

THE COUNSEL OF THE CUNNING

by

Steven C. Harms

EXCERPT – OPENING CHAPTER

A howler monkey screeched, its shrill pitch adding to the endless cacophony.

Dr. Catarina Amador watched the animal move through the trees until it vanished in the dense canopy below, then drew a last puff on her cigarette, crushing the butt with the heel of her worn-out tennis shoe. Her eyes shifted to the ancient ruins sprawling in every direction; eroded, gray slabs of rock covered with vines, others crumbled beyond recognition.

Her prison.

Atop the temple mount, the slight breeze and mid-morning sunlight provided a respite from the enclave of stone ruins and paths that weaved through the jungle of whatever country she was in. To the east, the sun reflected off the lone glimpse of the river, catching her eye. The faint sparkles shimmering off the surface forever calling her home. Six years and counting. But each passing moment chipped away at her will, replacing those pieces with an ever-increasing hopelessness. She had become mostly devoid of thought save for the world-class talents she employed for her captor.

The youngest daughter of a large family from the slums of Mexico City, her intellect and scientific acumen made her a prodigy. World-renowned in academic circles by the age of fourteen. At fifteen she began her studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore; flying through, she graduated just five years later with a PhD in biomedical engineering. Her human molecular manipulation thesis elevated her into the scientific world's stratosphere. Upon graduation, blank check offers from a hundred different companies and research labs spanning the globe filled her mailbox. All she had to do was pick one. Her parents had come to Baltimore for the graduation and to help with the decision. Over dinner, the list was pared down to four opportunities in the western hemisphere. When the evening came to a close, they parted company—her parents back to the hotel and Catarina to a local establishment to celebrate graduation with her peers. She was never seen again.

Sighing, she took a few steps forward to look out over the plaza area, resting her arms at chest height on the massive stone wall encircling the space. Standing just over five feet, her stature matched her frame. A lithe body and long, black hair kept in a ponytail most days

accentuated her stunning facial features. A foot taller and she would have graced magazine covers instead of medical journals.

She peered down at a bird-faced stone sentry near one of the plaza's entryways and the eyeless human statue set a few yards to its left. A variety of bizarre figures were sprinkled throughout the ruins. She felt the strangest ones were the two tall snakes, standing erect at twice her height with human feet, holding large blackish orbs of polished rock in their massive jaws. Positioned on either side of "Main Street," as she had nicknamed it, they guarded a small but steady waterfall spilling in front of a steep rock wall. The falls travelled over the rock above creating a wall of water ten feet high, cutting off the path with no way forward. A five-foot-wide chasm stood between the path's end and the water wall. She once had peered into it. No splash sound, the rushing water just disappeared into an eternal abyss. Beyond the water wall was the forbidden canyon and the treasure of the ancient ruins.

She closed her eyes tight and bowed her head, reflecting on the moment she first penetrated the water wall, not knowing what was on the other side.

Two men had tossed her over the chasm where she landed on hard ground and found herself in a dank cave, lit only by a torch on each wall. Soaking, she followed the orders she was given and took ten steps forward to a turn in the cave, which led to the opening on the other side. About sixty feet ahead was the jagged mouth of the exit, perfectly outlined by the sunshine stabbing through on the other side. Picking her way carefully towards it, the temperature warmed until she was standing at the cave's exit. She took the final step, ducking slightly into the beyond, and took in the wonderment of her surroundings.

It was a smallish canyon with sheer, steep sides and thick vines growing in bunches among the rocks. Clinging in arbitrary clumps was a fruit she had never seen before, displayed in a spectrum of light green to black and every variation in-between. Above the canyon the jungle had formed a natural ceiling of branches; not overly dense, but enough to provide a protective layer yet still allow the sun to push through to the polished, black-stained stone floor in various spots.

And there, in the middle of it all, stood a man of some years with his hands clasped behind his back. Wearing a panama hat, unassuming slacks and a floral print button-down, the hat's shadow cut across his face making his mouth the only discernible feature.

He gestured to her to come and sit at a small wooden table to his left. She had walked with slow, unsure steps towards him. What would he do? Was this the end? As she neared, his persona became clear. A man of Hispanic descent, well-manicured, with an air of self-assurance that clung to him like an invisible but tangible layer.

Once she sat, the man took his own seat and lit a cigar, drew a few puffs, and spoke.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Amador,” he had said. “Welcome to my kingdom,” he added, with a sweeping hand gesture.

“Where am I?” she remembered asking, as if in a dream.

“Where you were *born* to be.”

“Who...who are you?” she asked.

Her mind’s eye recalled the memory of his response at this particular moment. A smile. Cryptic.

“My name you will never know. But take heart. You are here to lead a significant advancement in a little science project I have a vested interest in. You, Dr. Amador, will be its shining star.” Then came his explanation for her kidnapping and what he wanted.

He began with a cloaked apology for his men taking her off the streets of Baltimore and blindfolding her for two days.

