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The Egyptian Coptic church was decorated with gold candelabras and iconic Christian artworks. Melodic prayers drifted from the nearby Monastery of St Anthony. Smouldering sandalwood candles scented the humid North African air.

Samuel Petrida contained his excitement. The exquisitely crafted golden hawk appeared genuine; one of the twelve gold figurines that once edged the steps leading up to King Solomon's Throne. The hawk's black obsidian eye glinted as if the gleaming golden predator might suddenly fly away.

'Can I inspect it?' Petrida asked the priest.

Father Daniel hesitated, then offered Petrida disposable gloves. 'Yes, but please be careful.'

He then unlocked the glass box over the golden hawk and placed the security cover aside.

The church annex had no air conditioning but even in the stifling Saharan desert heat, frail Father Daniel wore ceremonial robes. He finished reading Petrida's introductory letter and was amazed at the hooded stranger's generous donation, a wad of US dollars.

Well-built Petrida downed his karkade, a fragrant Egyptian hibiscus wine, before sliding the gloves over his

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gnarled hands. He lifted the golden hawk with ease and hand rotated the bronze drive spindle protruding from its base.

The elaborate golden wings extended, confirming the hawk was once part of an ancient intricate mechanism. 'This is not heavy enough to be solid gold; more likely gold-plated hollow bronze?'

Father Daniel nodded. 'Correct.'

An excited chill ran up Petrida's spine. 'I'm holding 3,000 years of history in my hands.'

'You are familiar with the icon and aware that it's thought to be a part of the earliest mechanical device in history?' Father Daniel asked.

Petrida wiped sweat from his brow. 'Yes, it's part of a revolving avenue of golden animals that swung to face King Solomon as he was carried up a moving stairway to the Throne of Sheba.'

Father Daniel frowned. 'You mean the Throne of Solomon?'

'No, the throne was built in Saba by artisans of the Queen of Sheba, then gifted to King Solomon,' Petrida sneered. 'Saba is where the Throne of Sheba rightly belongs.'

Father Daniel was suspicious of the statement and probed further. 'We at St Anthony have been the golden hawk's caretaker for over 500 years, awaiting a sign of the prophecy. Do you have the sacred icon with you for the exchange?'

'Yes, I have many valued items with me,' Petrida replied vaguely and patted his briefcase.

Father Daniel flinched when he saw Petrida's tattoo of a stylised black cross encircled by a red halo and considered the implications. 'I must insist on seeing the icon before I release the sacred hawk figurine into your care.'

Petrida unlocked his briefcase and lifted out a velvet folder. He opened it to reveal a clear strip of sealed gold coins.

Father Daniel recognised them and nodded. 'Very rare; Persian gold darics issued by King Darius.' He paused. 'But the arrangement was to exchange for another specific relic.'

He quickly grabbed the golden hawk and returned it to its security stand.

'These coins are certified 95% pure gold with a heritage value ten times their gold weight.'

'Very likely, but this is not the traditional trigger and agreed icon as per the prophecy of Nathan.'

Petrida suppressed his anger and proceeded with caution. 'What icon was agreed on in exchange for the golden hawk?'

Father Daniel's hands began to tremble. 'A genuine initiate of the Brotherhood would already know this.'

'That's unimportant; I'm here now to purchase the golden hawk,' Petrida insisted. 'And where will I find the golden throne, golden shields, and other related icons?'

'The resting place of King Solomon's Throne is still a mystery,' Father Daniel replied as he turned nervously to refit the glass security box.

Petrida suddenly grabbed him from behind in a neck hold. The clarion toll of church bells declared it was six in the evening and obscured the priest's attempts to scream.

Father Daniel struggled and gasped, 'What do you want from me?'

'First, I want this golden hawk as a lead to the throne. Next, you can detail what these secret icons are that I need to exchange for the golden animals.'

Realising the seriousness of his predicament, the priest relented. 'The specific icon for exchange is the rare and

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sacred Byzantine Crucifix.’

‘Describe this crucifix,’ Petrida demanded.

Father Daniel struggled to speak. ‘A gold crucifix with Christ in alabaster backed by a half-metre tall black onyx cross.’

‘And where do I get it?’

‘There are fewer than fifty known to exist in the world, and most are held by the Freemasons,’ Father Daniel gasped.

This revelation enraged Petrida, and he stealthily slipped out a ceramic pithing probe; it looked as innocent as a knitting needle. He suddenly grabbed the priest’s head; the neck angle had to be exact. He thrust firmly at the precise location and pierced the foramen magnum cavity at the base of the priest’s skull.

