

Masters Of
The Broken Watches

RAZI IMAM

Masters Of The Broken Watches
by Razi Imam

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations and events are either a product of the author's imagination, fictitious or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to any event, locale or person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Razi Imam

No portions of this book, except for book reviews, may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

Cover Designer: Maegan Beaumont - MW Designs

Cover photograph provided by: Depositphoto

Interior Design and Formatting: Deborah J Ledford - IOF Productions Ltd

Issued in Print and Electronic Formats

Trade Paperback ISBN: 979-8616971159

Manufactured in the United States of America

All rights reserved

Masters Of
The Broken Watches

RAZI IMAM

Praise For *MASTERS OF THE BROKEN WATCHES*

“*Masters of the Broken Watches* is an incredibly self-aware 21st century global science fiction thriller. Its profoundly universal themes of family, love, determination and discovery are woven within an accessible yet fast-paced plot with incredibly relatable and captivating characters.” - Farhad Asghar

“This book is jam-packed with action, adventure and magic! It takes you on a fantastical journey filled with descriptive imagery from start to finish. One of my favorite lines from the book is: “Gleaming beauty of the illogical moment.”—which to me, perfectly surmises much of what the very real characters experience. A page turner for sure!” - Hina Khan

“*Masters of the Broken Watches* envelopes the reader in a world of adventure, science, mystery, and heart! It perfectly intertwines proven science with imagination that leaves you wishing the world in *MOTBW* could be a reality. An absolute page turner that is so vividly written that it feels like you are pausing a movie when putting the book down.” - Zoha Imam

“*MOTBW* is one of those books that is hard to put down and once you have finished it, it makes you desperate for the sequels. It has a theme that touches upon the deepest mysteries of the universe that have mystified humankind since the beginning.” - Sobia Ahmad

“Fast paced, gripping and entirely plausible. The length and depth of scientific research is commendable. Looking forward to the next episode, the twists and turns and the direction the story takes.” - Arif Hasan

Praise For
MASTERS OF THE BROKEN WATCHES

“I found the story quite compelling and the book was difficult to put down. The science fiction was extremely imaginative and the characters believable.” - Arnold Shoulder

“*Masters Of The Broken Watches* is one of those books that completely drags you in, and makes you fall in love with its characters. This is a novel with a thrilling concept at its core. I love the way the author mixed adventure, action and commonplace everyday life occurrences. Like the wonderful mouth watering recipes from around the world, which tempt you into the kitchen to try them out for yourself! In newspeak ‘Double Plus good’ can’t wait for the sequel!” - Atiya Hasan

“A fascinating read that will make you question how we think and perceive time. Written in a pacy and punchy style, the broad arch of the story will leave you thinking about the possibilities for the future. The core concept is a unique take that combines an action thriller with science and philosophy.”
- Kashif Hasan

“I was absorbed from the first page and couldn’t put it down! Such colorful & vivid writing of a great action story interwoven with scientific facts and theory. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the characters and look forward to their further adventures!” - Lynne Zapadka

Praise For
MASTERS OF THE BROKEN WATCHES

“As an avid reader, finding a book that is wondrously unique is like finding a rare gem. *Masters of the Broken Watches* is such a book! This science fiction thriller is an action-packed page-turner featuring exceptional and well-developed characters (some you’ll love; some you’ll love to hate!) and a plot that’s unlike any I’ve come across before. It’s comprised of all the things that make up a masterful story. The level of research the author had to perform in order to write this book is impressive to say the least. You will not want to put *MOTBW* down, and you’ll be left aching for a sequel. I highly, excitedly recommend!” - Ruth Netanel

“A rousing adventure. I finished *MOTBW* last night and thought it was excellent! I found it to be filled with so many clever, creative ideas and interesting characters who were constantly thrust into difficult situations I didn’t know how they were going to escape. For all the grandness of the story, it was the details included (the food, the technology, the settings) that really grabbed me and pulled me in. It’s a truly impressive work.” - Shad Connely

“The author has masterfully created a fantastic adventure while weaving in details predicated on scientific principles. The reader is empowered to vicariously experience this stimulating journey through the eyes of the protagonists. This novel is a captivating page-turner that is hard to put down.” - Andy Mecs

DEDICATION

Wave:

A wave brings energy, motion and power.

It shapes the shores, carves rocks and creates structures.

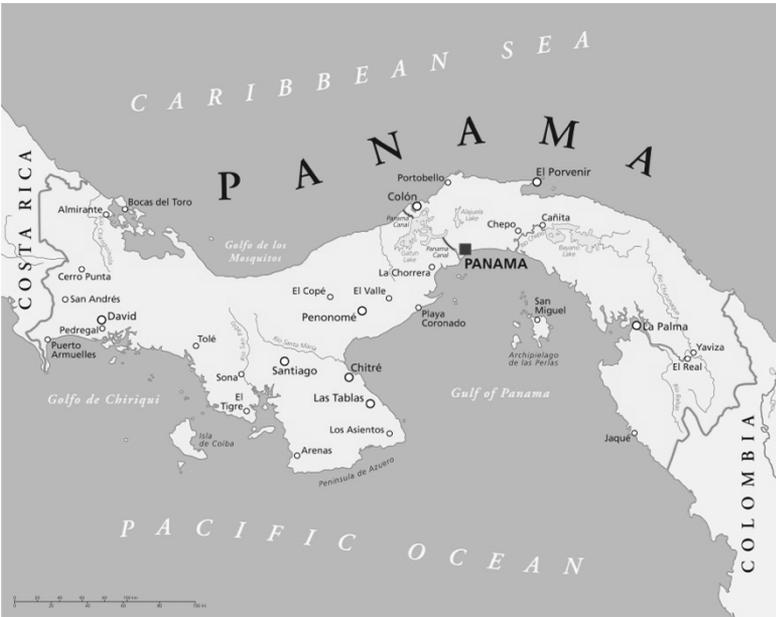
It brings balance, and rejuvenation.

