

About 2,065 words.

CHAPTER 9:
WEAVER'S NEEDLE

Alberto thought he knew where he was. He knew where he had to go at the very least. He was making his way towards Weaver's Needle. But he was in bad shape and the spire was at least ten miles away, through some of God's most hostile and punishing terrain, especially in summer.

He had no food or water, either, and he was still delirious with blood loss. He was covered head to toe in open gashes and wounds. Blood bubbled in a thick burbling crimson on his back and chest. Scabs turned bright scarab-black in the sun. He staggered southward. All he had on his person was the vial of Pulquito in his pocket.

The kokopelli was talking to him in a nonstop stream now. The being was working in overdrive to keep Alberto's body and fractured mind together. Alberto was completely inured to pain. He stumbled in a species of sublime ecstasy.

His destiny, long latent, forsaking its control to the social artifices of will and intellect, had now taken over. Alberto's very legs felt as if they were being motored by alien agency in the direction of the tall spire.

But first Alberto had a stop to make. Couldn't go to the old mountain completely unarmed. The old master had left him a gift. Vick's Achilles Heel, in fact. A weapon. A weapon Vick had once carried. A weapon which had drawn Vick to the mask in the first place. But he'd lost it. And the master had found it.

Alberto's light body had been completely opened. He scanned the surrounding hills for markers of the secret cache he was looking for. He remembered the clues. Waltz had left maps and written legends for uncovering his buried mineshaft. Every tourist and aspiring treasure hunter and gold miner in the entire country was likely familiar with these instructions.

But this mine was just the beginning. There was a lot more of value than just mere gold in this treacherous rock-graveyard.

That evening, Alberto rested for a few hours. In the dimple of a large rock, he found a brackish mud puddle from which he drank. His body was red-singed by the sun. His

hair was wavy and dried out. His face was gaunt and emaciated. His normally portly frame lean and baggy.

He laughed to himself. He was close.

He had only come a few miles south after a whole day of zombie-like shuffling. His body had been so weakened with heat and run-down with fatigue and emaciation.

He still had a mile or so to go this night.

The cache was off a side-canyon from the main north-south canyon which led to the lower slopes of Weaver's Needle.

Under the moon he made his way to the entrance of the side canyon. Day was breaking over the ridge as he made his way up the slope and into the narrow saddle. But here his memory failed him. The clues didn't add up. He could see Four Peaks to the north and the Needle to the south like it mentioned in the instructions he'd memorized. He could see the military trail, but he couldn't see the boulder nor the promised tunnel.

Alberto now took out the vial of pulquito. It no longer glowed light green but fluorescently instead, shimmering with multi-faceted splendor.

Alberto paused momentarily then impetuously gulped the Pulque 231. It hit immediately, affecting his cortex like a donkey punch. The colors of morning light hitting

against the rock took on a soft dull colorful sheen in Alberto's perception. Almost as if soft pixels of the surrounding rocks were dilating in his eyes and bloodstream.

Power and knowledge coursed through his being, further opening his light body. He looked around the slope now with new eyes. New things leapt out at him. The shrubs seemed to be vibrating in the forms of desert animals, as if they were living simulacra.

Waves of spontaneous natural intelligence and the genius of design washed over his frail mortal comprehension. He was having a "Lizard King" moment. A feeling of him demanding benevolence from the harsh forbidding natural world with supreme and unshakable confidence.

However, there was still a small note of discord in the feeling, which soon rose in pitch to dominate the whole experience. Alberto's crazed eyes shuddered, then refocused in hyperalertness.

His gaze was drawn to a peculiar stone a few yards away. It wasn't really upsetting, just different. He walked over to the stone which seemed precariously positioned against another larger rock. This rock had another energy, another aura. It stood apart starkly from

the naturally occurring formations of geologic time and space. Alberto realized that the stone possessed artificiality—it had been placed there by man at some point.

Next to this out of place rock was a flat stone with a few other flat stones stacked onto it. A subtly created cairn. He was definitely on the right trail. Artificial features in the landscape. He pushed the small rock out of the way. There was an arrow underneath made of smaller stones arranged to point toward the larger rock. Alberto gave it a push. It moved slightly. He looked down the valley. Time to give it a push.

Underneath were several rotted boards and beyond that a narrow tunnel. Alberto crawled through.

At the end of the tunnel he emerged in a small cavern hardly tall enough to stand up in. Great chests of gold were stacked against one wall, but this held no interest for Alberto anymore. He gravitated to a small lockbox buried under the by now very familiar sign of the Mask of Quetzalcoatl, which was traced into the soft clay of the cavern floor.

Inside the lockbox was the weapon which the kokopelli had been crowing to him about.

The Gun of Santa Fe!

The trucks emerged into an immensely large shallowly bored out rotunda-like cavern, a huge open space literally the size of a hundred football fields.

They had been extremely busy down here for a long time, realized Mateo.

The trucks passed a lifted command center on enormous treads. It was retractable and reticulated and functioned as a mobile command center.