The intrusive probe penetrated the priest’s spinal cord and then destroyed his medulla. As a paid assassin, Petrida knew this nerve-rich brain stem controlled every breath and heartbeat. It was instant brain death for Father Daniel.

Petrida allowed the twitching body to collapse to the marble floor. He took back the donation envelope full of cash, slipped the golden hawk into his padded backpack, then crept out into the hot Egyptian night. As he approached the car park and the nearby kitchen, the stench of camel dung was replaced by the aroma of barbecued mutton and Arabic spices. Stepping into his dusty Land Rover, Petrida was determined to obtain every part of his treasured Throne of Sheba.



Operations manager Dave Stark rested his hands in the pockets of his tan chinos. A light breeze ruffled his untidy

brown hair and made his blue silk shirt cling to his tall, slender frame.

‘Fang, the Throne of Solomon; you think it really survived after all this time?’

‘Who cares?’ Fang grunted back.

He was AvMar’s salvage manager, an almost muscle-bound man with a stubble beard. Fang wore dark jeans, and his unkempt sun-bleached hair skimmed the collar of his green Rhino shirt.

‘Dave, it’s a first-class return airfares junket to Portugal, all paid for by Valdez.’

Strolling alongside Lisbon’s sparkling Tagus River, the team from Aviation and Marine Salvage were on their way to meet with Alfonso Valdez, the man behind their latest assignment. Valdez had contracted them to find King Solomon’s Throne, golden animal figurines, and the biblical shields of beaten gold.

Tiana was Fang’s moneywise partner and responsible for AvMar’s finances. The mixed-race Thai beauty wore black skintight jeans nipped by a gold chain belt, while a sleeveless black top complemented her waist-length raven hair. On approaching the designated meeting place, Tiana gazed up at the spectacular Portuguese Discoveries monument ahead.

‘Much taller than I expected; that tower must be nearly 20 stories high,’ she stated, studying the white limestone prow and billowing sails sculpted into the face of the tall rectangular edifice.

They heard rotor throb and turbine howl as a Eurocopter passed low overhead. The downwash stank of exhausted jet fuel, causing a stinging rush of dust and detached leaves.

‘That must be Valdez,’ Dave’s partner, Jan, assessed. She was tall and slim; her shoulder-length brown hair streaked

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with blonde highlights. Jan wore a snug pink top with powder blue jeans, and a band of her slim, tanned waist was exposed above a silver belt with matching silver sandals.

The blue helicopter hovered then landed in a roped-off section of the riverside car park, and Valdez stepped out. He had a smaller build than the two salvage men, glossy black hair, and brown eyes. Dressed in a grey business suit, white shirt, and with no tie, he wore a hint of Bulgari cologne.

He was accompanied by an exotic beauty with heavy makeup, bouffant dark hair, and a black cocktail dress. Her elaborate diamond necklace flashed with extravagance in the sun-drenched plaza. Alfonso quickly kissed her farewell, and she strutted away provocatively as if modelling down a catwalk.

Dave shook hands with Valdez. ‘Good to do business with the Valdez family again, Alfonso.’

Alfonso, the son and heir of elusive billionaire Claude Valdez, smiled. ‘Yes, I’m glad you found the terms acceptable. I assumed a twenty percent increase on the last contract would be tempting.’

Jan smiled back. ‘The terms were very enticing.’

She was quietly confident and revelled in her rare sensual beauty.

Alfonso Valdez noticed Jan’s classic continental looks, her hourglass figure, and savoured a waft of her Giorgio perfume. He led them to a picturesque café within sight of the Tagus River and the Discoveries monument. The nearby paving featured a huge mosaic compass and a giant marble map of the world, charting the voyages of the early Portuguese explorers.

Tiana lagged behind, still taking photos of the magnificent monument. Valdez discreetly admired her striking mixed-race glamour and slim figure as her impractical gold stilettos clicked across the decorated

paving. Though in his early 30s, Valdez considered himself a connoisseur of women. Being a young and handsome billionaire, he had sampled the erotic flavours of many exotic and eager temptresses.

Tiana sat down between Fang and Valdez. 'Hello again, Alfonso. We never heard back from your father; how is he?'

'My father is still incommunicado,' Valdez declared curtly as the aroma of freshly brewed coffee announced the arrival of their order.

Fang noticed the billionaire glancing at the women. 'Alfonso, that cross we retrieved is now on display in the Goa Cathedral. It must have been genuine, yes?'