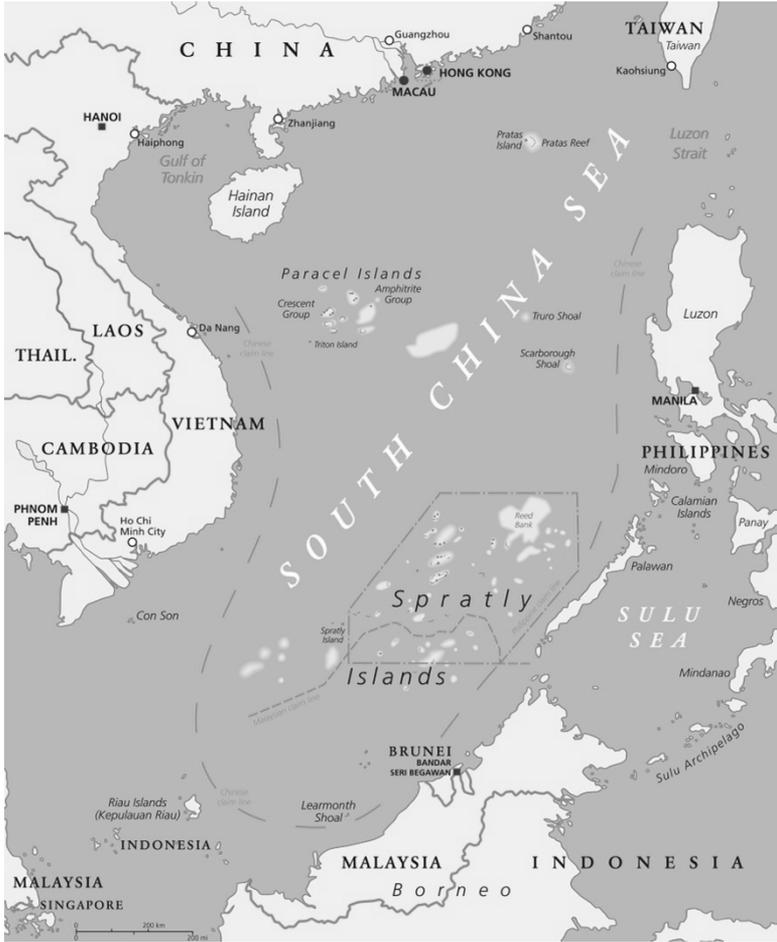
It brings life.

This book is dedicated to my wife, Saman, the wave of my life.

*“Your reality is not what you see, feel or live.
It is what you think, wonder and dream.”*

~ Razi Imam





PROLOGUE

The Red Mist

Yucatán Peninsula - 300 A.D.

“THEY ARE TAKING my child away!” Itzel cried, looking out of her hut at two approaching military guards. The red mist behind them blurred through her tears.

“Itzel, Quiche law is clear,” her husband Sachihiro answered softly. “When the war chief summons for a family’s baby, he must be handed over.” Tears flowed down his cheeks as he held their ten-month-old boy in his lap. The baby reached his hands up to his father’s face, cooing.

“They are taking him into the red mist!” Itzel shouted. “I will miss his entire childhood.” She gazed at her child, stroking his forehead.

One of the guards barged in and took the child from Sachihiro’s arms. Itzel followed him out, crying and pleading, “Don’t take my child! Please, please, don’t take my child!” Other villagers stood outside their huts, watching the traumatic separation.

Itzel and Sachihiro hung close to the guard as he approached the mist. A second guard pointed his obsidian spear, warning them not to follow. They collapsed to the

RAZI IMAM

ground in despair as the guard and their baby disappeared into the wall of glowing red particles.

Three days later, a young man approached their hut. Itzel stepped outside and smiled as the man bowed. She traced her hands across his face. “Sachihiro,” she called, her voice trembling, “our son has returned.”

CHAPTER ONE

The Su Vang Fish

PHAM KAI STEPPED into his front yard. His house was tiny, a single room with a small area for a kitchen. The walls were made of coarse cement with a thin corrugated sheet of tin for a roof. The floor was a packed mixture of mud and red clay that gave off an earthy scent when water was sprinkled on it. It was a clean house. His front yard was a small piece of land no bigger than a dinner table. An old wooden bench sat under a blue tarp stretching out from the house, supported by two bamboo sticks. He sat down, admiring the changing shades of the dusky sea.

There were dozens of boats anchored in the water, including his modest twenty-five-foot schooner. It had a deep hull to store fish and a small cabin to protect him from rain and storm. A ninety-horsepower engine allowed him to head deep into the South China Sea, where there were strong fishing lanes. The top of the cabin had two spotlights that helped him navigate treacherous reefs at night. His boat was painted deep blue, with an orange and yellow accent stripe running its full length. On the beach were scattered several round, traditional blue bamboo basket boats. They were quite sturdy, used to transport fish from the boats to the shore.

Pham Kai was a third-generation fisherman. As a young man, he remembered the long debates he had with his father about not wanting to go into the family business. Pham Kai wanted to become an engineer. It was such a big world, he'd thought, with so many experiences to be had. But he had been anchored to fishing by birth. While sitting on his bench, he often wondered what it would have been like if he had followed his dream. Now, at fifty-three, it was too late for him.

Every evening, his wife Minh would join him on the bench, and they would look out to sea. She would chat about her day and he would smile and nod from time to time. Soon after, they would walk down a gravel pathway and reach their usual spot, a village sports bar—no more than a tiny shop with a cooler full of local beer. There were two foosball tables placed outside under the same kind of tarp they had at home, accompanied by a few tables and benches.

They would find a spot with a view of the sea and order two cold beers. Often, other fishermen and their wives would join them, and they would spend hours talking about their day, which to Pham Kai was the same old routine—leave at two in the morning to catch fish, be back home four hours later to clean them with the help of his wife, then take them to market to sell to local stores and restaurants, and return home by noon. He would earn 700,000 Vietnamese dong a day, equivalent to thirty American dollars. Life was hard yet honorable in this tiny Vietnamese fishing village of Nhon Ly.

Each time, after the third beer, the stories would shift to fantasy. Tales would be told of fishermen in other villages who had caught the famous su vang fish. Su vang was a rare delicacy, and it was believed they held unique medicinal properties. A fully-grown specimen could fetch as much as \$25,000. This was the dream of all fishermen—to one day find a su vang in their nets. Such a catch would change their lives, allowing them to move inland to a better home, educate their

kids, and maybe even travel.

Tonight was no different. Stories were flying and so was the beer. Pham Kai remained quiet and listened. The loudest and most boisterous fishermen had peculiar marks on their hands and necks, like two puncture holes. Out of courtesy, he didn't ask about them.

On their walk home, Minh did not say much. Often, she would be discussing local village politics or bigger economic issues related to fishing, like pollution. Pham Kai was always impressed with her knowledge—she would have made an amazing leader or businesswoman, had she been given a chance. She was the one reason his long years as a fisherman didn't seem so hard. She was his best friend and his life.

“Why so quiet?” he asked.

Minh hesitated, sighing. “Pham Kai, I found a lump on my left breast last week. I got it checked at the local health clinic. They took an X-ray, and the doctor said I need to get to a hospital in Qui Nhon City for further tests.”

