deesappeared. They wanted to hike the site - survivalistas or something lik' that. Their bodies were found three days later eenside one of the temple structures - they were cut open and their organs removed. Typical extra-terreste calling card. I knew een a moment upon receiving the report what we were deeling weeth."

"And the local police - have they gotten involved?"

Emita shook her head, her thick, luxuriant auburn hair moving about her shoulders, "Some of them have taken bribes from the drug lord who has moved eento thees area to grow mari-juana - they are not eenterested in eenvestigating. And, several of them have been foun' dead lik' the touristas! The people een the vee-lage are upset - very peee-sed off," she pronounced the last two words very precisely, "And, they wan' to take matters eento their own hands. The village shaman says the touristas were killed by the Old Gods - tha' they took the touristas as a sacrifice as in the old days - he says he had a veesion about it. Tha' the Old Gods keeled those who would make Palenque a place of cureeo-seetee instead of maintaining it as a sacred site. But the priest, Father Luis, he says Ibanez ees just scaring the pee-ple."

"Do you think the shaman actually saw anything? Did he see the aliens?"

"Ibanez likes to hike up to the site and do the mushrooms, you know? He gets them from a place called Oxaca (pronounced Wah-haka). So whether he really saw the aliens, or saw sometheeng in a fungus-eenduced stupor - who knows? Many een the village listen to him because he knows the old ways and knows about medee-cinal plants and what to do when somebody ees sick. Many times he has saved lives with hees medicines. He ees smart. The priest doesn't like Ibanez - he says he ees a pagan - a throwback to the bad old days before the Conquee-sta-dors. There has always been a struggle between the old ways and the Church here in Mexico."

"Did you get time to read the materials I sent you?"

"Oh yess, and I was su'prised. I deed not know about the situation in Egyp'. I checked with all the museums in the con-tree and none of them have any artee-facs which correspond to what you found - the gateway keys. There eesn't as much ree-search going on at Palenque as there used to be - eet's mostly a tourista site now. And, eet's vital for the villagers because tha's how they make most of their mon-ee - taking tours up there, selling theengs to the reech Americans. Eet's a ba' sit'uation."

"What got me about this, Emmita, is that there is a parallel to what happened in Egypt a number of years ago. The very idea that the aliens might have set up another 'gateway' is terrifying. And the pyramids of Mexico may have some sort of correlation to the pyramids of Egypt - if that's the case - we've got to put a stop to it. That's why I felt I had to come here personally and get involved."

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When Hannibal and the boys landed at a small rural airstrip, they were met and driven the rest of the way to the small village outside Palenque by their contact, Miguel, "You can stay with our priest, Father Luis. He ees waiting for you weeth a hot meal. Then manana - tomorrow - you can go up to the site."

"Is there a specific time of day when people disappear, Miguel?" Face asked.

"We don' know for sure, Senor. When people go meeing, we go to loook for them, but we find them dead, you know - and cut up too. They go up in the morning, and when they don' come down, we mus' search for them. By the time we find their bodies, well...eet ees too late, of course."

"Does anyone in the village have any idea what is going on?" Hannibal chomped on his cigar.

"Father Luis theenks eet ees the bad men who come here to plant and harvest their maree-juana on the other side. He also theenks they pay monee to the policias so they look the other way. That ees who could be keeling these people."

B.A. shook his big Mohawk-inspired head, "That makes a lot more sense than thinkin' some supernatural stuff is at work!" B.A. was nothing if not pragmatic.

"Thees ees very true, Senor. That ees why Father Luis ees so angry with Ibanez for speaking of the Old Gods and sacrifices. But, Ibanez says he has seen the Old Gods heemself, including Lord Pakal, and he says they are taking these people."

Face shrugged, "Too many magic mushrooms can make you see things that aren't there. Maybe what Ibanez thought he saw was actually the bad dudes killing off any witnesses to their little criminal enterprise."

"I would agree with you Senor Face, but eet ees what Ibanez tells that ees so strange. He says these Old Gods wear red and have beeeeg heads with no faces, and that they use weapons he has never seen before."

"Like I said, fancy fungus makes for some pretty strange interpretations of events..." Face replied.

* * *

The SHADO and Omega people settled quickly into their small encampment not far from the historic site of Palenque. Emita had acquired for them all special papers which detailed them as a National Geographic film crew, making a small documentary about the famous Mayan location. They had two tents set up, and were eating their rations while carrying on a briefing for the night's recon mission.

Padilla, Gallant, and Little had joined Foster, Straker and Emita at the camp and Al Leslie was standing by with a SHADO chopper for any removals they might require. There were several bodies which needed to be removed from the local cemetery - tourists and local police who ended up dead - their bodies carved up for their organs. Those bodies could not be allowed to end up in the hands of the authorities in any event, so they would be spirited out after nightfall. Straker and several of the other operatives would go up to Palenque to scout around and see if they could locate the alien nest or evidence of it.

* * *

Palenque's lush verdant beauty was lost in the darkness of night as Emita, Straker and Ana made their way up to the historic site. It was deathly quiet - the birds were settled down for their rest, and even the insects were keening only lightly.

Emita was scanning with her metalometer, checking for evidence of alien metal as they silently hiked the trail. The instrument was set to register visually with a small light. Ana was utilizing the GPS unit, constantly keeping their position noted. Straker wanted badly to light a cigarillo, but her knew the very act of lighting a match could give away their location to any vigilant aliens on watch.

The site was suddenly awash in moonlight, as the clouds broke, permitting the rays from Earth's only natural satellite to penetrate the jungle growth. From their spot on the trail, they could see the majesty of Palenque; its complex of ancient temples and open boulevards. Small geckos skittered by on tiny feet, catching Straker off guard by their sudden movement, but Emita and Ana were too involved in their scanning to give more than a passing glance to the reptiles.

Ana's vibraphone got her attention and she flipped it open so she could send their current GPS position to the three male operatives. Their text message reported that they'd removed the bodies and sent them off in an Omega chopper, and were now ready to start for Palenque itself.

From somewhere up on one of the temple platforms, they caught sight of a small flashing light. Straker, surprised that there might be others at the site at that hour, pointed it out to Emita and whispered, "Do we have company?"

Shaking her head, Emita whispered back, "The metalometer ees not registering anytheeng at th' location, Eduardo. Whatever eet is, eet is not of alien origeen." She calculated the GPS for the spot and text messaged it back to Claude immediately, asking the others to investigate the site on their way up, "Whatever it is," she whispered, "The guys will check it for us and we can keep to our own schedule."

"Has anything alien registered yet?" Straker asked anxiously.