Her memory replayed the horrible experience. Someone coming from behind as she passed an alley. A hood suddenly coming down over her face. A vice-grip hand that quickly covered her mouth. The man whispering something in her ear—a throaty, aged timbre—before hustling her into a vehicle. Once inside, he let go but ordered her to be silent as she felt the unmistakable hardness of the barrel of a gun being pressed against her temple. She recalled the vehicle speeding up, taking a number of tight turns before zooming along a straight path, then slowing to a stop and taking a final turn. The last slice of recollection was a breeze touching her arms as she was pulled out of the vehicle, being carried up a flight of stairs and into an enclosed space, as the sound of an airplane’s engine roared to life. For a brief moment the hood was removed, but an instant later, a man she assumed was her captor, sprayed something in her face. That was it. Her recollection of a hazy, in-and-out consciousness was the only vestige of the bridge between boarding that plane and coming off it some amount of time later. Once again hooded and placed back in a vehicle for a short ride, she was then in a helicopter—the sound of its rotors were unmistakable. She remembered the flight being incredibly long. Upon landing, the same throaty voice said something she couldn’t understand and then her hood was removed.

The bright stab of lush greenery walling in a sunlight-splashed landing pad pierced her vision. She recalled squinting, trying to discern the environment. The warmth of the climate immediately registered. Baltimore and her parents were the first thought that came to mind and then the understanding that they and the city were now thousands of miles away.

Two different men, not so gently, had taken her arms and steered her to a pathway that directly led into what she then was able to realize was a tropical forest, and finally to the waterfall and the eventual meeting with the man in the panama hat.

With another puff of the cigar, he then presented her with the whole tale of what lay ahead.

She was to develop a new drug, and he had stated that her opportunity to use her intellect and talent when it came to molecular manipulation was going to be unfettered. “Anything and everything is at your disposal,” he had said with firmness and a hint of delight.

Next was a tour of the compound and her new living quarters—a luxurious penthouse adjacent to the ancient temple featuring a grand view. It was stocked with a closet full of clothes, toiletries, a hot tub on the small balcony, a desk, books for reading, and a computer to be used for her research. Following that came an introduction to the world-class lab with five qualified scientists, also prisoners. Her operation to run. Her scientists to lead. A deadline of three years.

Included in the “tour” was a modern, plain brick building housing more prisoners, each given a simple cell. Haggard-looking people. Further on came the trails, the statues, the ruins. Another cement block building looking completely out of place, with a large “F” scratched into the door, and behind it the three men and one woman chained to the wall. Final stop, a spherical hut off the southwest corner of the plaza, secured by barbed wire and an armed guard.

“Sometime in the coming weeks I will escort you here again,” the man had said in a different, almost reverential tone. “The treasure inside is truly priceless. Perhaps the single greatest discovery in the long, brutal history of this ancient empire.”

His final comment echoed in her mind, reverberating, before she eased her eyes back open, fluttering them as they adjusted to the bright sunlight atop the mount. The present day resumed its rightful place in her awareness, which she reluctantly gave into.

It was an off day from the lab. No scrubs. Worn-out gray cargo shorts and an equally frayed white halter top draped her body. Utility and comfort for the task ahead. Eleven harvesters with large baskets strapped to their midsections came up beside her: seven adult women, three men, and one five-year-old girl. She looked down and winked at the child, giving her a soft pat on the head.

“Hello Isabella,” she said. The girl giggled as she always did and hugged her leg.

Dr. Amador savored the indulgent moment before a cocked rifle cracked the air behind the group, making them all spin around. Atop a small, three-walled structure on the back edge of the temple mount, stood an enforcer, and next to him, the man with the unknown name. The king of the ancient empire. Panama hat and all.

“Time for the harvest,” he said in his now familiar deep voice. “Thank you for your continued service. Business is prospering as planned.” He tipped the hat before disappearing.

The group stared back; prisoner slaves in the heart of ancient ruins whom the outside world didn't even know existed.

“Let's move,” the enforcer screamed. “The Tat,” as they had come to call him, had markings covering his skin, save for his face. As the group moved, Dr. Amador loitered just enough to ensure she was the last one in line down the familiar steps. Three more enforcers stood ready at the bottom to escort them to the canyon—two positioned twenty paces away on the plaza and one at the base of the steps. When her foot touched the plaza, she shot a sideways glance to the enforcer who stood there. He was a relatively short man, fortyish, with half his right ear missing and raven black hair fashioned in a bowl-cut. Her pet name for him was “Mrs. Lobe,” a play on words that he found amusing. He caught her glance, blinking both eyes simultaneously before grabbing her elbow and shoving her forward to pick up her pace. The Tat joined him as they crossed the plaza.

The trail to the canyon was directly across. Wide at the start, it narrowed to single file after the first bend near a statue of a half-man, half-bird figure. Two enforcers led the group down the path, with The Tat and Mrs. Lobe bringing up the rear.

As Dr. Amador passed the statue she stumbled, taking her over the path's edge and down a steep incline into a heavy cluster of ferns; landing awkwardly, she yelled in pain. The Tat screamed at her, sending down Mrs. Lobe. Once there, he roughly lifted her upright and then hoisted her up the hillside, pushing her in the small of her back while she used her hand in his as a leverage point to climb. When she reached the trail, The Tat grabbed her neck and moved her quickly to catch up with the group.

They were out of sight around another bend when Mrs. Lobe reached the path from his climb back up. He looked around for a moment before opening his palm to look at the flash drive Amador had given him. One more glance around, he then pulled out a satellite phone and punched in a message before heading down the path to rejoin the work party.

At the receiving end, a man in cowboy boots stared at the words.

DOC DID IT. IN HAND NOW. I'LL COME WITH THE NEXT SHIPMENT.