

*The
Emperor
Crown*©

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Rylan Mathis could smell the man's oily sweat as he chased him into the Parisian catacombs. It was the sweat of a coward's desperation. What should have been a simple jewelry heist had been thwarted, and now the thief was making like the rat he was... fleeing into this moldy subterranean refuge.

And to think the chase had started on rooftops! Rylan grimaced, his strong-jawed face flushed from this labyrinthine pursuit. Four thieves had attacked the museum gala just ten minutes ago, waving guns at the wealthy crowd of patrons. Three now were incapacitated, lying in a heap of broken glass and shattered tables. But this fourth one had eluded quick capture, scrambling out through the third-story window and dashing across roofs, with Rylan in hot pursuit.

Rylan ducked the slimy overhang of dripping catacomb arches as he stayed on the heels of his quarry. Yellow bones stuck out from the walls in ghastly piles. Almost two thousand years of history slumbered in these old limestone mines, while the Paris above glittered in night-lights and traffic, well-dressed couples strolling past street-level cafés, and musicians entertaining the riverside pavilions of the Seine.

The corridor banked sharply to the left, and suddenly the feeble light from the catacomb entrance was lost. Rylan could no longer see the villain in this Stygian black, so he concentrated on the erratic footsteps he could hear. Though running blind, he increased his speed, navigating this underworld labyrinth by smell and sound.

Rylan was tall, handsome, and muscular, with broad shoulders that filled his suit like the statue of a Greek Olympian. His face, too, resembled the stone portraits of timeless heroes. The line of his mouth touched a fleck of scar. An ancient and trusted medallion hung from a cord around his neck. Well-dressed as he was for a night of civilized recreation, his eyes were especially noteworthy. Feral, savagely alert, missing nothing, lit by the crackling fires of a survivalist spirit, as comfortable with the trappings of society as with the brutality of the wilderness, for he'd learned long ago that such things were not so divorced as most people wanted to believe.

The night had, up 'til the heist, been going just swell. He had managed to pry his friend Simon de Camp away from the inventors' pavilions by the Seine, and showed him

the museum's invitation. *"Thrilling Artifacts from the Mysterious Past!"* claimed the elegant scrawls. Rylan, Simon, and their raven-haired dates had attended, gathering with Paris' finest patrons of culture. As a group, they wandered past glorious Greek, Roman, Frankish, and Napoleonic relics...

Then four black-clad attackers announced themselves by a ring of gunshots into the plaster ceiling. The patrons screamed and quaked, but Rylan merely nodded to his friend Simon. Simon, as burly as a grizzly and with an appetite to match it, nodded back. Then the fight started, a full on scrap with the criminals in which bags, belts, a smashed display case, a sword which had fallen out of the smashed display case, and finally one of Simon's little surprises: an electric suit button which one of the thieves made the mistake of grabbing in the tussle. The blast of electricity knocked the assailant into an exhibit of Parthian jewelry, where he hung, his hair standing straight out, like a peculiar mockery of the Statue of Liberty.

Now it was down to this wild chase. From the gargoyle roofs to the hellish underdark.

Rylan heard the thief's shoes slip. There was a collapse of what must have been a bone heap, and his quarry cursed in the blackness. Feeling the underworld draft sucked into a sudden new direction, Rylan hastily struck out his hands, located a secondary shaft, and plunged in after his prey.

Suddenly, a match ignited. The thief was revealed in a splash of orange light, the match blazing in his left hand. He was a rodent-like man, nimble and whiskered. The shaft he had stumbled into was a dead-end.

The rat-like face twisted in smug satisfaction. "Enough of this running! All I needed was to see you up-close, to size you up." He held the burning match to his lips. "Now that I've seen you, you're a dead man. I'm an expert in blind-fighting."

His laugh blew out the match.

The sound of a brief scuffle, a wild punch failing to connect, an iron one-two succeeding.

Another match ignited, this one in Rylan's hand. The thief lay unconscious at his

feet.

“So am I,” Rylan grunted.

“Why would he make off with a simple Roman brooch?”

Rylan couldn't help but ask the question again, pacing in the museum hall. The guests were gone, the thugs carried off by a gaggle of flatfoots, and all stolen items returned. In other words, one item. Out of all the museum's priceless artifacts, as well as the fancy oyster-fruit around so many rich women's necks, it seemed one Roman brooch had been the heist's objective.

Simon shrugged, peeling off his tie and surveying the empty hall. A half-dozen policemen, and the Paris Museum's curator remained, which was really a shame, because a buffet table of delectable treats waited in the adjacent hall. Simon could see it from where he stood: plates of sliced turkey breast, crackers with the finest cheeses, escargot in raspberry glaze, pastries, scalloped potatoes, and champagne sparkling in slim-necked glasses.

“The girls all right?” Rylan asked him.

“Got them both a cab,” Simon said, and he inched over to the food.

Rylan turned back to the curator. “A simple brooch, *Monsieur* Pinon? Doesn't that raise your suspicions?”

The curator, Mr. Pinon, scowled... either at the mess, the wasted food, the bad publicity which had transpired on his watch, or at Rylan's comment.