"No, no' yet. Theese ees strange - the metalometer has a long range ...," Emita replied, a frown on her pretty face.

Ana held up her hand, "Shhhhhh...sometheeng's out there."

A huge black man and his partner stepped out of the shadows, armed to the teeth, "Hands up, fools!"

* * *

"What the hell...?" Straker pulled out his own small concealed weapon, but the big black man pointed his gun at him and said, "Drop it, Gramps" The SHADO commander bridled at the epithet, but there was no other choice at the moment but to drop his Baretta.

The other man scooped up Straker's fallen weapon and said, "Well, Hannibal's gonna be thrilled that we found you guys so fast!" Murdock grinned, "Checkin' up on your marijuana plants? In the dark?"

"Maree-juana?" Emita's eyes flashed with anger, "We do not come here for maree-juana!"

Ana flashed her gorgeous smile at the two heavily armed men facing them., "We're here with thee National Gee-ographic - we're scouting the place for a documentary feelm we're doing we thought we would come up at night to check out some good vantage points for camera shots of the place ."

"National Geographic my big black ass," B.A. Baracus snorted, "And carryin' a gun?"

Straker straightened his posture, "I'm the producer, I'm running this trip. I only carry in case of emergency."

"Riiiiight," Murdock eyed the silver haired SHADO commander, "Aren't you a little long in the tooth for running around historic sites in the dark?"

"I like to maintain a hands-on position with all my projects." Straker replied stiffly.

"You an American?" B.A. asked abruptly.

"I can show you my passport."

"What about the ladies?" Murdock grinned.

"I am a Mexi-can national. And, she," Emita nodded at Ana, " She ees as well."

"Hardly the types to be running some sort of marijuana growing operation, as you implied," Straker commented, his brain awhirl with questions like *"What are these two doing up here and what do they want from us? Can we get rid of them? Are we going to be forced to kill them to conceal our true intent here?"*

"I think we'd better let Hannibal talk to you anyway," Murdock replied with caution,

"Maybe we should pat down these pretty ladies just in case they're packin' some heat of their own."

"This is ridiculous!" Straker stepped forward and was forced to move back when B.A. aimed his machine gun at him, a dark look on his face plainly visible even in the moonlight.

Ana surreptitiously pressed the panic button on her Omega-issue cell phone - it would alert Paul, Claude and Pete that something was wrong, and she also encoded their last GPS position. She didn't want to surrender their instruments either; without them, they could get lost or lose contact with the others.

In an effort to stall for time, and avoid these two finding their Omega-issue equipment, which would just raise more questions, Emita suggested, "We can show you our passports and our National Geographic cards eef you wan' to see them. That weell prove what we are doing here." She moved to place a hand inside her jacket.

"Wellllll, ok, but do it real sloooooow," Murdock over-enunciated the letter "o".

They presented their papers to Mad Dog, who perused them using a small flashlight. All Straker could think of was, "*You idiot - you're going to give us away to the aliens with that light!*"

"So? Are they legit?" B.A. growled, making it obvious in his tone of voice that Murdock was taking too long.

"Looks that way, buddy. Pictures match up and all that stuff."

"Yeah, well, I still think Hannibal should talk to them."

"Guess you're right. OK, you three, let's march."

* * *

Claude Gallant felt his vibraphone in his pocket go off. He held up a hand to Pete and Paul and stopped to pull it out and check for a text message, "It's from Ana - she's pushed the panic button and sent us their last GPS position - they're moving off in the opposite direction from their original position."

"Think they flushed out some aliens?" Pete asked sotto voce. They'd completed their mission to extract the ruined bodies from the cemetery which were even now winging their way to an Omega lab to be examined.

"There's no tie-in readings from Emmy's metalometer - which is odd." Claude showed the readout on the tiny screen to Pete.

Pete held up their own GPS instrument and took a quick reading, "We can move to intercept them."

"Everybody check their sidearms - this could be dirty." Paul told them.

* * *

While Pete, Paul and Claude were trying to intercept them, Straker, Emita and Ana were en route to see someone named Hannibal. They arrived at a small base camp about 15 minutes distant, perched in one of Palenque's temples, and realized they might have arrived at the same GPS co-ordinates Ana had registered for the flashing light just before they'd run into their captors.

Hannibal, as it turned out, looked a lot like Straker. Silver-haired, cigar-chomping, and obviously a man of some years and experience, he greeted them with a toothy smile and offered them some "shitty coffee, but it's the best we've got for now."

All three declined. No Omega or SHADO agent worth his training would take food or drink from an unknown and possibly hostile source.

"Are you the man in charge here?" Straker demanded, "You're obviously not Mexican

law enforcement, so why are you here and why are you running around a famous tourist site with guns? Have you got any identification?"

"I could ask you the very same thing," the silver haired man grinned, and assumed an exaggerated Mexican accent as he said, "Badges? We don't need no steenkin' badges!" Then he spoke again, "For your information we were asked to come here," Hannibal smiled, a smug, maddening smile, with his cigar clenched between his teeth in a vague imitation of the Depression era U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Seems some undesirables moved into the neighbourhood here and they've been terrorizing the good folks in the village of Palenque, and ruining their tourista business!"

"We ha' no-thing to do wit' that," Emita spoke up, "Eef there are bad people here, eet ees no' us. We are jus' here to feelm this beauteeful place for the worl' to see."

"Yeah, B.A. told us you gave him some bullshit story about working for National Geographic," Face Templeton replied, his normally handsome face sombre and unsmiling.

"Ees no' - how you say it? Boool-sheet," Emita shot back, "We have our papers to prove eet."

"Documents can be forged," Face reminded her.

"Look, we don't want any trouble here," Straker jumped in, "We just want to be free to film our documentary and leave in peace. We're on a time frame - we have to do our filming and get back to our production facilities in Mexico City by the end of the week," he lied, hoping he sounded appropriately convincing.

"B.A., let's see their documents," Hannibal held out his hand and the big black man passed them over in silence, his lip curled. It was clear he didn't believe their story.

"Have a look at 'em, Face - you're our forgery expert here."

Scrutinizing them carefully with a small penlight, Face flipped through the passports, the National Geographic cards, looked up a couple times to compare their faces to the photos and made a face of his own, "If they're forged papers, they're damn good ones." He gave them back to Hannibal.

More than once Straker had been impressed with SHADO's bogus document makers - when - and if - he got back to HQ he might just hand out some commendations to that department His musings were interrupted by Hannibal's voice again.

"Maybe I'm just getting to be a sucker in my old age, but I really can't see that these people are marijuana growers."