Pham Kai stared at her. “Why didn't you tell me all this before?” he asked.

Minh smiled. “Look at you. I knew you would get too worried. I wanted to make sure before I said anything.”

Pham Kai shook his head in frustration. He remained silent for the rest of the walk, all the while holding her hand. As they reached their house, he turned to her. “Tomorrow, we'll go to the hospital in Qui Nhon. We'll meet the doctors and see what they have to say.”

The next day, they took the early morning bus, arriving in the city two hours later. Pham Kai had never visited such a large hospital in his life. They waited eight hours before the doctor could see them.

After looking at the X-ray, the doctor ordered an immediate biopsy. While Minh rested for the night in one of the wards, Pham Kai found a wooden pallet in one of the

corridors. He laid out a small towel to protect himself from splinters, and slept.

The next morning, they both waited for the doctor in an examining room with bare white walls. Every minute felt longer than usual.

She appeared, holding a file with Minh's test results. Placing herself on a rotating stool, she opened the file and leafed through it. "There is no easy way to say this," she said. "Minh, you have an aggressive form of cancer. You need immediate surgery, then chemotherapy." She paused to see if the simple couple understood the significance of what she was saying.

Minh started tearing up. Pham Kai held her close and asked, "What does this mean? Can she be cured? When do we start the treatment?"

The doctor nodded and said, "Here's the problem—if we wait to get you treated under the government program, it'll take a year and a half before your turn comes up. And that may be too late. I recommend you take the private treatment route."

She paused again. The doctor knew that this humble couple might not have the funds for private treatment. She bowed and left the two of them in the cold, lifeless room.

On the bus ride home, they were able to find seats next to one another. He held her hands and kept hugging her. Minh knew this was killing Pham Kai inside. He was such a strong man. He'd faced extreme danger so many times while out fishing—getting caught in storms and surviving sixty-foot waves. But this was different. This was her storm.

"Minh, we will sell our boat and our house to start your treatment."

She smiled. "I'm sure we'll be able to work something out, but I don't think we should sell our boat. It provides our income. And selling our house will mean we'll have to rent. Let's just get home. We can discuss this later." She squeezed

his hands and put her head on his shoulder.

Once they got home, they ate their dinner in silence, and afterward they walked to the same bar. This time, Pham Kai paid closer attention to the boisterous fishermen. A few of them regaled stories of a fisherman who had caught a su vang near the ominous Bombay Reef, a particularly nasty member of the Paracel archipelago. It was dangerous to fish in that area, as most of the islands didn't have well-documented reef maps. Even worse, there was the threat of being caught by the Chinese Navy. There were stories about them torturing Vietnamese fishermen for days and then releasing them.

On their walk home, Pham Kai held his hands behind his back and Minh knew he was deep in thought.

“What are you thinking, Pham Kai?” Minh asked.

Pham Kai stopped. He could see the lights of the fishing boats on the bay and hear the waves breaking on the beach. “Minh,” Pham Kai said, “I’m going to catch a su vang.”

CHAPTER TWO

Bombay Reef

IN HIS THIRTY-plus years as a fisherman, Pham Kai had on several occasions ventured close to the Paracel Islands, where the quality and quantity of catch was always strong. But for the last ten years or so, he had avoided them. The danger of fishing in these waters was too high.

Bombay Reef was ten miles long, located near the southeastern zone of the Paracel Islands. A rock-strewn lagoon sat at its center. Visibility approached zero when squalls rose up. The surrounding sea was greenish-blue in color, with clarity that allowed one to see the ocean floor at twenty to thirty feet. The area was known for sunken wrecks, so the reef wasn't the only thing that could cause problems—wrecked ships could sink fishing boats too.

Pham Kai reached underneath their bed and dragged out an old metal trunk. Pulling a tiny set of keys from the inside pocket of his kurta, he opened the padlock. Tucked inside sat a bundle of papers wrapped in a faded plastic sheet, held together with a rubber band. He began to lay them out on the jute floor mat.

Minh watched him sort the papers under the soft lantern light. The pages were old, with a light brown tint, their ink

faded with age. They were nautical maps of the Paracel Islands, hand-drawn and annotated by his father and grandfather. They were more accurate than any modern map, and the notes detailed wind speeds, current changes by time of day and month, every last detail of the reefs and sunken wrecks. If he had any chance of helping his wife, these papers were the key.

Pham Kai started to sketch out a plan to reach the reef. It was about a hundred nautical miles from his beach. He could get there in about three to four hours, give or take wind speed and current. He was glad it wasn't monsoon season, which would have further complicated his mission. The trunk also contained his grandfather's wristwatch, an old Tissot, complete with a metal strap, in addition to a small compass and an old-style lantern.

Minh saw the wristwatch. "What are you planning?" she asked.

"I need an extra set of nylon nets to increase our odds of catching the fish," he explained. "I'll pawn Baba's things to buy the materials."

"Please," Minh pleaded, "I don't want you to do this."

"What would I do without you?" Pham Kai asked her, helpless. "I must find a way to get your treatment started, and this plan is the only chance we have." Minh lowered her eyes toward the jute mat, knowing he wouldn't change his mind.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, Pham Kai got to the village pawnshop and met with the owner, who had run the place for over forty-five years. He recognized Pham Kai's grandfather's watch. "Did you know your grandfather was one of three people in the entire village to have a wristwatch at the time?" He regarded Pham Kai with sad eyes. "Life must have thrown you a real test."

Pham Kai nodded, determined.

“Tell you what,” the owner said. “I’ll hold the wristwatch for you. One day you may want it back. You can keep the compass and lantern.” He then loaned Pham Kai the funds needed for his plan.

Pham Kai went straight to the local store and bought the necessary items for his fishing net. He spent the afternoon building it, then went to bed after an early dinner. At nine o’clock that night, Minh woke him and gave him a large mug of chai. She made it how he liked it—piping hot, sweetened with cane sugar and milk. Pham Kai took the mug and sat on the bench, looking out at the sea. After finishing the chai, he got ready in his standard fisherman gear—a loose-fitting hooded shirt, heavy trousers, rubber boots, and his favorite khaki cap. There was nothing special about the cap, except that it fit well and he thought it was lucky.

He embraced his wife. “Go to sleep. I’ll be back when you wake up, and if the sea favors us, I’ll have a su vang.”

He walked over to the beach, dragged his small blue basket boat into the water. With a few rapid to-and-fro motions of the paddle, he headed to his fishing boat. He climbed aboard a few minutes later and stowed away his gear and basket boat.