“*Monsieur* Mathis,” the curator started, “While your reputation has certainly been proved tonight, I must point out that the brooch is hardly *simple*. Why, it dates back to Sulla's era!”

“But there are brooches like it, also from Sulla's era, in the museums of London, New York, and all across the Ottoman Empire,” Rylan maintained. “There are far more priceless artifacts here which a thief should have gone after.”

“You interrupted them.”

“No. Their leader, whom I defeated in the catacombs, made a point to grab that particular brooch. He strolled right past objects ten times its worth!”

The curator sighed impatiently, clearly eager to call it a night. “Petty criminals, monsieur, only see the glitter of gold. Likely he knew nothing of specific values.”

Rylan shook his head. “I’ve dealt with thieves and vagabonds of all sorts, from the sampan villages of Hong Kong, to the seedy streets of Istanbul, to the thugs of Chicago’s underworld.” At this latter mention, he noticed Simon jerk a look at them. Any mention of Chicago and mobster Lucky Luciano was a sore spot with him.

Rylan continued. “The men who attacked this museum were sophisticated. Or rather, they were following someone else’s sophisticated plan. If it was just gold they were after, why not snag the jewels in there!” He pointed to a display of an emperor’s cuirass. “Or the Second Century Syrian merchant chest there!” He jabbed a finger accordingly. “And Nero’s crown is more expensive than both!” He pointed.

And froze.

The display case for Nero’s crown was empty.

The consternation which followed was simply aggravating to Rylan. The policemen babbled, and the curator shouted back, and everyone encircled the pristine display case and clucked around it so frantically –

“The glass hasn’t been broken!”

“Was it locked, *monsieur*?”

“Of course it was locked! I take exception to your implication!”

“We are only trying – ”

“ – figure out who did this –”

Rylan made his way to his inventor friend. “The crown was sitting in that display just two minutes before the robbery! We’ve been had.”

It was a magician’s classic sleight-of-hand. Once shots were fired no one was paying mind to that side of the hall. The lack of forced entry deepened the mystery, until

Simon suggested any number of ways it could be done.

“A modern skeleton key, adapting to the configuration of the lock tumblers,” the big man said. “I could have done it.”

“But who would have access to a device like that?”

“Not many people,” Simon conceded. “Gadgeteers really. Spies. Government agents and other shadows of the espionage industry.”

Rylan paced, rubbing his chin. The crown would fetch a fine price, true, but the same problem existed as with the brooch. There were more expensive, even priceless, artifacts to be found in easy reach.

“It was the last crown worn by Emperor Nero,” the curator snapped when asked, and returned to quibbling with the police.

Rylan and Simon excused themselves, making a hasty exit. The night air felt good.

“The crown was valuable,” Rylan said thoughtfully.

“Sure,” Simon replied, fishing more crackers out of his pocket and stuffing them in his mouth.

“But not so valuable as to justify this method of theft. A staged robbery, exposure to risk like that, all for one crown? There has to be more going on! I’m sure of it!”

“We can hit the library in the morning, look up its history.”

Rylan’s eyes flashed. “Actually, I think we need more *thorough* information. Details, Simon, that might not be found in a public library.”

He let those words sink in. Simon’s chewing slowed. His mustachioed face twisted in an expression of disbelief. “You... no!”

Annick’s chateau lay among the castle-studded landscape to the southeast, secluded from France’s metropolitan regions. It was a luxuriant mansion surrounded by a forest of tangled wood, flowers, and creeping ivy, reachable by an hour train ride. Simon slept the whole way, his moustache twitching with each snore. Rylan, in the seat across

from him, remained fiercely alert and troubled, staring out the window at the shadowed countryside.

When they disembarked, a red dawn had broken, bleeding onto the horizon. The walk up the forested path to the chateau gate was scarlet and black.

“It’s like visiting a witch in the woods,” Simon muttered.

“Be nice now,” Rylan said, but he knew his friend was right. Annick was the mistress of crypts and vaults, a dabbler in dust, a scholar of sweet-smelling papyrus scrolls and sandy sarcophagus, of mossy Gaelic ruins and Scythian burial mounds. She was wealthy, and strangely connected wherever she traveled. Rylan spoke eleven languages, but she outdid him there. Once, in her shadowy library among swinging candles, he had seen a cache of moldy books whose faded writing matched nothing he recognized. When he asked her about them, she merely smiled and purred, “Mankind is young, Rylan, and the art of writing is old indeed.”

The chateau’s front gate was locked, but there was a bell there. Rylan rang it, swinging his arms back and forth in perfect rhythm. Six rings exactly.

From the front door of the house came a flicker of shadow. The door swung wide. A youthful woman strode forth, her chestnut curls draped across her shoulders to her wasp-like waist. Blue gossamer livery, like something out of an Arthurian painting, hugged her curvaceous body.

Annick approached, her sapphire eyes burning with pleasure. “Rylan! And *Simon!* I heard rumors you back! Yet I refused to believe it, for surely you would have dropped in on me sooner, no?”

“What can you tell me about the Crown of Nero?” Rylan asked through the gate bars.