"So whatta we do with 'em?" Murdock asked, incredulously.

"I say we," Hannibal was cut off in mid-sentence as Paul Foster finished for him.

"Let them go!"

Paul, Pete and Claude burst out of the bush, weapons raised, and ready to rescue their comrades!

"And, just who the hell are you?" Hannibal drawled, not seeming to be surprised or shocked by the armed intrusion.

"Let these people go - they're not here to cause you any trouble," Pete added.

B.A. was still holding his own weapon, "Still think they're not up to anything?" he growled at Hannibal and Face.

"Ah, yes, the old cavalry coming over the hill trick," Hannibal smiled brightly, "I was on the verge of deciding to let you go, but it looks like your compatriots are carrying a little too much weaponry to be National Geographic employees."

"They're just worried about us," Ana interjected.

"My, my, my," Murdock intoned, "Would this constitute a 'Mexican standoff?'" He and B.A. were still holding their guns, and Face had pulled his out when the other three men had come rampaging out of the bush.

Cool as a cucumber, Hannibal held up a hand, "Gentlemen, gentlemen, there's no need for violence here. We're just having a little conversation."

"At gunpoint?" Claude asked pointedly.

"Just a little precaution of ours - you never know who you're going to run into here," Hannibal replied, "We wanted to make sure your people here weren't involved in anything criminal - like, say, growing marijuana, and killing anyone who got too nosy."

The words had just barely left Hannibal's mouth when a sharp hissing noise was heard. Then another, and another, and more.

"Get down!" Paul yelled, as he and Claude and Pete hit the ground, rolled and started returning fire into the darkness. Straker and the ladies dropped to the ground in haste as well.

Hannibal and his men did likewise, noting the expressions on the faces of their visitors as they hit the dirt. There was no fear - just - *what was it? Did they know who was attacking? Had they been through this before?*

Without knowing what or whom they were firing at, Hannibal and his men joined the others, shooting off rounds into the blackness and wondering at the strange hissing noises, taking care to duck the bolts of dangerous light that came strafing out of the darkness.

Something came crashing through the underbrush, and into the light of the flickering campfire... a figure in a reddish-orange suit and a silver helmet. Face and Hannibal watched in disbelief as Claude Gallant brought up his rifle and fired directly into the man's faceplate. The figure staggered to the ground, clutching his helmet, a thick trickle of green viscous-y looking fluid leaking out from between his fingers. When he collapsed, the weird hissing energy bolts stopped, and Face, still stunned, laid in his place on the dirt, watching as Hannibal shimmied across to the injured man.

"Don't touch him!" Straker's voice boomed out, he crawled on all fours to push Hannibal away from the fallen stranger, then he looked up at Paul and Pete, "Go finish them off - Claude, get over here and look at him!"

The A-Team members stared in shock as Claude Gallant attended the man on the ground. He pulled the man's hands away from his face and carefully removed the silver headgear. Taking a small device from his backpack, he ran it over the prone man's body, and shook his head, "Done for."

"Whaddya mean 'done for?'" B.A. growled, "Ya mean he's dead?"

Ignoring the angry black man, Claude addressed his comments to Straker, "I'm sorry, he's gone. We won't be able to interrogate *him*."

Hannibal looked down at the bare-headed dead man and saw that his face and hair were green, "OK, I want some answers. Like, NOW!"

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Hannibal stood up and brushed the soil off his camouflage style fatigues, "Who is this guy? He sure as hell doesn't look like a drug lord to me!"

Straker stood up too and pursed his lips. Face watched him. It was clear from his expression he knew exactly what was going on - but would he tell them the truth?

"You and I are on duplicate missions, Hannibal. We're both here to get rid of the bad guys," Straker said, "However, we're after *different* baddies. If you leave us to do our thing, we'll leave you to do yours."

Hannibal looked down at the dead alien again, "Why is that man *green*? It doesn't look like a medical condition."

"Like I said, we have a little job to do here," Straker nodded at Emita and Ana who pulled out a thin material body bag and began to stuff the alien into it for transport, "It might be better for both of us not to ask too many questions."

"I knew these guys weren't with the National Geographic," B.A. snarled.

"Now just a doggone minute, Straker," Hannibal held out his hand, palm up in the halt position, "Who are these people you're after? If you're not after the drug lords, who else is causing trouble here?"

Straker sighed, "It's a long story, and we're wasting time. We have to abandon this location as soon as possible. If any of them survived this rekkie party, they're going to have alerted the others and they'll come looking for us. Even if we got them all, their nest probably isn't too far. You setting up your base camp in this spot probably got their attention. That's why they attacked. They like to maintain their privacy."

Frustrated at Straker's double-talk, Face said forcefully, "But who is *they*?"

Paul and Pete returned, saving Straker the trouble of responding to him, "Did you find the others?"

Pete nodded, "They're down the trail a bit. They're all dead."

Straker's face assumed a grimmer expression, "Damn. I wanted to get at least one alive so we could find out what this is all about," he glanced over at Emita and Ana, who had sealed up the body bag, "You'll have to pick up the rest of them, ladies - Pete - take them down the trail and get the others packaged. And call the chopper back. They'll have another pick up."

Paul gestured at the members of the A-Team, "What about them?"

"Let's assume a *modus vivendi*, gentlemen," Straker smiled, but grimly, "You do your thing, we do ours - no more questions asked. "

Face spoke up, "What's this business you mentioned about a nest? You mean there's more of those men out there? And, they're going to come after us?"

"They won't be any threat to you if you leave," Paul replied.

"We can't leave," Hannibal said, "We were hired by the villagers to get rid of the drug lords and stop the killings."

Straker bit his lower lip. Emita had spoken previously of the rumours of drug lords in the area growing marijuana, and he could easily understand why the locals wanted to get rid of them. They were bad news for the tourist industry, and bad news for the peaceful people who lived at the foot of the Palenque site in general. But, what Hannibal and his men didn't know was that the recent killings had not been the work of the drug growers. The aliens had killed to protect whatever it was they were doing in Palenque, and SHADO needed to know just what it was the aliens found so important about this site. They couldn't do a proper investigation with these men hanging around, getting in the way of their operations, seeing too much, asking too many questions. It occurred to him that he could simply have his team kill them. It would be simple, easy and their deaths could be blamed on the local drug lords with no trouble.

But, killing four innocent men to simply hush up their anti-alien operation seemed a high price to pay. Was age catching up with Straker and that was why he'd developed a conscience about such things in recent years? Was there any way to neutralize these men without killing them?

"Look, we can't discuss this here - every minute we waste in this location is giving the bad guys another chance to get at us," Straker said grimly, "Let's go back to the village and

re-group."