At a quarter to two in the morning, he reached the coordinates highlighted in his notes. The ocean was pitch dark—he couldn’t even see the far distant lights of container ships heading to Vietnam. As he shut down the motor and dropped anchor, he could hear the water splashing against the reefs and rocks of Bombay Reef. He kept a keen eye out for Chinese patrol boats—if they were to come, he would need to shut down all movement and hope they didn’t notice him in the dark.

He grabbed the net, walked over to the starboard side, and switched on the spotlight attached to the top of the cabin. The surrounding area lit up, showing the reef and a nearby school

of fish. He folded the net over his left shoulder, opening it and flipping the weights over his right hand. He then walked over to the edge of the boat and in one smooth, practiced motion, swung the net out over the water.

The net made a subtle splash and sank. Using the drawstring attached to the braille lines, he began to haul the net back in. He caught about a dozen fish in his first cast, and it took a bit more strength than usual to pull the net onto the boat—the hauls were larger out here. One by one, he placed each fish in a large galvanized tin bucket full of seawater. He cast three more times on the starboard side before switching to port.

The port side yielded little—the fish had moved. He decided he needed to take the boat maybe half a mile north, alongside the reef. Five minutes later, he anchored again. As he shut off his motor, he caught a glimpse of a spotlight in the water about a mile away. He wasn't sure if he had been seen—his cabin lights and spotlights were off, and the water hitting the reef was loud, so they couldn't have heard his motor running. He rushed and tied one end of a thirty-foot rope to the bow of his vessel and the other end to his basket boat. He then lowered the basket boat into the water, and without making a sound stepped into it with his anchor. He rowed deeper into the heart of the reef, dropped anchor to secure his position, and then pulled the fishing boat closer to him.

The patrol boat approached, chugging to a stop about two hundred feet away. He could see the captain in the cabin. He was shouting at his crew in Chinese. They started sweeping the surface of the sea with their spotlights in a consistent figure-eight pattern. The spotlight kept missing Pham Kai each time by a few feet. Holding his breath, the only noise he made was the water lapping against the sides of his basket boat. Just as he thought they were going to spot him, the boat swung away and sped to the southern tip of Bombay Reef.

Pham Kai pulled the anchor and climbed back onto his fishing boat, pulling the basket boat up behind him. He noted the patrol boat's movements—they remained in sight for over an hour, then moved around the reef behind the lagoon and out of sight.

He cast his nets for another hour, catching several dozen more fish. At six in the morning, he headed back. An hour later, after confirming he was safe, he shut off the motor and anchored. He inspected his catch as the sun rose. He'd caught a good number of the standard fish found in these waters, but a su vang wasn't among them.

A little after ten in the morning, he anchored near his beach and paddled ashore. Minh greeted him with two plastic buckets to transfer the fish, but she had to run for two more, as the catch was twice as large. Exhausted, Pham Kai went inside to change. He emerged a few minutes later to find Minh staring at the buckets. "Minh, I'll try again tonight," he said, sitting next to her.

By mid-afternoon, they had sold all four buckets and returned home. This was a good earning day—twice as much as usual.

That evening, Pham Kai studied his grandfather's maps. Based on last night's experience, he should be fishing on the north side of Bombay Reef. It was far more treacherous, but if there was any chance of finding a su vang, he thought it would be in that area. He'd have to take his basket boat in order to get close, maybe even float on top of the reef, and cast his nets there. That was where the rare, exotic fish bred and lived.

Planning in his mind, he lay down and slept, only to be awakened by Minh. She had dinner ready, and Pham Kai realized how hungry he was. She had made her specialty, a fish curry with mint, ginger, and coconut milk. She had added basil and cumin seeds for extra flavoring and red ground chili for spice. She had squeezed a full, fresh lemon into the curry base,

MASTERS OF THE BROKEN WATCHES

and then cooked the fish in the curry for twenty minutes, adding noodles at the end. The key to her recipe was fried onion, with fresh cut cilantro and ginger as garnish on top. It was Pham Kai's absolute favorite meal, and he devoured two healthy bowlfuls.

CHAPTER THREE

The Catch

WANG LI, THE captain of the Chinese patrol boat, was getting ready for another night shift, shaving over the sink in the tiny quarters furnished by the government. It was more of a naval hostel for sailors and cadets, not for officers—they had better quarters than what he'd been given. The mirror he peered into was small, flecked with toothpaste and shaving cream. No one ever wiped it clean. It had a crack in the corner, and he was convinced cleaning it would cause it to break, bringing him bad luck.

His starched uniform was laid out wrinkleless on his bed. He was the only captain who used starch, and the other officers made fun of him for it. It prevented the fabric from breathing—no small thing in the muggy heat of the South China Sea. But Wang Li was determined to look sharp. It inspired respect from his crew, or so he thought.

He mused about the previous night. He hated Vietnamese fishermen with a passion—they were a low class of people who had no respect for Chinese sovereignty. He wished he had the authority to sink their boats on sight. He knew he'd caught a glimpse of a Vietnamese fishing boat. His crew felt he'd imagined it, but Wang Li was sure of it. He wanted to catch the

bastard. He knew he was lurking near Bombay Reef, trying to outsmart him.

* * *

PHAM KAI PULLED up about a mile from Bombay Reef, shut off the motor and the cabin light, and waited. Instead of casting his nets from his boat, he decided to go deeper into the reef using his basket boat.

He lowered it into the water, along with his gear, and stepped aboard. He then rowed toward the edge of the reef, where the waves were strong and violent. He had to time his forward motion with the incoming waves so that his basket boat would glide over the reef. It took him three tries, and the forward motion of the waves and volume of water lifted him over the reef. As soon as he reached the other side, the water was calm. It was still pitch dark, and all he could see of his fishing boat was the orange and yellow stripe on its side. He could see it despite the nonreflective paint, but one had to know what to look for to make it out.

Standing and balancing himself, he got started, the lantern giving off just enough light for him to work. He began casting both nets, one after the other. For the next few hours, he worked nonstop. His breathing grew heavy, and sweat poured off him. His hands grew sore from all the pulling, and his lower back started to cramp. His bucket overflowed with fish, and the floor of his boat was strewn with them. He checked his watch, a Casio replica, and it was 4:00 a.m. He had lost track of time.

As he started to navigate back, he realized that he couldn't return the way he'd come—the force of the waves hitting the edge of the reef was too strong. He needed to go south and cross over the reef into the sea where the water was calmer. It took him forty-five minutes to get back to his boat. He hauled everything aboard, emptying the fish into the tin buckets.

At almost five in the morning, Pham Kai started his motor

and navigated toward Vietnam. Safe in Vietnamese waters an hour later, he once again inspected his catch in the light of the rising sun. There were several dozen fish of all colors and sizes, but again, there were no su vang among them.

