



Heart of Vengeance

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BEEER, PLEASE,” ALAN WRIGHT SAID AS HE PLOPPED HIMSELF onto the barstool.

“Whatever you have on tap is fine.”

“Got a local brew ya might like,” the bartender offered.

“Whatever.” Alan shrugged as he picked up the overpriced aspirin that he had just bought at the hotel gift shop and rolled it between his fingers. Joe—Alan managed to glance at the bartender’s nametag—returned the shrug, poured something dark amber in color, and slid the glass across the mahogany bar in front of Alan.

Alan tossed the three aspirin down his throat and chased them with the not entirely unpleasant beer. He rubbed his eyes, waiting for the mixture of painkiller and alcohol to numb the memories of the past few hours.

“Rough day, huh?” Joe asked. “Not having a good time at the convention?”

Alan rolled his eyes as he looked down at the SF/Fantasy convention tag he had forgotten to take off. “I just came to promote my book. They invited me to give a talk about folklore. I didn’t it expect it be so . . .”

“Crazy?” a feminine voice from behind Alan said. Alan turned to see a young woman, about college age. Her mousy hair had been pulled back into a single braid that hung below her waist. She kept a decently attractive face hidden behind thick, saucer-sized glasses and about ten extra pounds. She stood just a couple of hairs over five feet tall. Under her arm, she held a cardboard tubes, the kind that architects use to mail blueprints.

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Alan nodded. “I didn’t quite expect how fanatical some people are about this stuff.”

“You get used to it,” she said.

“You’ve been to many of these cons, Miss . . . ?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Becky.” She extended her hand for him to shake, which caused her to immediately drop the tube. As it bounced on the floor, Alan slipped off his stool to bend over to help her pick it up.

“Sorry,” Becky said. She jumped back and her glasses tumbled off her face. “Whoops.”

He retrieved the tube as she picked up her glasses. “Are you okay?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. I mean, I’m really sorry. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Pause. He handed her the tube. Pause. Alan took a sip from his beer. “Did you want to ask me something?”

“Oh, yeah.” Becky opened one end of the tube and pulled out a parchment. “When I heard about you being here, I went home—I live here in town—and got this.” She unfurled the parchment on the bar, knocking over the coasters and the plate of peanuts as she spread her hands across it. “Have you ever seen something like this before?”

The parchment looked like a charcoal rubbing with many strange characters were crammed together in irregular rows. “Hm, it looks like Phoenician.”

Becky’s eyes widened until they were almost as wide as the lenses of her glasses. “You can read it?”

Alan shook his head. “I recognize some of the symbols, but I don’t know the language. My field is folklore, not ancient languages.”

“Oh, that’s okay.” Her hand darted into the tube and tried to pull out something else. She coughed in frustration as she failed to reach whatever she was searching for. Alan set down his beer to help her. Swinging the tube to slide the contents out, she batted Alan’s beer glass off the bar. The glass hit the floor with a crash just as a few pieces of notebook paper tumbled onto the bar.

“Sorry,” Becky said.

Joe grunted something unintelligible as he reached under the bar and retrieved a dustpan and brush. Alan gave him a sympathetic shrug.

“Professor Morelli at the University of Minnesota was able to translate the writings.” Becky held up the papers. “He was sure that they forgeries, given where we found them.”

“Which was?”

“My friends and I were exploring these caves outside Duluth last summer and we found these stone tablets. I couldn’t believe it when Professor Morelli said it was Phoenician.”

“Hm,” Alan read the pages. It looked like a description of a journey of exploration. “Well, I’ve read a few theories about how the ancients were a little more well-traveled than modern historians give them credit, but if this real, this might