"Are you gonna tell us what this is all about?" Hannibal wanted to know.

"Plenty of time for that when we're in a safer place."

Chapter Two

The sun was up full by the time the exhausted SHADO agents and their A-Team confederates straggled down the trail and back to their encampment. Seated outside the National Geographic logo'd tents, the disparate group sipped coffee and gorged on Omega-issue nutribars to keep up their energy.

"You've got some pretty unique gadgetry for a bunch of video-journalists," Mad Dog commented with an ironic tone of voice as he watched Foster and the others re-load their weaponry and take specialized readings in the early morning light.

"Here's the deal," Straker leaned over to light Hannibal's cigar after lighting his own, "You have your bad guys to take care of and we have ours. Give us one more night and we'll be out of here and you can finish what you came to do without interference from us."

Hannibal took a long drag on his cigar, with a thoughtful expression on his face, "There's a catch to all this, isn't there?"

"No questions asked or answered - tha's our only steepu-lation," Emita made a zippering movement across her mouth and twisted her fingers as though she were locking it with a key.

"You're not gonna tell us what happened up there last night?" B.A. cocked an eyebrow at Straker, "We traded fire with God knows who and damn near got our butts shot off!"

"No, Meester Baracus, thees meession ees on a need to know only basis," Emita handed him another cup of coffee, which he downed quickly, "I don' think General Hunt Stockwell knows you are here, and I'm certain you would like eet that way, wouldn't you?" She smiled innocently, but the A-Team men understood her veiled comment all too well. General Hunt Stockwell rescued them from death in front of a firing squad years ago, but then he forced them to work for the American government for some time so they could escape being sent back to jail. They'd finally managed to submerge themselves so they could just fade away into obscurity, and this mission to Palenque was to be their last hurrah before permanent retirement. How the hell had she known about Stockwell?

Face spoke up, echoing the question in the other A-Team members' minds, "You know about the General?"

"Eenformation is always available eef you know where to look for eet, Senor Templeton." Emita patted a small gadget hanging off her belt that looked like a combination PDA/Blackberry - it had a strange logo on it - it looked like the Omega symbol .

"You'd have turned us in by now if you really wanted to," Mad Dog said, looking down into his coffee cup, "If you know who we are, then you'd also know there's a reward for reporting our whereabouts."

"We have no need of reewards. Your co-operation ees far more valuable," Emita told him.

"OK," Hannibal knocked the ashes off his cigar, "Supposing we co-operate with you. What's in it for us?"

Straker and Foster traded glances and then Straker nodded for Foster to speak, "We know exactly where to find your drug people. We can also arrange for you to contact the federales to pick them up, put a stop to their operations and for you to leave Mexico under deep cover and go to wherever it is you want. No questions asked, as stated before."

"You can do all that?"

"You'd be surprised what we can do for our 'friends'." Claude Gallant smiled disarmingly.

"Ya think we can trust these fools?" B.A. was clearly not convinced.

"So what do we do, just cool our heels down here in the village for another day until you people do...whatever it is you're here to do?" Hannibal took another sip of his coffee.

"As our guests, of course," Straker told him.

"Your guests or your *prisoners*?" Face retorted.

"Nothing of the sort, Mr. Templeton. You scratch our backs, and we'll scratch yours. Simple as that."

"What about the money the village was gonna pay us for gettin' the drug guys?" Mad Dog asked, "That was our retirement nest egg, ya know."

"You can still earn that money. It will look like you captured the bad guys and summoned the federales. The villagers don't have to know we were ever involved," Pete Little stood up from his collapsible camp stool, stretched his six foot three frame, and pulled his gold cross out from under his T-shirt, "Or you can make yourselves out to be real heroes and donate that money back to the local parish church. From the looks of things in the village, they could really use that money here."

Mad Dog looked helplessly around at the other A-Team members, he could see they liked the idea, "Hey, what about us getting' paid? We came down here, riskin' our necks..."

Hannibal waved Howling Mad down, and grinned over at Straker, "Sounds like a win-win situation."

* * *

"How are our guests doing?" Straker asked Emita, as she came back to their small campfire. Pete Little was off doing a perimeter check.

"Sleepeen' lik' los ninos," She smiled, and inclined her head towards one of the tents, "They have e-noff drogs in them to stop a whole herd of rampageeng' ele-phantas. I don' theenk they will wake up very soon, Eduardo."

Paul and Claude were packing haversacks for them all to use that night on their second expedition to Palenque. Claude looked up and smiled, "That's my Emmy - she's a real knock out!"

Ana was running tests on some of the equipment they were going to be using, "Theenk it's safe to just leave them here alone?"

"We could tie them up I suppose, but then if they woke up, they'd really know they'd been had. If we're lucky, we'll be able to triangulate from their campsite in that temple and locate the alien nest quick," Paul said, "Plus, we'll have a couple SHADO choppers in the air. When we're done, we'll send our friends back to the States on one of them."

"Los Americanos," Emita spoke up, "I geeve them more than the normal dose of thee drog. They weel be alright?"

"Dr. Jackson says you can give that dose with no more after effect than a bad hangover," Claude laughed, "They'll just wonder how much booze they consumed!"

Straker lit another cigarillo, "Ok, people, let's get some rest and we'll pull out of here at 11 o'clock. We've got a busy night ahead of us."

* * *

Triangulating from the A-Team's original camp in the temple proved to be a good point. Emita's metalometer registered metal of alien manufacture almost immediately.

"Madre de Dios," Emita whispered, "Thee metalo-meeter ees showeeng that the extraterrestes are located in the famous temple of Lord Pakal."

"Lord who?" Paul Foster asked sotto voce, as they all stopped to reconnoitre.

"Lord Pakal was a famous Mayan keeng whose burial place was found in thee Temple of

Eenscriptions in the nineteen-feeftees. That has to be where the extraterrestes have their, how you say eet? Their nest."

Straker nodded at Emita, "What would be important about that site as opposed to any of the other temples in Palenque?"

"Lord Pakal's reemains were taken away manee years ago, but hees sarcoph-a-guus ees steel there in thee temple. Eet is inside the temple, many feet under-groun'. That ees why eet was not deescovered for so long." She handed off her metalometer to Claude, who continued taking readings, while she consulted her special Omega-issued Blackberry.

Claude turned to Straker and whispered, "As far as I know, there hasn't been much archeological work done here lately. Newer finds are getting the Museum pesos. Except for the touristas, there isn't much activity now."