* * *

PHAM KAI'S NIGHTTIME adventures continued for three weeks. Minh grew worried that his strategies for eluding the patrol boat were getting bolder. The catches he brought home were large, with some excellent variety that fetched them good money, but he was putting himself in extreme danger.

Pham Kai knew he had figured out the patrol's routine, and using his grandfather's notes, he had discovered a key natural channel in the reef, allowing him to take his boat deep inside where he was invisible amid the waves and mist. Every night, he started his fishing from the north end of the reef, then used the hidden channel to move toward the center. Transferring onto his basket boat, he would fish right on top of the reef.

Tonight was no different. Paddling his basket boat, he could make out the outline of the lagoon, and it didn't look friendly. It had an old feel to it, as if time had stopped. Pham Kai shrugged off his misgivings and started casting his nets. Once in a while, he would notice a beautiful luminescent light in the water, but it wasn't fluorescent plankton—this was quite different, and moved in a distinct pattern.

After several casts, Pham Kai decided to cast both nets one more time before heading back to his boat. As soon as he cast his second net, his basket boat started to spin in a strange way—the current was changing and gaining strength. An undertow had formed, and he was caught in it. This sudden movement of current occurred when a massive underwater cavern formed and water rushed in to fill the void. It created a negative pressure, pulling at the surface water and forming a

massive whirlpool—once someone was caught in it, the likelihood of survival was low at best. But the water wasn't behaving like a typical whirlpool—it was moving slow. Puzzled, Pham Kai had no time to ponder it further. He had to escape.

He had to get to the part of the whirlpool that would slingshot him out. His nets were pulled in a circular motion too, and more fish were getting caught in them. He held the rim of his basket boat and jumped into the water, stretching himself out. He needed the combined momentum of the boat, the nets, and his body weight in order to escape.

Swirling around and around, focusing not to lose his frame of reference, his speed increased. This was the moment he'd been waiting for. He held his breath as he was flung from the whirlpool, hanging on to his basket boat for dear life until he was clear. He lifted himself back into it and collapsed with exhaustion. His head was spinning, water had invaded his lungs, and his hands felt like mush.

He sat up, holding the sides of his little boat. His tin bucket was still inside—most of the fish had spilled from it, flopping on the floor. His lantern was gone. Using his last bit of strength, he hauled in his nets, heavy with fish. He searched for his fishing boat and paddled toward it, thankful the current hadn't pulled it onto the rocks.

Back aboard, he retrieved another lantern from the cabin to inspect his haul, most of it still trapped in the nets. Untangling them, bringing the lantern close, he froze. He stared at his catch—in front of him lay two adult su vang fish. The first was beautiful, over a foot long, silver with tan scales. The second was also impressive. He knew they both were worth enough for Minh's treatment and then some.

For generations, the sea had provided for his family. Today, it had been beyond generous. Pham Kai wasn't religious, but he did believe in the miracle of the sea. How else could he explain the forming of the whirlpool? He would never

have caught the su vang without it. He brought out a cooler from the cabin and placed the first one inside.

He lifted the second su vang and it was bright, as if it were under a spotlight. Pham Kai paused as the realization hit him. His heart sank.

In his excitement, and with the noise of the waves hitting the reef, Pham Kai hadn't heard the patrol boat approach. They had discovered his secret channel.

Wang Li smiled as he turned to his crew. "You're all idiots. You should be court-martialed for taking so long to find this lowlife." The crew stared at the tired, feeble-looking Pham Kai in disbelief.

There was still some distance between the two boats. Pham Kai dropped the su vang in the net, ran into the cabin, and started the motor. Maybe he could go deeper into the reef where the patrol boat couldn't follow. A cannon-like explosion splintered the cabin wall, and a harpoon lodged deep into the side of the steering wheel housing. Pham Kai wasn't going anywhere.

Wang Li jumped aboard with two of his officers, who pulled Pham Kai out of the cabin. They attached a six-foot wooden plank to his outstretched arms, its length running across his back at hip level. His hands were tied to the plank with nylon ropes around his wrists. The restraints exposed his shoulders, making them protrude outward at a painful angle. The officers forced him to his knees and stood behind him on each side. Wang Li gazed down at him, not saying a word. He smiled at him, exposing his yellow teeth.

A metal rod with two tiny prongs on one end hung from Wang Li's gun belt.

Wang Li barked at him, "You scum of the earth. You're fishing in the sovereign territory of the People's Republic of China. You're breaking our military laws by even being here. Today, you'll wish you were never born. When I'm done with

you, you'll never be able to use your hands to fish again."

The two officers grabbed Pham Kai's arms on each side. Wang Li unclipped the metal rod and pressed a button on its side. A spark leaped between the two prongs.

Before Pham Kai could register what was happening, Wang Li brought the sparking rod down and pressed it against Pham Kai's neck.

Pham Kai had endured pain in his life, but he had never experienced anything like this. He convulsed as the voltage surged through his body. Flopping to the floor of the deck, his whole body twitched. He could hear them laugh as they lifted him back to his knees. Wang Li brought the rod close to the other side of his neck and held it there. The anticipation of getting shocked again was agony for Pham Kai.

Instead of touching his neck with the electric rod, Wang Li barked, "Rip his shirt off."

They ripped Pham Kai's shirt down to his waist. Wang Li brought the rod down and placed it on his right shoulder joint. He then pressed the button and 1,200 volts moved from the rod straight into Pham Kai's right shoulder, and he fell to the floor again. This time, however, he didn't black out. It felt as if his arm had been ripped from its socket. He checked it in a panic—it was intact, but the entire length of it was shaking.

The officers were laughing at how his arm was no longer in his control. They once again lifted Pham Kai upright. Tears flowed down his face, and his stomach convulsed. His heart pounded hard. He knew he had lost—they weren't going to let him go. They were going to shock him to the point of no return. He would never be able to move his hands again.

As Wang Li brought the electric rod close to his left shoulder, Pham Kai somehow summoned his deep fisherman strength. He sprang up and rammed his head into Wang Li's nose. Before the officers could react, Pham Kai rushed toward the port side of the boat and jumped into the water.

Underwater he tucked his legs, flipping them over the plank like a reverse skip, and brought the plank in front of him to use it as a floating buoy. Kicking his legs, he swam deeper into the reef where the patrol boat couldn't follow. He wasn't just swimming for his own life—he was swimming for Minh's.

The water of the channel was rough, and the rocks were sharp and dangerous. His knee hit the reef, and he could feel it bleeding. Far behind him, he could hear a commotion. Wang Li was shouting orders at the top of his lungs. They switched on both spotlights and swung them everywhere, searching for him.