'I suspect it is the real cross as the clerics gladly put it back up on display.' Valdez hesitated, then changed the subject. 'I deliberately chose to meet here as it is inspirational; the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* is a dedication to the great Portuguese captains from the age of discovery.'

Dave sipped his coffee and admired the amazing rose-tinted limestone monument nearby. Both sides of the caravel-shaped prow carried 16 limestone sculptures of legendary Portuguese captains. Each of the huge statues was triple life-size.

'Check that out, Fang. All the famous Portuguese explorers are up there.'

Valdez began reciting them. 'Henry the Navigator, Vasco da Gama, Bartolomeu Dias, Albuquerque, Magellan ...'

'I don't need no fuckin' history lesson, mate; I just want rewards,' Fang retorted. 'I hope you got deep pockets; we don't take Amex or Diners.'

Valdez strategically ignored the profanity and suppressed his anger. 'My pockets are always brimming,' he bragged, unfazed.

Valdez needed this efficient battle-hardened team. He recalled his father's simple assessment: one is as slick as

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oil, the other as sour as vinegar. As oil and vinegar form a great dressing, so, too, did Dave Stark, and Chris 'Fang' Mitchell form an amazing symbiotic team.

'Finance won't be an issue,' Valdez declared, 'as long as we stick to the golden rule.'

Fang frowned. 'What golden rule?'

'The one with all the gold makes all the rules.' Valdez smirked, the champagne diamonds sparkled on his solid gold Presidential Rolex.

Dave concentrated back on their mission. 'So this legendary throne is our primary goal, Alfonso?'

'Yes, hopefully, you will prove it is more than just a legend. Some Middle Eastern and Ethiopian sources insist that this amazing throne was a gift from the Queen of Sheba. This theory is not confirmed and is even denied by some biblical adherents.'

Alfonso paused, his tone turning serious. 'This will literally be a quest of biblical proportions; there may be blood, sweat, and tears.'

'Just so long as it doesn't mean our blood and your sweat and tears,' Dave retorted.

Valdez smiled and continued, 'Michael will again lead your security backup team on this quest.'

He signalled, and the huge Samoan Islander security guard materialised from the crowd of tourists.

Michael smiled a distant greeting then delegated a security guard to occupy each nearby table, ensuring no one was in earshot. He then discreetly blended back into the tourists. As head of Valdez security, this is what Michael did best: ever present but usually unseen.

Fang needed more input. 'What about the other treasures, like the golden shields mentioned in the Bible and these missing chests of gold?'

'There may also be golden shields, boxes of gold ingots;

possibly some of the 666 talents of gold reportedly paid to King Solomon each year, and even chests of ivory blocks. I'm still awaiting search permits for some remote regions.'

'Don't bother with permits,' Dave said, raising his voice over a noisy group of tourists. 'Your father should have explained that we have unconventional procedures. I don't tolerate bureaucracy; it's death by a thousand paper cuts. I'm a Bob Ballard disciple; it is better to beg forgiveness after you've found treasure than be refused permission to begin the search. Now, where do we start?'

'Research reveals that back in the 1500s, a Portuguese Knight Templar named Rodrigo Cabral sailed a caravel across the Mediterranean to the coast near Jerusalem seeking Solomon's Throne,' Valdez began. 'Our first trail begins at Jerusalem then leads east into ancient Persia.'

Dave challenged the information. 'I thought the Knights Templar ceased to exist after the 1300s?'

'True, but a rogue group went underground and continued operating from Malta. After much research, Cabral trekked from Jerusalem to a sacred lake once visited by Solomon and Sheba, near a Persian citadel named *Takht-e Soleymān*,' Valdez explained.

Tiana frowned. 'What does that mean?'

'The Throne of Solomon,' Valdez replied.

Dave took a guess. 'And with this link to the name "Solomon", there may be something very valuable lying in that sacred lake?'

'Possibly, as in ancient times, valuables were sacrificed to the lake,' Valdez agreed.

'Fang's diving skills and LiDAR radar knowledge may be needed at this lake, so I'll take Fang and Tiana with me to Jerusalem,' he stated.

Fang cut in, 'Since it's a lake, we could use a floatplane to fly there.'

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‘No, the lake is too small,’ Valdez corrected. ‘I will accompany you and Tiana on this search, and we will first sail in my yacht, *Conquistador*, to Israel. Our group will then fly from Jerusalem to the Persian citadel in my Eurocopter.’

Dave made notes on his phone. ‘What about me and Jan?’