They saw Vick inside the glass, and Katy saw someone else she thought she recognized.

Couldn't be, she said to herself.

They drove over to a side of the vast cavern and parked. Bedraggled slaves started unloading the boxes of explosives and drilling equipment from the cargo beds.

The slaves betrayed quite a shock when they saw two people trying to skirt around the shadows at the edge of the cave, but they were too weary and indifferent to raise any alarm.

The cavern was mostly empty except for the command module and the slaves unloading the trucks. They snuck up closer to the command module to get a better look.

"It's him," whispered Katy harshly. "Look inside."

Mateo gasped in alarm. "Trent? He's on their side now."

"They probably are forcing him," said Katy. "He's extremely brilliant."

"All right. What do we do now?"

"Let me see if I can get his attention."

"What about Vick? He's in there too."

At the other side of the vast cavern, near where the command module was placed was an enormous circular drill-bored tunnel. This was the point of it all. The tunnel Vick was constructing under the earth. But for what purpose?

They had to find out.

"Vick's coming out. Get down!"

Vick was leaving the command module. He hovered to the side of the pod then zoomed Hermes-like into the maw of the gaping drill-bore.

"He's going in. Let's run up to the module."

There were a few deputies inside with Trent, who was looking intently at a screen in front of him. This screen was for the camera on front of the massive boring machine deep down the tunnel. 12 miles down.

"We can't get his attention without revealing ourselves," said Mateo.

"Only one of us needs to go," she said looking at him helpfully hopefully.

But then Mateo had another idea. The world was very clear to him all of a sudden, even more than it had been of late.

"Look," Mateo said pointing at the Portapotty near the command module.

"He's got to go to the bathroom sometime. We'll just wait near it."

"Oh goody," said Katy.

Mateo held the dreamcatcher in his hand. It glowed gold effulgently while Mateo used it to hone his concentration.

He was trying to send images to Trent's mind. Of rushing rivers, Niagara Falls, every inducement to urinate he could muster. Trent seemed immune to telepathy, however, like he had earlier in the Positsoc lab. Not these guards, however. Even Katy was squirming and whimpering. It seemed all the deputies had each used the facility twice before they finally saw Trent's familiar form ambling towards the john.

Katy yipped at him. He jumped a good foot in the air but recovered quickly. He was simply stunned to see Katy and Mateo.

He joined them in the shadows behind the toilet. He looked at Mateo first. "He's got your helmet. I recognized it. He's very powerful now. What are you two doing here?"

"We have to stop him. Can you help us? Is there anyway to sabotage this operation? Blow it up or blow him up somehow."

"He can read thoughts now. He's very powerful and virtually assassin-proof at this point. Besides, you may not need to do anything. We're pretty well stumped. We can't get into the Vault. We can't drill in. The vault is surrounded by a substance harder than any diamond and it's a seamless shell. We haven't yet reached the front door but we're already running into some wild phenomena. It's spooky and from what we've seen in the sonography, it looks like some sort of door. And it would appear to be locked."

"Is there anywhere around here we can hide?"

Trent thought for a moment.

"I won't be able to hide you guys from him. I'm telling you this telepathy is so advanced, and we're so close to the source of his power, that he's gonna know you're here soon anyways, if he doesn't already."

"Where are you sleeping? We'll hide there and we can talk later. Help us think up a plan."

"We work around the clock down here. I catch a few hours here and there but I don't even have a bunk."

Vick came screaming out of the bore-hole now. Trent jumped to attention and sprinted into the potty letting the green plastic door slam behind him.

He walked back to the module minutes later without one scant look in their direction.

"We're screwed," said Mateo.

They watched Trent's body language through the window of the lifter command module. He looked nervous. Vick was sniffing around him, reading thoughts, smelling pheremones. He was truly terrifying now in his power.

It was only a matter of time. There was a small village of sleeping rolls and tents in one corner of the massive vault. Mateo and Katy made their way there stealthily.

There was no one else there—it seemed like more of a place to crash than anything else. But there were water thermoses and some protein bars, and they drank their fill and tamed their stomachs.

Then the two of them curled up in the filthy sleeping rolls in a shadowy disused corner and tried to pretend to be some of the workers. They were joined by Trent after a couple of hours.

"He was too preoccupied with this vault at the end of the tunnel. Vault of the Aztecs, he calls it. He wasn't reading me. But he's absolutely stumped on how to get in. He's worried he won't be able to understand the technology, once we reach the door. Should be any minute now. He's antsy. He's been running the bore for four days straight now. The fuzz is yelping at the door. We've burned through three diamond-bits in 24 hours. An hour to fix and \$500,000 a pop. Anyway, Vick is worried there's going to be glyphs on it which he can't read. Mateo..." he said.

"He may not want to kill you. He may actually need you."

Mateo's dreamcatcher glowed bright molten gold now.

"Oh shit," said Trent. "Here he comes."

End Ninth Installment...