Pham Kai managed to find a rock protruding from the reef about a hundred yards away from the boats. He swam to the other side of it and started to wade. Two additional crew members had jumped aboard his boat and were smashing his equipment. He saw flashlights moving on deck—they were going through his catch. After more shouting, they jumped back onto their patrol boat, pulled out the harpoon with a tremendous splintering sound, and navigated away into the darkness. Pham Kai wondered if they'd ripped out the entire cabin wall.

He stayed behind the rock for half an hour, making sure the patrol boat was out of the reef. He started scraping his left hand over the protruding rock, as his right hand was still hurting from the shock to his shoulder. Soon, the rope split and his left hand was free. He then used his free hand to open the knot on his right.

He moved the wooden plank in front of him and started to swim toward his boat, dreading the inevitable, yet thankful they hadn't sunk it. It must have been the steady worsening of the current that caused them to abandon him to his fate.

Exhausted, flinching with pain, Pham Kai pulled himself aboard and collapsed onto the deck. He dragged himself to the basket boat and, using one hand, started searching the net.

MASTERS OF THE BROKEN WATCHES

“No. Oh, no.”

He kept searching, desperation setting in with every passing moment. Finally, kneeling next to the nets and the cooler, he sobbed. The su vang fish were gone.

They had taken both fish, and any hope of saving Minh with them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cerro Tacarcuna

DR. SEBASTIAN MILES arrived at *Ultimo Refugio* around noon, a popular restaurant in the coastal town of Bocas del Toro, Panama. It was a colorful establishment run by a loving gay couple that prided themselves in serving healthy cuisine prepared with ingredients sourced from local farms. The wooden dining tables were painted light blue, and the ceiling had equidistant beams running the length of the restaurant with old surfboards placed over them. Instead of walls, the restaurant opened onto the ocean, giving the feeling of dining outside while enjoying cover from the sun.

Sitting down at a small table for two, Sebastian realized that one of the legs was shorter than the others, making the table wobble. Tucking a folded napkin under the leg, something caught his eye—a large mural of the Panamanian jungle on the back wall. He sat up and studied it, fascinated by the hidden animals throughout. A big green frog peeked through the leaves in the foreground, a bird-like creature blended in with the tree branch on which it perched, and a monkey-like animal sat hidden at the base of the tree.

Maria Rodriguez walked in. She was a professional explorer who had to sign off on Sebastian's project before his

boss at the Bocas del Toro Marine Research Center would even consider funding it. *A Junoesque mountain climber*, he thought, tapping his fingers on the table.

Maria was tall and slender with sharp features, yet a particular softness to her face. She had a golden complexion—a natural tan of some sort—and her black shoulder-length hair had reddish-brown streaks from frequent swimming in seawater. She walked over and sat across from him in one smooth, elegant motion. She crossed her legs, revealing toned muscle.

They ordered two Soberanas and sparkling water. After a few introductory exchanges, Maria jumped in. “So, tell me about your adventure.”

Sebastian cleared his throat and took a sip of his beer. “I need your help in searching for a unique marine life that I believe lives deep in the Panamanian jungle.”

Maria pulled her hair back, tying it with a beaded band that initially served as a bracelet. “Marine life in the middle of the jungle?”

Sebastian nodded. “It’s a specimen that, in my opinion, is related to an evolutionary mystery belonging to the *Cerithideopsis californica* and *Cerithideopsis pliculosa* family.”

Maria smiled. “*Cerithideopsis*? You want to go into the Panamanian jungle to find snails?”

Sebastian laughed, rubbing the back of his right hand with his left thumb. He’d hoped that by using scientific names, she wouldn’t catch that fact. “Not just any snails—the snails that would solve one of the most powerful questions of evolution: How did humans evolve?”

He pressed on. “I’ve been researching this field for over five years and based my doctoral thesis on the subject at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. You see, there’s a big problem with the current evolutionary theory. It doesn’t explain how humans evolved. Scientists have yet to find a clear

connection between apes, monkeys, and humans based on Darwin's theory. Around twenty million years ago, humans separated from primates, and some of us believe they evolved based on a theory by renowned evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould called Step Evolution—the process by which a species takes a genetic leap forward to adapt to their changing environment. We know Step Evolution exists among many other species, but we still lack conclusive evidence, living or fossilized.”

Maria leaned forward, propping her chin on her hand. “Interesting. So, these snails may be able to prove Step Evolution?”

“Yes!” Sebastian confirmed. “This discovery would be as significant in the field of genetic engineering as gravitational waves were for astrophysics.”

“Why do you think these snails can be found in the Panamanian jungle?” Maria asked.

“Maria,” Sebastian said, taking a technical tone. “Evolutionary scientists believe that the Isthmus of Panama, where we are sitting today, is the perfect location for such finds.

“The formation of this tiny strip of land connecting North and South America parted the ocean three million years ago, forever separating entire families of marine life. As a result, these families each evolved in their own way, in two separate oceans that became different from each other in terms of temperature, depth, and currents. Many of us believe there may be marine life that has survived this massive geological movement using Step Evolution. However, we have yet to find such a specimen in any of the inland waters of Panama.” Sebastian paused to check if he still had Maria's interest.

“Go on,” she said, leaning closer.

“As part of my PhD at Scripps, I researched a French explorer, Jean-René Gustav. Among his many expeditions, the

one that caught my eye was in 1920 when he went deep into the Panamanian jungle. In his journal, he mentions that he climbed through a crevasse into the heart of a mountain, discovering a body of water with bioluminescent snails. The entry then ended with that information. According to the known facts of *Cerithideopsis californica* and *Cerithideopsis pliculosa*, his find of these bioluminescent snails is a powerful indication of Step Evolution. I've been searching for the mountain ever since, and I think I've found it."

"What makes you so sure?" Maria asked.

"Do you believe in being at the right place at the right time?" Sebastian said. Maria kept staring at him with her big eyes, and then blinked once. He took it as a yes and continued. "Last weekend, I was heading home after yet another failed expedition—adding to the grand total of thirty such attempts over the last ten months. Frustrated, I was at a traffic light in my car, when across the road I noticed a woman selling mangoes at a meager fruit stand—a wooden cart on four wheels." Sebastian stared at his beer bottle, lost in the memory. "The strangest feeling came over me. I can't explain it. So, I pulled over.