"Which would suit our green friends to a "T", wouldn't it? But, why here? Why now? Is the Temple another gateway like we found in the Pyramid at Giza?" Straker asked, almost rhetorically, knowing Claude wouldn't have any more answers than he did. He motioned to Foster and Pete Little, "Move up closer and see if you can spot any kind of activity at the temple. Keep us posted."

The men moved off noiselessly, garbed in the black Ninja-like fatigue clothing all SHADO and Omega operatives wore for their many extermination ops. They were heavily armed as usual.

Emita showed the tiny screen on her mini-PC to Straker, "Eduardo, look at thees ."

The screen was filled with the image of the lid of Lord Pakal's sarcophagus. It was easy to see that the pattern which had been traced on it so many hundred years ago looked like an alien at the control seat of a spacecraft. Straker looked at the image and then looked at Emita, "My God..."

"Exacto."

* * *

Lord Pakal's last resting place was underneath one of Palenque's most spectacular temples. Discovered by Mexican archeologist Alberto Ruz in 1952, the find was considered one of the best in all of the Mezo-American sites at the time. The Mayan king's bones were found inside a fabulous sarcophagus - which could have rivalled anything found up to that time in Egypt - and his grave jewellery was absolutely stunning. Consisting of an incredible green jade face mask, and other priceless artifacts, the Pakal horde eventually ended up outside the country, finally residing in the American Museum of National History in New York City.

The human figure portrayed in relief on that stone slab became known as "the astronaut" and the image on the slab itself looked suspiciously like the Mayan king was seated in a small one person spacecraft, reminiscent of the early space program capsules. Dated to circa 690 AD, the slab on Lord Pakal's sarcophagus spawned controversy among the archeological communities studying the early Mezo-American peoples, and provided fodder for those New Age thinkers who were willing to see the Mayan lord as a representing a connection to alien visitors during his own era. Pakal had reigned over his people for 68 impressive years, and under his kingship, his people had reached new heights of intelligent astronomy, mathematics and other sciences.

"Historians, archeologists and New Agers have all at some point questioned the oddness of so many earth cultures of ancient times building huge pyramids," Straker said, sotto voce, "If the aliens may have been behind at least one god cult in ancient Egypt, what are the possibilities that the aliens may have been behind the 'old gods' of the Mayans and the Aztecs,

and may have initiated them into a cult of human sacrifice to service their own needs for human body parts? Were they in trouble that many years ago? It's been 500 years plus since the Mayan communities flourished before the Spanish arrived in the new world. Also, was the Aztec calendar, with its incredible correctness and accuracy, a legacy of some sort from the aliens themselves to this primitive people? Did the aliens also share their mathematical and astronomic knowledge with the Maya and the Aztecs? Is that how they came to be so intelligent and ahead of their neighbours scientifically? Were the old gods of the Mayans simply the aliens themselves?"

"We cannot dees-count any theories, Eduardo," Emmita replied, "But, weeth Lord Pakal's grave goods no longer buried weeth him, eet begs thee question as to why else the extra-terrestes would be eenterested in the Temple of Inscr-eep-tions itself." Emita did more searching in her handheld Omega issue PC, "Eet's true that the arti-fac's are no longer here at Palenque. Some of them were sent to thee Museeum of Nat-ural Heestory in Ameri-ca - an eessue wheech has been contested by the Mexee-can autoritees for some time. They bee-live that Lord Pakal's mask and hees other things shoul' be here in Mexee-co, where the people can see them in one of *our* musee-ums."

"Does this mean the aliens think Pakal's goodies are still here? But, why would they want a jade mask? It has a distinct archeological value, but it is hardly worth a trip of trillions of miles across space to get it."

"I cannot answer those questions. Eef the aliens have set up their nest in Lord Pakal's tomb, there must be some sig-neef-ee-cance to why they are here. But eet does not seem to make sense that they would come all theese way and keel all those people just to vee-seeet an old archeological site. Maybee your concerns about another gateway are well just-ee-fied."

Foster leaned forward, "For whatever reason they've come here, they've got a nest and they're a danger to everyone. Let's clean them out first and ask the questions later - we don't have time to discuss this - the sun's going to come up too soon and we still have to figure out what to do with our sleeping friends back at camp."

* * *

Attacking the nest was hand to hand combat of the worst kind. Straker wasn't used to such action at his age, and sustained a couple of nasty flesh wounds. But when it was all over, the aliens had not gone "gently into that good night" - they had made a concerted effort to take the SHADO people with them into death.

The one alien they collared pulled off his own helmet and apparatus for breathing his green liquid - he died of aging and suffocation on the spot - an enigmatic smile on his greenish dyed face to the end. Straker was not so much upset over his own wounds as he was over the fact they failed to capture a single live alien for interrogation.

Claude Gallant came up the stairs from the interior of Lord Pakal's tomb, "Guys, the aliens were after something for certain - the lid of Lord Pakal's tomb has been raised, and there's a piece of alien scanning equipment in there!"

The others followed him downstairs, casting a series of eerie lights on the tomb as they collected around it, "It's empty - there's no artifacts!" Pete Little blew out his breath.

"None of Lord Pakal's jade goodies, or even his bones, are here," Paul replied, "Why did the aliens risk so much to stake out this site and kill anyone who wandered close? If we knew Lord Pakal's artifacts had been removed, why hadn't they known?"

"Unless there was something else in here they wanted that the archeologists didn't see . . .," Straker mused aloud.

"Thee archee-ologiss' were very exacto in their work here at thee Temple of Een-screep-tions, Eduardo," Emmita reminded him, "Eef they were here, they wanted somethin' very badly!"

Getting the alien bodies and their equipment out of the site was accomplished by calling in Al Leslie and his team of choppers - they remediated the site pronto, and departed just as the sun was full in the sky. Ana sat Straker down on the temple's airsteps and bandaged his wounds, shaking her finger at him imperiously for lighting up one of his stinky cigarillos.

Gallant and Little did another investigation of the Temple interior, "General, we haven't found anything in this site that suggests there's a gateway here. Paul helped us look for indentations into which 'keys' for the gateway could be inserted, but there's no sign of such technology. Unlike the pyramid at Giza, this one has no evidence of alien technology at all."

* * *

They were scaling back down the hill when Emita's Omega issue Blackberry chimed. She flipped it open saying, "I told the maa-kina to let me know eef there was any new information on Lord Pakal's arti-fac's," her nimble fingers punched in several commands. Her eyes opened wider as she read the small screen, then she snapped the lid shut.

"What did you read?" Claude asked her, offering his arm to help Straker limp along.