‘The other possible trail leads south into Egypt,’ Valdez revealed. ‘I want you and Jan to fly direct to Cairo and begin research there. I’ll provide you with a list of likely churches, monasteries, museums, and even mosques.’

‘How do Dave and I get to Cairo?’ Jan raised her voice above squabbling seagulls.

‘My private Citation bizjet. It will only take a few hours.’

A group of troubadours strumming flamenco guitars paused at their table, one on his knee as they began chorusing. A Valdez security guard moved to intervene, but a quick whisper and a large note from Valdez prompted the noisy trio to move to another table.

Fang probed for more background, ‘So does your research match up with the biblical history of King Solomon’s Throne?’

‘It’s not as simple as Bible references,’ Valdez replied. ‘there’s still a lot of assumption.’

Fang smirked. ‘Assumption is the mother of all fuck-ups.’

‘So, what’s the most likely story?’ Dave probed.

‘The history of Solomon’s Throne is very vague,’ Valdez admitted. ‘It varies widely within the ancient texts of 30 different versions of the Bible: the Hebrew *Torah*, Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast*, Aramaic *Targum Sheni* scriptures, and even the Quran. Remember, King Solomon was also revered as the Prophet *Soleymān* in the Muslim faith. My

researchers are also following up on a supposed prophecy of Nathan, as in 2 Samuel in the Bible, that states the power of King Solomon's Throne will be restored.'

Tiana admired the river view and sipped on her jasmine tea. 'Are there any revelations in your research about King Solomon's legendary gold mines?'

'Even though we will be close to these fabled mines, they've been eliminated from our investigation list.'

Fang looked confused. 'So Solomon's Temple and throne were in Jerusalem?'

'Yes, his temple was quite elaborate with courtyards, side rooms, and antechambers, including the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon, Hall of Justice, and the Hall of Columns. At its heart was the Holy of Holies, a six-metre square room with gold walls dedicated as the sacred storage for the Ark of the Covenant.'

Jan was intrigued. 'What did the missing Throne of Solomon look like?'

'Again, there was a wide variety of descriptions, but the frame of the throne was reportedly made of gold and ivory over acacia and studded with gems and pearls. A set of six ivory paved steps led up to the throne; one for each term of the Earth.'

'Steps paved with ivory?' Fang sipped his beer and frowned.

'Yes, the ivory tiles are estimated to be a digit, or finger thick,' Valdez confirmed. 'This ancient mechanical masterpiece featured a moving staircase and a pivoting avenue of twelve golden animal figurines. Some versions of the Bible state there were twelve golden lions only, while others mention a variety of birds and animals, including a panther, camel, ox, hawk, wolf, and an eagle.'

Valdez displayed an image of a golden leopard. 'The latter theory makes more sense as various golden animal

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and bird figurines featuring drive shafts have been found from King Solomon's era.'

Jan joined in. 'The twelve animal statues make sense; before mathematics and even the Chinese abacus, ancient traders used the tip of their thumb to tally numbers using the twelve creases of their fingers.'

'Since ancient times, twelve has been considered the perfect number,' Valdez revealed. 'There were twelve tribes of Israel, twelve Apostles, twelve jurors, twelve months, and even twelve hours on a clock.'

He then stood and clapped his hands symbolically. 'Now, I need you all to see a real caravel: we have a replica of the famous Diaz caravel nearby at Lagos.'

'Why do we need to do that?' Fang queried.

'You may have to dive on sunken ships, so I want you familiar with the compartment and cabin layouts inside a Portuguese caravel.'

Dave approved. 'Providence is partial to the pre-prepared.'

'Is it close?' Tiana asked.

'It's a three-hour drive, so we'll go in my Eurocopter instead. Dave and Fang, I believe you have both flown a Eurocopter EC130 before?'

'There ain't fuckin' nothin' I can't fly, fix, or fire,' Fang snarled.

Valdez flinched but remembered his father's cautionary assessment.

Dave frequently had to censure abrasive and volatile Fang, who could be trouble in the city. As Salvage Manager, Fang only seemed at ease when challenged at remote crash sites or sunken wrecks far away from bureaucracy.

'What model EC130 is it?' Dave cut in to head off a confrontation.

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‘The latest, a T2,’ Valdez replied. ‘With one pilot, it can carry seven passengers.’

‘Good,’ Fang said, nodding in approval. ‘Better performance than those shit boxes we flew.’