"Maria, you should have seen this lady. She was a glorious woman. She had a bright red shirt with a triangle-shape pattern, and some kind of wrap for a skirt—bright orange, with prints of animals. Her face was so distinct, even powerful, with a long tattooed line running from the center of her eyes to the base of her nose, and this large nose ring. It turns out she belonged to a remote indigenous tribe called the Kuna. While buying some mangoes, I asked her if she knew of a mountain that had water inside it. At first, she looked surprised to hear such a question. Then she started speaking fast in Spanish. My Spanish isn't great, but I was able to catch the following details." Sebastian's voice dropped to a conspiratorial hush.

"She explained that her people knew of a mountain deep

in the jungle, just like the one I described. She said the gods had possessed it when the earth was born, and inside it lived an ancient animal. After I promised her that I'd respect the mountain and the creatures that dwelt there, she agreed to tell me its location. The mountain is Cerro Tacarcuna, in the Darien Province. I couldn't believe my luck."

Maria smiled. "You're going off the word of a, as you said, 'glorious fruit stand lady.'"

Sebastian returned her smile. "Sometimes the answer lies in stories that have been handed down through generations," Sebastian said, leaning in. "How she described the mountain and the animals inside leads me to believe she was talking about Jean-René Gustav's mountain. I've analyzed detailed charts of the terrain and studied the pathways of underground streams—and they, too, support the story. If the charts and journal are correct, we need to climb approximately 2,500 feet up the mountain, where we'll find a unique geological formation—a small ledge with a granite table. Somewhere around that table is a crevasse that will lead us into the heart of the mountain, and to the snails."

"Cerro Tacarcuna is a formidable mountain, deep in the jungle. And we would need an extremely skilled riverboat captain to even get us close to the base," Maria said, considering the challenge.

"That's why it's so important that you help me," Sebastian replied.

Maria focused on a slow-moving ceiling fan, thinking about Sebastian's proposal. She found herself considering his looks for the first time as well—he was a handsome man, in an unconventional sense. Athletic, with dark curly hair and a square jaw sporting a shadow of a beard. His ocean-blue eyes had a unique quality to them—it wasn't the color, but something more mysterious. She felt there was something different about him, something powerful. Ignoring those

thoughts, she asked, “Ever gone mountain climbing?”

Sebastian smiled. “I’ve climbed a few mountains. I’m no expert like you, though.”

Maria laughed. “Okay, Sebastian. Let’s go get your snails.”

* * *

TWO WEEKS LATER, and after a vicious hunt, they found a riverboat captain. He was a grungy chain smoker, who made his living ferrying tribes deep into the jungle. In a harsh, raspy voice, he explained, “I’ll only wait twelve hours for you at the drop-off point. You’re fools to go so deep into the jungle.” Ignoring his comment, they paid his advance.

After getting final sign-off from his boss, Sebastian and Maria began the five-hour river journey toward Cerro Tacarcuna before dawn. Landing on the shore as light was breaking, Sebastian was taken aback by the natural beauty of the place. The plants were so green they were almost radiant, and flowers abounded in deep reds, yellows, and violets. Wild fruit trees grew everywhere—mango, coconut, and guava. He spotted some toucans with their bright yellow beaks, perched high on a flowering saman tree. The fragrances, too, were mesmerizing, from vanilla flowers to sandalwood trees.

“Did you know that Christopher Columbus landed at Bocas del Toro on one of his later voyages?” Sebastian said. “He found it so beautiful, he named it Puerto Bello.”

Maria smiled. Sebastian’s passion was contagious. She pulled out her satellite map of the area one final time to confirm her calculations. It would take them three hours to cut through the jungle and reach the base of the mountain, two hours to climb to 2,500 feet, two more hours to descend into the crevasse, and maybe longer to get back out—that was if all went according to plan. If they were lucky, they would be back just in time to catch the boat before it left.

She extracted a machete from her backpack. It was a well-

worn blade with a strong wooden handle. She wrapped her fingers firmly around the handle and began slicing and hacking a path toward the mountain base. Surrounded by thick vegetation, this part of the jungle wasn't so beautiful. The air was muggy, almost suffocating.

A short while into their foray, Maria looked back and warned Sebastian of the sandbox trees in the area, which had sharp thorns. Maria snaked her way through the unblemished foliage. Sebastian, on the other hand, was starting to get cuts and bruises.

Noticing Sebastian's condition, Maria stopped at a tree. Plucking a few leaves, she crushed them in her hand and gave him the paste to apply to his cuts. "I have cortisone cream in my backpack," she said, "but these leaves will act faster. They're from the guembe tree. It works miracles on cuts and bruises."

At various points, Maria would take her can of spray paint and mark a tree or a rock—breadcrumbs for their journey back. The sounds of the jungle were distinct and foreboding—a combination of rustling trees, screaming insects, and the occasional howls and calls of various animals. Panama's rainforests weren't for the faint of heart.

Three hours later, they reached the base of Cerro Tacarcuna and got ready to climb.

"Ready? If I'm going too fast, stop me," Maria said while strapping on her climbing gear.

"I'll keep up," Sebastian said, not one to back down. Yet privately he hoped she would slow down.

Just like her ability to snake the jungle, Maria was a rock climber without parallel. Watching her was like watching a ballet—she knew where to place hooks, where to hammer spikes, where to swing over, where to grapple. She bent in impossible curves and contractions, moving from one rock to the next in a knowing, deliberate effort to discover the easiest

path for Sebastian to follow. Sebastian watched in awe, wondering if she practiced capoeira, the beautiful Brazilian martial art that combined dance and acrobatics. He followed her path, slipping and sliding more than he would have liked.

Around noon—which felt like a lifetime to Sebastian, but in reality was only about two hours—they reached the landing, laying eyes on the granite table for the first time. It was no bigger than five feet by four feet, jutting out of a vertical wall of rock that continued up to the summit. Several boulders that must have fallen during the last earthquake were situated at random around the table. He couldn't, at first glance, see an opening or a crevasse. Maria began pulling out their rappelling gear so she could anchor their rappels once they found the crevasse.

Precious time passed as Sebastian traced each and every granite line. Compounding matters, they heard thunder in the distance. The forecast hadn't predicted rain. A more troubling thought crossed Sebastian's mind—what if the fruit vendor was wrong? What if Cerro Tacarcuna wasn't the mountain he'd been seeking all this time?

Just as he was about to share his concern with Maria, he realized that one of the boulders sitting at the wall of the table had a different pebble formation around it than the others. He pulled out a sledgehammer and chisel from his backpack and began chipping into the rock. Sebastian removed his shirt, which was tattered from the journey, and wrapped his hands to protect them from the debris as he continued to work.