"I jus' read where the main musee-um in Mex-eeco Ceetee ees opening a dee-splay of Lord Pakal's arti-facs tomorrow morning - they are on loan from the musee-um in New York!"

Pete Little shook his head, "We'd better take care of our friends in camp asap - I can just bet the aliens will check out that Museum and take whatever it is they came here looking for!"

* * *

They had not gone too far when four very armed and angry A-team members met them on the trail. In an effort to pretend there had been no agenda for putting them to sleep with the amnesia drug, they'd left their weapons with them.

Straker made eye contact with Emita but said nothing. Hannibal was chomping furiously on his cigar, "What the hell was leaving us down there all about?" The others wore expressions of anger on their faces.

"I'm sorry, but we needed to... detour your efforts for a few hours . . .," Straker said, "We still intend to honour our original agreement with you regarding the drug people and your exit from this country."

"And what makes you think we'll believe that now?" Murdock asked sarcastically.

"I guess you'll just have to trust us," Foster smiled grimly.

"I'll tell you what's goin' to happen from here on in," Hannibal retorted, "We're gonna be with you guys every step of the way - and no more tricks. How'd you slip us the drugs?" Hannibal grinned over at Murdock, "Mad Dog here is so chocked full of stimulants all the time they must have countered whatever you gave us to put us to sleep. He woke up first and got the rest of us going."

Emita looked over at Straker and shrugged her shoulders. Straker lit up one of his own cigarillos, "Let's go discuss this over breakfast... I don't know about you people, but I'm starving..."

* * *

"Ok," Mad Dog sniffed his coffee suspiciously, "What's the deal here?"

The SHADO-Omega people had rustled up some java (this time sans the drug) and some other edibles. It was full sunshine, and they were sitting in the shade of one of the big National Geographic logo-ed tents.

"Simple. We're on the trail of art thieves. Or to be more precise, artifact thieves. They bummed out up there at Lord Pakal's gravesite, but we know where they're likely to strike next. They're looking to get their paws on the Mayan king's goodies - and probably to sell them on the black market," Straker explained - there was a certain amount of truth to what he was saying, after all!

"I wouldn't have said that dead man we saw the other night up there was an art thief..." Face retorted suspiciously.

"Remember our bargain - no questions," Pete Little reminded them.

"So... if we help you stop them, you'll get us out of here - no questions asked?" Hannibal replied.

"You're the ones who are insisting on getting involved in our problems," Foster told him, "We'd prefer to go this thing alone."

"Oh no!" B.A. roared, "We're keepin' our eyes on you people but good! You're not gonna sneak out on us again! And leave us here holdin' the bag! For all we know, you'd nail us with this mess and we'd end up spendin' the rest of our days in some Mexican prison!"

Straker held up a hand, "Gentlemen, gentlemen... surely we can come to an accommodation here. Our offer from before still stands. We'll get you the drug growers and get you out of Mexico - the only price is your silence."

"You can't take on a gang of art thieves by yourselves - there aren't enough of you to go around. Let us help. We've had a lot of experience dealing with people like this," Hannibal temporized, "Fair is fair. We help you, you help us."

Straker pretended to be considering his opposite number's offer. Finally he replied, "We might be able to use your help in Mexico City after all..."

* * *

Pete Little and Claude Gallant didn't say anything, but they did wonder if their commander had suddenly gone soft on them. Since when did they ever willingly involve civilians?

The A-Team members had gone down to the village to retrieve their vehicles for the drive to the nation's capital.

"General, do you think it's wise to take those yahoos along with us?" Pete didn't bother to sugar coat his objections.

"They're just going to get in our way, and see too much," Claude added.

Straker smiled mirthlessly, "Remember that old philosopher who said 'keep your friends close, your enemies even closer'? We've got to get into that Museum before the aliens do, or at least get there in time to figure out what it is they are planning to do. We're going to have to set up some sort of surveillance on the Museum - a few pairs of extra eyes watching could come in handy. I have NO intention of allowing those 'yahoos' as you so succinctly put it, Mr. Little, to see what our real objective is, or to come into contact with our little green friends. As long as they think they are fulfilling a purpose, they'll be content to be helpful."

Foster added, "We can keep them outside the Museum as our eyes and ears, while we go inside to take care of the aliens."

"OK, so in the meantime, people, we are going to play nice with the A-Team and let them think we're just one big happy law-enforcing family..." Straker lit another cigarillo.

* * *

The A-Team's SUV was parked across the street from the Museo Nacional de Antropologia in Mexico City. Inside were Straker, Emita, Face and Claude. The others were

occupying a second SUV, located just behind the Museum, covering the other entrance. Even though it was late, a local police officer pulled his car over to the side and just behind their vehicle.

"Uh oh..." Straker leaned forward to Emita, "I think we have company..."

Despite the still darkness of the wee hours, Emita put on her most ingratiating smile and got out of the passenger seat to address the cop who was obviously on the beat. Claude and Face hunkered down in the back seat out of sight.

"Buenos noches, signora," the police officer smiled back at her, "Por que su vehiculo estacionado aqui?"

It only took Emita a moment to decide how to handle this fellow, "Nosotros somos policias federales," she handed him her fake ID card which looked enough like the real thing from the Mexican government in the dim light from the street lamps to disarm him mentally, "Recibimos una llamada que alguien trato de entrar al museo." After all, there really was the likelihood of a break into the museum - but not by locals!

"Guien guerra entrar al museo?" he asked, noticing her slim body and exotic fragrance, but he still wasn't quite convinced.

"Hay! Ladrones. Los gringos!" She hoped he would be satisfied with her answers about foreign art thieves and take himself away from there with a minimum of hassles.

"Mi estacion de policia no ha recibido ninguna informacion acerca as esto," the cop was beginning to get on Emita's nerves - too many questions - of course his precinct hadn't received information on these art thieves!

With a pantherlike movement, Emita slapped her hand onto the back of the police officer's neck, rotating her ring so that it's tiny needle protrusion could enter his skin, "A dormir, por chance a sonar..." she recited Shakespeare's line from Hamlet in Spanish, and the amnesia drug took effect so quickly she barely had time to lower him to the sidewalk before he fell.

"Need some help?" Face and Claude took the cop's feet up and together they deposited his unconscious form behind a thick hedge, where he wouldn't be found for several hours, "What did you say to him?" Straker wanted to know as Emita climbed back into the car.

"All hee weel remember is something about los gringos art thieves... ,"

* * *

"OK, we need you to stay out here as our lookouts," Claude informed the A-Team members, "That encounter with the local police was too close for comfort. Our job is to get inside the Museum and keep the thieves from absconding with the jade goodies."