‘Yes, I have had it specially modified,’ Valdez said. ‘It’s capable of speeds approaching 300 kilometres per hour, and the range was increased to almost five hours flying time.’

Michael joined them as they all clambered aboard the Valdez Eurocopter waiting on the riverbank near the marina. They then lifted off over Lisbon and flew south.

There was a palpable air of confidence among the AvMar team. With no foreseeable issues on this contracted search, Dave relaxed and enjoyed the view.

2

‘That’s Cabo da Roca; the most western point of Europe, where the land ends and the ocean begins.’ Valdez pointed at a ragged Cape surrounded by raging surf to the north of the city. ‘That was the last land any explorers saw when leaving on expeditions into the unknown.’

Their Eurocopter turned south, crossed back over the coast, then flew inland over whitewashed villages, classic Moorish ruins, and medieval castles. Neatly planted acres of verdant vineyards below featured luxurious mansions; others had quaint white *haciendas* with stucco arched balconies dripping purple bougainvillea.

Within an hour, they were over Lagos, nestled between palm-fringed avenues and white Mediterranean beaches. The replica of the Diaz Portuguese caravel *Boa Esperança* could be seen anchored in the Bensafrim River.

In a nearby Lagos marina, the Valdez mega yacht *Conquistador* was docked at the end of a jetty, dwarfing the other luxurious super yachts around it. The Eurocopter hovered briefly then landed on the rear deck helipad.

As they stepped out, the *mistral* wind carried the aroma of Portuguese spices from the ship’s galley. Stowed on the rear deck were a floatplane, Zodiacs, Jet Skis, quad bikes, and even a mini-sub.

Fang noticed another military helicopter. 'Shit! Are those real Gatling miniguns mounted on that Hughes gunship?'

'Yes, but that assault helicopter is a fifty-year-old warbird; just a collector's item, not a toy for you to tinker with,' Valdez said, smiling evasively. 'However, all other equipment aboard the *Conquistador* will be at your disposal during this mission.'

They walked down the gangplank, the air heavy with the smell of barnacled pier stumps and fish scraps. Some other luxury super yachts moored stern to the pier also carried helicopters.

'Welcome to Lagos,' Valdez said. He noticed Michael had already allocated security.

Fang huffed. 'A great place for newlyweds and nearly dead.'

The marina had a Monaco-like setting, and despite Fang's sarcasm, yacht parties were raving on rear decks as Valdez led them towards the Diaz replica caravel. The geometric-patterned pavement led them past fishermen, tented market stalls, and an avenue of huge date palms.

The old twenty-metre-long caravel was an impressive sight; the lateen sails emblazoned with the Red Cross of Christ were loosely set, allowing them to flap in the light *mistral* breeze. Dave and Fang boarded and began to familiarise themselves with hatch positions and access. Many cabins were tiny with claustrophobic, low ceilings, so neither could stand upright.

Fang was stooped over. 'The ceiling's so damn low even the rats must have been hunchbacks.'

Jan was impressed; the caravel displayed ancient but reliable technology featuring strong, solid oak bulkheads. 'My God, it's not much bigger than a bus! They sailed these to India?'

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‘And beyond. Some circumnavigated the world,’ Valdez revealed. ‘The caravel was the space shuttle of its era. Very fast, stable, and strong enough to weather ocean swells and storms. The small draft also allowed it to navigate coastal shallows and reefs.’

Dave and Jan moved aft and took photos of the bulkheads and access hatches to the stern and quarterdeck. The bilges had a foul, mouldy smell of moist timber, molasses, and sealing tar.

‘What the fuck is that stench?’ Fang grumbled. ‘Smells like a Portaloo at a rock concert.’

Valdez winced. ‘Have you considered writing verse for Hallmark greeting cards?’

Fang ignored the sarcasm. ‘How many crew?’ he grunted, noting the tight compartment sizes and diving issues.

‘About twenty,’ Valdez replied. ‘All space was important for valuable cargo.’

Tiana was amazed. ‘Unbelievable that twenty men in such a small, fragile wooden ship could circumnavigate the world.’

‘Before steel ships, there were only wooden ships crewed by steel men,’ Valdez quipped and changed the subject. ‘Your buddy Dave hasn’t said much. He’s a multi-faceted man but a bit of an enigma?’

‘He’s a mega methodist,’ Fang grunted.

Valdez nodded knowingly. ‘He follows the Wesleyan Theology of Christianity, then. It’s next to impossible to swerve a dedicated Methodist from his inspired path.’