Maria paused her prepping of the gear and observed Sebastian. She was impressed he had been carrying the dead weight of a sledgehammer. Her initial impression was confirmed—he did not fit the mold of a scientist. Shirtless, he revealed a set of abs that, beyond question, were not acquired by spending hours in the confines of a marine laboratory.

After ten minutes of brute-force pounding, the boulder broke apart. Using his upper-body strength, Sebastian lifted the

heavy pieces out of the way and pushed the rest of the boulder into the mountain. A small rockslide revealed a large crevasse that sloped at a steep angle into blackness. Sebastian jumped up with excitement, smiling at Maria, who ran over and anchored their ropes outside the crevasse. After putting on a clean shirt from his pack, Sebastian joined Maria and they made their way down into the darkness.

Sebastian wasn't sure if he could hear the sound of rushing water over the howl of the wind, and he had no idea how deep they would have to descend to reach the stream. They alternated between sliding down on their butts and rappelling with their feet, and bumping into rocky edges. Sebastian began to notice ferns and fungus on the walls, a sure sign of moisture. The air was musky as well, with a hint of saltiness.

The crevasse expanded from its initial size, and after about an hour, Sebastian's flashlight beam fell upon a small outcropping a few feet wide. They descended onto it for a brief rest, glancing down at the continued darkness past the outcropping. Deep in thought, Sebastian tried to understand the geology of the place. He moved his headlamp and flashlight around, soon finding a large cave-like opening a few feet away.

"I think we should go through that opening," he said, understanding that the success of their task was very much tied to their strict timetable, leaving no time for wrong decisions. They anchored themselves to the outcropping and unhooked from their ropes before inching over into the new opening.

The opening looked to be about four feet wide and three feet tall, forcing Sebastian and Maria to go through on their hands and knees. Sebastian felt moisture on his fingers, unsure if it was water or just sweat. Forging ahead, they came to a large natural cenote, where they heard the unmistakable sound of rushing water.

The cenote was formed in the shape of a vertical cavern and was filled with turbulent water. Waves were crashing in

and out, smashing into the walls, swirling in a vortex, then disappearing through an opening—only to reappear with the same violent intensity. “Okay,” he said, “here’s where I leave you and go alone.”

Maria regarded the current. “Sebastian, you’ll be tossed around like a rag doll. I think you shou—”

Not waiting for Maria to finish, Sebastian rappelled toward the water. Maria looked on, annoyed, as he continued to descend. He soon hung inches above the splashing water. He set his stopwatch and timed the flow. Twelve-second intervals.

Sebastian switched his flashlight and headlamp off. Hanging in total darkness, he saw a faint luminescence through the foaming waves, toward a far wall of the cavern. He waited for the torrent to rush out and dropped himself onto the cavern floor with a splash.

His legs and feet reacted by going numb in the freezing-cold water. He focused on the far wall, but didn’t see anything. Before he knew it, a wave lifted him off his feet and slammed him into the cavern wall, submerging him.

Underwater, the force of the current tossed him about. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of that strange light again, but he still wasn’t sure what he was seeing. The water spun him around and dragged him near the opening. He managed to cling to a wall, hanging on for dear life as the water rushed out. Able to breathe again, cold, his body in state of shock, he searched for the glimmering light. Like clockwork, the freezing water rushed in again. This time, Sebastian was ready. He took a deep breath and tightened his grip on the wall. Submerged, he saw them—small, luminescent snails, stuck against the far wall.

The raging water rushed out again and, as before, the luminescence was gone. He stood there in the dark, chilled to the bone, his muscles tense. He waited for the turbulent water to return. Taking a deep breath, he used the force of the

current to maneuver in front of the snails and peeled them off the wall. He was able to secure five snails and put them in a specimen bottle before the receding water spun him around and pulled him away. He scrambled and grabbed another wall and waited out the water. Once clear, he ran to the wall, where Maria had lowered another rope attached to a pulley she had set up. Sebastian grabbed the rope and wrapped it around his pulley, creating a loop.

He began hoisting himself up, climbing as fast as his exhausted body would allow, the cavern once again erupted with violence and the water missed him by inches. He turned back to glance again at the luminescent wall when something else in the water caught his eye. A beautiful light. Something moving in the water, swimming free. Squinting, he tried to focus, but as soon as he saw it, it disappeared into the vortex rushing out.

“C’mon!” Maria shouted. “We’re getting a flashflood in the crevasse now!”

Sebastian pulled himself the last few yards to Maria, and they both crawled back to the outcropping.

“Whoa!” Sebastian exclaimed, looking up. The crevasse had become a natural waterfall—rainwater cascaded down, making it almost impossible for them to climb out.

The noise of the waterfall was deafening. “We’re going to have to improvise,” Maria yelled. “It’s going to take everything we’ve got to place new hooks as we climb out.” Sebastian nodded.

Maria secured her first hook and ascended. While holding herself steady, she placed a second hook. They inched themselves up through the falling water.

After almost two hours, they pulled themselves out of the crevasse and back onto the granite table. Drenched, and exhausted, they took a minute to rest as the rain continued to fall. They had the snails, but now it was a race against time to

get back to the boat before it left without them.

During their rapid decent down the mountain, Sebastian kept feeling the flask in his backpack, making sure it was still there. Once at the base, Maria reset her stopwatch. Attaching new hooks had added an hour to their adventure. “Ready?” she asked, somehow smiling, “We have two hours to get out of the jungle, instead of three.”

Hands on his knees, Sebastian took a deep breath. He rose upright with a grin and nodded. “Let’s do this!”

They moved through the thickets in a jungle jog—a combination of jumps and short bursts of speed—balancing on fallen trees and ducking stray branches, all with as much energy as they could muster.

* * *

BACK ON THE boat, the captain realized it was forty minutes past the twelve hours he’d allotted them. What’s more, the weather had taken a nasty turn—he’d been keeping a close eye on the steadily rising waterline. Any longer and he risked drifting deeper into the jungle, only for the water to recede after the storm and leave him stranded. He fired up the engine and started to hoist the anchor, inching away from the bank.

* * *

SEBASTIAN AND MARIA broke out of the jungle, sprinting toward the boat as it pulled away. Maria reached it first with a hop, leap, and jump, followed closely by Sebastian. They collapsed under the covered awning of the deck, exhausted, ignoring the captain’s grunt on their return.

Breathing heavily, Sebastian removed his backpack and took out the flask. He peered into it and his snails were doing fine. Closing the flask, his childhood neural condition flared up and rapid images started flashing in his mind. He started seeing pictures of glittering sand, ethereal humanoids wearing cloaks,

RAZI IMAM

and something that looked like a huge sparkling Russian Fabergé egg.