Ana passed the A-Team men small communications devices, "Por favor, you have to keep a close watch and let us know if the policias or anyone else who could interfere with this operation could be approaching."

Face smiled down at Ana, always the ladies' man, "For you, gorgeous, anything. You're sure you don't want us to sit in with you on this?"

"It's going to be hard for us all to get out of the building as it is - the less bodies inside the better," Pete Little reminded them.

* * *

With the A-Team men positioned in the shrubbery outside the Museum, the SHADO and Omega personnel were shocked to discover that the museum's security system was not engaged, permitting them to quietly slip in.

There on display in special cases, were the artifacts originally recovered from Lord

Pakal's tomb. The jade mask warranted its own lighted case, and the other items were as prominently arranged in secondary cases around the mask, all with their own text blocks and in unbreakable glass boxes for protection. On the walls were other larger text blocks printed in Spanish and English, with giant colour photos depicting the interior of Lord Pakal's gravesite.

"Look!" Ana whispered urgent, pointing to the central display case. It was Lord Pakal's famous jade mask. Ana, Straker and Emita stared at it for a moment - speechless.

"Ees thees what the extra-terrestes hav' come heere for?" Emita held up one of her scanning devices and waved it over the mask's case, "Eduardo, thees mask - eet is registering as of alien construc-cion on my scanner..."

"We have to take it with us!" Straker whispered furiously, "We can't leave it here for them to take home! If they want it this badly, there must be something special about it!"

Ana nodded, "Dee-ssecting the mask in a lab may answer the question of why the aliens want it so desperate-lee. Even though eet ees a valuable historic artifact, eet ees first and foremost a piece of alien technology - and as such - must be ree-covered and eenvestigated."

Their attention was distracted by a small slithering sound. They all scattered into the shadows, watching intently as a figure, illuminated by the thin lined glare of a flashlight, came into the chamber.

The figure turned out, upon closer examination, to be quite human, not alien. They watched from their individual vantage points as he carefully snapped off some controls on the security panel, and laying his flashlight down on the floor, light side up, began to lift up the case under which Lord Pakal's jade mask had been placed.

Emmita moved out from her hiding place and help up her weapon, "Stop right there, Senor! What are you doin'?"

Squinting blankly into the glare from her flashlight, the man seemed dazed, "Por favor, senorita, por favor... " he stammered in Spanish.

Someone flipped on the overhead lights for better visibility, and the others came out to get a good look at the man. "Thees hombre," Emmita explained, "Ees the Dee-rector of thee Museum!"

* * *

Straker was the first to ask, "Why are you in here, stealing an artifact from your own museum?"

"Por favor, senor... eet would mean my life... jus' let me take the mask and go..." he was obviously frightened, but seemingly cursed with a one track mind as well.

"Go where?" Ana asked, "Where are you taking the mask?"

"To thee rendezvous... eef I geeve it to them they weel let me go..."

"Who will let you go?" Straker queried. They all had a bad feeling about this.

"Them. Los extra-terrestes... they jus' want thee mask back...they tol' me eet was their mask and they jus' loaned eet to Lord Pakal... " clearly the man was delusional, or...

Emita said aloud what they were all thinking privately, "Thees man ees under alien influence, mi amigos, we mus' work carefully here and take control of thees situation."

She pulled a Pressi-Jet out of her knapsack and gently expelled the drug into the Director's arm. He was so alien controlled he simply watched her do it, not struggling, merely calm.

"We are your amigos, senor," she told him quietly, "We wan' to help you, but firs' you must help us... we need to know where the extra-terrestes tol' you to leave thee artifac' for them..."

Straker leaned forward and extricated the jade mask from the man's fingers, "I bet the aliens were figuring on having the director steal it - his fingerprints all over the place would lead the authorities to suspect he was helping some art thieves - when they left him for dead upon receipt of the mask, the case would go cold with no live suspect."

"They tol' me to drive to Cuarnavaca...on thee highway... to pool over on thee road an' they woul' find me there..."

* * *

After dosing the poor museum director with some amnesia drug, and leaving him lying comfortably on the couch in his own office, the team exited the building and re-joined the others in the vehicle, "Paul," Straker told him, "Get Sky Seven on the horn, we have a little job for them... get them the co-ordinates for the city of Cuarnavaca - asap! We've got to intercept an alien ship before it gets away!"

* * *

Back in the Chiapas...

"OK, you kept up your part of the bargain, and so will we," Straker handed a small GPS unit to Hannibal, "This pinpoints the location of the weed growing operation you came here to put down. Our satellite information shows that the workers arrive on site every day about 7:00 am local time. They break at noon for a short siesta - they'll be sitting ducks."

Emita handed Face a no-name cell phone, "The batteree ees onlee good for twenty-four hours so use it prudentlee - I have programmed een the main number for the federales - you can call them when you have captured thee drug men. When thee batteree ees about to die, eet weel send out a seegnal for our helee-copter to land here at this location and take you out of the countree."

"You can get dropped off wherever you want in the continental U.S.," Pete Little added, "Free of charge, and free as the birds."

Murdock was still sulking about their fee being given back to the villagers, "Well, at least we're gettin' something *free* outta this mess..."

B.A. grinned, "Hey, fool, ya gotta do some good in this world. It ain't always about the money!"

The SHADO transport chopper, minus any logos, landed, stirring up some dust, until the rotors halted. Their tents and equipment were quickly stowed on board by Padilla, Emita, Foster, Gallant and Little.

"Good luck, Hannibal," Straker shook hands with the A-Team commander, and grinned as he quoted Hannibal's favourite quote, "I love it when a plan comes together!"

Hannibal and his men watched as the chopper lifted off and then looked at his watch, "We've got only about 2 hours or so to surprise our little drug friends, so we'd better get to it!"

* * *

On board the huge transport chopper, the SHADO-Omega people were getting their first sustained look at the fabled jade mask.

Emita scanned the piece carefully, "Eduardo, there ees definite evidence of extraterrestrial technology buried deep eenside the jade pieces..."

"Why would the aliens build a sophisticated item like this and then leave it behind with such a primitive group of people?" SHADO's C-in-C demanded.

"Theese people were not as preemi-teeve as you theenk. They were expert archee-tects, astronomers - mathematee-cians. Yes, they prac-teesed human sacr-eeefice..."

Straker shook his silver head, "I'm beginning to see a very disturbing parallel here..."

Foster nodded, leaning over Emita's work space to look more closely at the mask, "Egypt. I was there. Personally. We speculated at that time about the oddity of human sacrifice in Pharonic times, when there had been no archeological evidence to confirm it. But we know the Mayan and Aztec religious practices did include sacrificial victims - which would have been a godsend for the aliens."