‘Fuck no.’ Fang chuckled. ‘Dave’s the man with the plan; just super methodical, but your quote also fits as he’s the most determined man I’ve ever met.’

‘An absolutely meticulous planner,’ Tiana added, ‘he and Jan investigate every eventuality, ensuring we have

multiple backup plans.’

Valdez looked impressed. ‘Good. So he’s always one step ahead.’

‘Sometimes three or four steps ahead,’ Tiana corrected.

‘Dave’s a checklist freak,’ Fang snickered and shook his head. ‘He really gives me the shits sometimes.’

They were interrupted by Dave and Jan rejoining them and announcing they had all the information they needed.

As the group walked back down the caravel’s gangplank to the pier, Tiana probed more about their quest. ‘You mentioned earlier that this elaborate Throne of King Solomon was possibly a gift from the Queen of Sheba?’

‘That’s a contentious Ethiopian Orthodox theory. They say that in 1000BC, King Solomon invited Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, to visit Jerusalem,’ Valdez revealed. ‘She had heard of his wisdom and decided to accept his invitation. As a befitting gift to King Solomon, she reputedly took along her unique golden throne. Makeda had it crafted by her best Egyptian artisans and engineers in Saba, a modern mechanical wonder of its day. It was later said that the glorious throne reflected perfectly in the glass floor of Solomon’s Palace.’

Dave looked surprised. ‘They had glass back then?’

‘Yes, the rooms in Solomon’s Palace were variously floored in cedar, ivory, and glass, which had not long since been discovered by the Romans and Greeks. Makeda, having never seen glass before, was surprised as she entered the temple. Thinking it was water, she took off her sandals.’

Tiana nodded as they strolled back to the marina. ‘Ivory paved the floors in some rooms?’

‘Yes, besides golden shields and other treasures, you will also be seeking possible chests of ivory pavers.’

Tiana needed more information. ‘How can we tell if it’s real ivory?’

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‘Easy if you carry a needle and lighter,’ Dave answered. ‘A heated needle will not pierce real ivory; if it does, then it’s likely fake plastic material.’

Valdez checked his gold watch. ‘Before we separate on our different missions, there’s time to see something aboard the *Conquistador*.’

Though structurally still an icebreaker, the Valdez *Conquistador* upper deck and cabins had been revamped, befitting an opulent mega yacht. The state-of-the-art research areas and functional support equipment were divided from the teak decks, lush carpets, and ambience of the living areas.

Fang and Tiana wandered over to the assault helicopter they spotted earlier, while Dave and Jan followed Valdez towards the ship’s pool and spa. The area was well attended by mainly young bikini-clad women.

Valdez grinned. ‘Staff break.’

One lithe bikini-clad blonde, champagne glass in hand, sauntered over and kissed Valdez longingly. ‘Hello, my darling, you’ve been away too long,’ she pouted.

Valdez smiled and said, ‘Dave, Jan, this is Elsa, she was runner-up in Britain’s Next Top Model.’

Dave hesitated. ‘Congratulations, Elsa. A television star?’

Elsa forced a smile on her flawless face. ‘And all over social media, darling, have you been living under a rock?’

‘Yes,’ Jan said, breaking the brittle silence. ‘Our contracts lead us to all kinds of rocks, the Rock of Gibraltar, the Rocky Mountains, Ayers Rock, Table Mountain, Kilimanjaro, etc.’

‘The Alps, Andes, and Himalayas; I’ve seen it all before, darling; so tedious,’ Elsa retorted.

‘Anyway, nice to meet you, Elsa, and I’m sure you’ll have a great modelling career on the radio.’ Jan smirked,

but the sarcasm eluded Elsa.

Valdez kissed Elsa on her cheek. 'I will be with you shortly.'

As Elsa strutted her perfect figure back to her deck chair with that typical model overstep, Dave smirked. 'Wow, only runner-up?'

Valdez quickly led the team through the familiar passageways and staterooms. He requested a bottle of port and glasses from his nearby valet.

Tiana looked impressed with the luxury fit-outs in every lounge and cabin they passed. 'Which is our room?'

'This cabin here.' Valdez paused, then pushed the door ajar to reveal sumptuous furnishings. 'And Fang, I'll arrange an off-leash area for you.'

Fang ignored the jibe but looked impressed. 'Wow, some major upgrades here; I love what you've done with the place.'

Valdez led them to a lower deck bulkhead, unlocked a large dark room that would once have been a storage hold, then turned on the lights.

The AvMar team was stunned as the flood lighting revealed the otherworldly beauty of King Solomon's Throne.