

THE CROWN OF SAMMURAMAT

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GLAZER

I was furious. If I had a gun in my hand just then, I might have killed him.

"It exists. I *know* it exists," I insisted with such ferocity I am sure I sounded like a maniac. I was possessed, and I could not stop myself.

He was a reporter. He smiled and asked, "And if you had the crown, then what?"

"I don't have the faintest idea. Maybe I'd give the damned thing to a museum. Maybe I'd wear it. Who the hell knows?"

I was referring to something mentioned on a magnificent Assyrian monument that archaeologists had unearthed in 1865. It astounded me last year when I visited London's British Museum. I could not take my eyes from the object or the ancient message written on one of its sides. It was as if something were reaching across thousands of years, controlling me. I became transfixed. My skin crawled. Life outside that room no longer existed. The only thing I heard was a faint voice deep in the recesses of my mind. Its language was pure gibberish, something I had never heard before. Strangely, as if it were happening in a dream, I understood every word it was saying. They were words I will never forget, words that have haunted me almost every waking moment since that soul-shattering day.

My listener jotted something on the small pad he held on his lap. He twisted on his seat and cocked his head. "I'm going to play devil's advocate here, okay?" Then he continued without waiting for a reply. "You say you didn't know anything about this inscription before seeing it in the British Museum."

I nodded.

“And I’ll assume you’d never really investigated Assyrian mythology before then, right?” I nodded curtly again.

“Well, if you never knew about the inscription, and you’d never studied Assyrian mythology, you couldn’t possibly have understood one of the oldest forms of written language ever discovered. We can’t do something about which we are totally ignorant...especially something like translating an ancient, dead language, can we?”

Of course, he was right. I would never believe my story if it had not happened to me. Even two of my closest friends had laughed and assigned it to my imagination. After all, I am a novelist and imagination is at the heart of my literary success.

“I can’t explain it,” I snapped. “But everything I’ve told you is absolutely true.”

“Had anything like this ever happened to you before?”

“Never.”

“Were you researching something about Assyrian kings before it happened?”

“No.”

“Had you ever been to the museum before this supernatural experience?”

“The answer’s yes, but I don’t like your calling it a supernatural experience.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know what it was and, since I don’t know, I don’t like putting that kind of label on it.”

He adjusted his glasses. Then, after swigging the cold beer I had given him earlier, he said, “I’ve only got a few more questions, Mister Lasker.” He was pleasant and respectful, with none of that flat, professional detachment I have heard from other interviewers. Easy to like, he even looked good. He was about twenty-two, probably fresh out of college and new to his trade. His hair was cut short and stylishly scruffy. His clothes were just right, too: black NFL jacket; an open-collared shirt hanging loosely outside his pants; trendy shoes; black socks. He was an eager, handsome young man trying

hard to be professional and GQ chic. So why was I being such an arrogant, ill-tempered asshole?

Two reasons:

One – I do not like interviews. I have had bad experiences with them, and I believed I was better off without this one. I did it only because my publicist had insisted. “Do it, Andy,” he had begged. “*Capitol Magazine* doesn’t do novelists. I busted my hump to get this one. It’s a coup, believe me. It’ll open a whole new audience and be fantastic for the new book.”

And two – which was much more compelling: It was this Assyrian thing. I do not know what it was, but something always forced me to talk about it. And every time I did, I lost myself.

“You say this wasn’t your first time in the museum,” he continued. “You could have seen that Assyrian stele on a previous visit.”

“No. The place is huge. It would take weeks to see everything. That’s why I was visiting again. I had never been in that section before.”

“You’re implying there were other sections you hadn’t seen. Why’d you go into the Assyrian section and not one of the others?”

“What a question! Why were you given this assignment and not another one? Some things just happen.”

“Then you’re not suggesting this stele pulled you mysteriously to that section so it could talk to you in a dead language, are you?”

“I’m just telling you what happened. I’m not suggesting anything.”

“Good, because, truthfully, I wouldn’t know how to handle that in the article without making you look ridiculous. By the way, what is this stele...a slab, a wheel...a what?”

“It’s a marble pyramid. Black marble. With alabaster inscription.”

“A black marble pyramid.” He grinned. “This is wild...really wild.” Then he scribbled something on his pad quickly.

I could not continue. “Look, you’re a nice guy just trying to do his job, but I can’t talk about this anymore.”

“Okay, we can talk about something else.”

“No. Let’s end it. I’ve wasted your time. I’m sorry. I’m sure you

have better things to do than sit here and listen to what sounds like an off-the-wall plot of my next novel.”

I stood, but he continued to sit. “It’s your house, Mister Lasker. Order me out, and I’ll have to go. But I’d rather stay and finish the interview.”

“It’s over.”

“What exactly does the inscription say?”

“You’re not listening. You’re on your own, Chuck. We’re finished!”

He creased his brows. “Don’t do this, Mister Lasker. Please. If you stop me before I’ve asked all my questions, you won’t like what I’ll tell my editor.”

Was that a threat? Was he blackmailing me? He had seemed amiable and courteous up to then. Was he...? No, it was *me*. Talking about that Assyrian stele had me so agitated, I was twisting a simple statement into a warning. “Tell your editor anything you please, Chuck,” I responded. “Goodbye and good luck!”

The next day, I learned that Charles “Chuck” Glazer had been savagely murdered only a few hours after leaving my house.