"Or maybe they practiced human sacrifice *because* of the aliens," Claude interposed, gesturing with his coffee cup, "The images on Lord Pakal's sarcophagus lid show a pretty detailed figure of an astronaut inside a spacecraft . Where else would they have gotten such ideas?"

"And the hieroglyphics dee-ciphered in his gravesite say he was to take a two year journey to reach the gods in the stars - does that mean eet takes the aliens two years to travel from their star system to ours or vice versa?" Ana asked.

"It's a good guess that the aliens have involved themselves more than once in human social development," Pete Little looked down at the gold cross on his chest thoughtfully, "The scary part is: how much?"

"What would be more convenient for the aliens than to have humans offering up organs to keep their transplant program alive - no questions asked?" Claude replied.

"Eef I remember my hee-story correctly - the ancient Aztecs and Maya con-seedered the sacree-fices to be vital to maintaining their world view. Weeth-out placating the gods - the whole world would come to an end," Emita added, "An' thee two year journey Lord Pakal was suppos' to take to reech hees gods has been docu-mented to be closely aligned with thee hab-eet of throwing ritual vic-teems and gold items eento thee cee-notes."

There was silence for a moment, then Ana said, "The aliens deed not succeed een acquiring Lord Pakal's mask - we stopped them and took eet ourselves. Eef eet ees truly a piece of their techology, what ees eet for? Why deed they want eet so badly?"

Chapter Three

The report back from Sky Seven confirmed they had destroyed a UFO on the run from the vicinity of Cuarnavaca - they chased it high up into the atmosphere and disposed of it outside of human sight. Once more SHADO and Omega had managed to thwart the aliens from their nefarious plot!

"What's that, Al? You say the A-Team wasn't at the phone co-ordinates?" Pete Little barked into his own cellphone.

Straker looked up in consternation and motioned Pete to hand his cell over, "Al, what's up?"

"Like I told Pete - those guys weren't at the pick-up co-ordinates! We found the cell you gave them with the battery almost dead - sending out the signal for us. Looks like they flew the coop on their own!"

"Damn! I wanted them dosed with amnesia drug again!" Straker ground out his cigarillo firmly with his boot heel, "Think they're still in the area?"

"Not now. We scanned about 500 miles in every direction with our infrared and all that gear and they're nowhere in sight. They musta skedaddled before the federales swarmed this location. We got here after the take down with the weed growers - when we saw all the lawmen, we got outta there pronto!"

* * *

Straker looked up from his desk in the Omega building in New York City. Each newspaper spread out was carrying a front page story about how Lord Pakal's fabled jade mask, on loan from the New York museum to one in Mexico City, had been stolen. Every story had a different theory as to who had carried out the theft. Terrorists? Rogue archeologists who had been calling for the artifact to be returned to its rightful place in Palenque? Shifty art thieves who were likely planning to sell it on the black market to a wealthy private collector? Nobody seemed to have the complete facts on how the mask disappeared. Mexican authorities were refusing American intervention in the case, and they were very tight-lipped about how the investigation was proceeding.

The phone rang, "Eduardo, I theenk you might lik' to come down to the labs and have a look at what we have been doing..."

* * *

The General found his way down to Omega's state of the art laboratory complex. Built underground, it was an amazing feat of stealth and scientific achievement - stocking just about every possible cutting edge type of technology and equipment one could imagine. Straker figured the FBI labs at Quantico would be pea-green with envy if they could see the resources Omega, and SHADO, could marshal.

Lord Pakal's jade mask was lying delicately on a scanning padd, while Ana and Emita finished some calibrations on it.

"Well, ladies, what can you tell me about the king's treasure here?"

Ana flipped open her laptop and started bringing up a series of images, "General, these images were taken weeth our most del-i-cate alien scanning de-vice. As you can see from the peec-tures, we have been able to determine that there ees in fact alien technology eenside," Straker could indeed make out a delicate tracery of equipment tracking all through the jade pieces, as though each one was connector part of a larger puzzle.

"Any idea what it's for?"

Emita tilted her head to one side, "There are several larger pieces in the sides of the mask which appear to match up to specific locations on the humanoid face and head. We have checked these areas - the mask may connect to the area just between the eyebrows, and at two other places on the temples."

Straker shook his head, "Why? What do these pieces do?"

"Short of putting it on our own heads," Ana explained, "We do not know. It is possible these pieces may connect to neural brain tissue, but whether it was created for human brains or for alien brains - that is the big question."

"It could be some sort of brain stimulator," Emita continued, "Because these pieces can transmit some sort of energy - we tested it with electricity. And of course the human brain, as well as the alien brain, works on electrical energy, with synapses firing and all. Perhaps it was something which the aliens were using on the Mayan king or his people. It must be of some great importance for the aliens to sacrifice so much to get it back."

"Even if it does connect to the brain, human or alien, in some way, what was its primary function? Why was it needed and why did the aliens want it back so desperately?"

Ana spoke up, "At this point, General, we cannot determine that. It would take a human volunteer to put the mask on and experience whatever happens. And, we cannot guarantee that the mask would not cause brain damage in the volunteer because we still do not know what its purpose is."

"Keep working on it, ladies. As you say, it must have been of primary importance for the aliens to work so hard to find it, and to put themselves at such risk to get it back," Straker made a face, "Why is it that so many people suffer and die every time the aliens want something here on this planet?"

Epilogue

Howling Mad glared back at Face. Sitting in the back of a truck hauling swine to the local market wasn't exactly his idea of luxury transportation. The other members of the team were watching the scenery as they bounced along the rutted, unpaved rural road. But, Face, who arranged for them to travel in this fashion, was getting great amusement out Murdoch's discomfiture.

"Just think," he commented loudly to Murdoch, over the roar of the truck's labouring engine, "You're getting to see all this gorgeous Mexican scenery for free!"

"Yeah, sure! I just wish the scenery didn't come with such a realistic... smell!" Murdoch gestured to the pigs jouncing back and forth against each other, squealing in time to the truck's every movement.

"Hey, take it easy, we'll be at the border in no time - you can cross over or stay here in Mexico and go native!"

"Well, those guys we met back there offered us a chopper to anywhere we wanted to go - we should have taken them up on it!"

"And miss all this?" Face gave him a faux scandalized expression, "Where's your sense of adventure, man?"

Hannibal lit a cigar, drew on it, and grinned at the others, "Nothing like roughing it! And General Stockwell won't find us in that little border town. I think I could get to like this country! I love it when a plan comes together!"

THE END