Annick slipped her hands through the iron lattice, caressing his large, tanned arms. The contact was electrifying; Rylan couldn’t help but think of the electric stun device Simon had used on one museum thief. But Annick’s touch was worse... a hot burn worming into his body, possessing his blood, so that he flushed, his body stirring.

“And here I thought you still held me a grudge,” Annick said, her pink tongue

flicking across her ruby lips, “for cutting that rope when you were climbing out of the Hollow Earth. How long were you stranded down there? Must have taken years to tunnel out. You’re not still mad, are you?”

Simon shoved his bulky arm through the bars so fast the limb nearly got stuck. Annick laughed and clapped her hands in delight.

“You old witch!”

“Old?” she pouted.

“Yes, old! And we both know why..”

Rylan stopped them both with a sharp clearing of his throat. “The Crown of Nero, Annick. Start talking or I’ll let Simon here tear down this gate and then go to work on your house.”

The sorceress’ smile slipped. “Nero’s crown? Who cares about that? It’s just a headpiece for that demented little Roman cretin.”

“There must be something special about it.”

“Just silly stories.”

“Such as?”

“Nero,” she said with a hostility that was surprising even for her, “was an insane tyrant with a big nose. He believed anything he was told. When his Mom made him Caesar, he took the crown that his predecessors had worn. But one day, a mysterious traveler convinced him to buy a different crown... yes, it was sold to him... because he believed what the traveler said about it: it had come from the gods themselves.”

Rylan frowned. “The gods?”

“I told you it was just a story.”

“Which gods?”

“The Olympian gods. The stories differ on which divinity wore it. But the crown was supposedly flung from Mount Olympus, by accident or on purpose, after the Titan revolt was put down.”

“It is magical then?”

“I don’t know.” She withdrew from the gate, visibly disappointed that he wouldn’t

be coming in.

They returned to the hotel slowly, thoughts dominated by the events of the day. Rylan made a point to take a detour to the nearest telegraph office, where he sent a message to his crack aviatrix Helena, and her sharp-shooting partner Maximilian.

- Believe trouble is afoot. Simon and I are staying at the Paris Grand Hotel. Theft at Paris Museum. Standby -

Outside again, they resumed their trek to the hotel. Rylan knew it was his enduring habit to think a conspiracy dwelt in everything. But that was only because there was a conspiracy in everything. It made him feel divided from the people he had sworn to protect. They went about their lives in a delirious fog. There was almost something noble about their ignorance, like an Amazon tribe's innocence to the world beyond their leafy universe.

Something red fluttered by his face and touched the cobbled pavement. A rose petal.

He glanced up, expecting to see a high window with potted flowers being disturbed by a sudden gust. Instead, more petals spiraled towards him, collecting on his face. Thousands of petals! Millions! So thick he could barely see the source. The street was instantly carpeted in delicate red, which cars cut through like boats breaking through rosy waters, their drivers leaning out their windows in bewilderment, craning their necks to see what the fuss was about.

There was something moving across the sky.

A flourish of silver trumpets sounded, the triumphant melody promising unstoppable victory.

"I don't believe it," Simon whispered, sharing Rylan's view of the midnight sky. Rylan gasped. His hard eyes tried desperately to process the sight.

A marble pavilion was hovering over the city, floating down towards the Arc de Triomphe. Wide and flat it was, with naked statues ringing its side, and from the

amphoras they grabbed poured rose petals in an unending vermillion stream. Rylan could see a dais and throne in its center. The pavilion was flanked by floating chariots, being drawn by mechanical horses who cantered upon the air. Soldiers stood in these, human by all appearance, though dressed as alabaster centurions.

Rylan's feet moved. He followed the incredible airy procession, setting his sights on the grinning man seated upon the ornate throne.

He was wearing a crown.

The astonishing apparitions were capturing every Parisian's attention. A crowd was following it, whispering in an even mixture of fear, bemusement, and glee. When the pavilion approached the Arch d Triomphe, it ascended to a higher altitude, spun in a slow circle, and rested upon the decorative masonry.

"Citizens of Paris!" the man boomed. His voice was incredibly powerful, far stronger than any megaphone could do. When he spoke, the words seemed to strike Rylan like invisible hammers. "I welcome you to a new era! The modern world has forsaken you! But the past is not forgotten!"

The enrapt crowd stared, glittering eyes fixed on this magical visitor. A few people offered a playful cheer.

"I am the New Caesar," the man declared. "The city of Paris shall join the newly-made Roman Empire."

The metropolitan police were as equally stunned as the rest of the city, but they were slowly reestablishing a sense of order. Like a dark ring, they began to close to the foot of the Arch, even as people grinned at the freakish sight and openly wondered if this was some new technology to celebrate the City of Lights' modern age.

"Is it technology?" Rylan whispered to Simon. "Or a Power?"

Their globe-trotting adventures with the rest of their team had placed them into conflict with both. Tribal shamans who could walk in the spirit world, cave-dwelling cultists in the misty bogs of Ireland itching to awaken their frightful slumbering god,

and the moon-beasts of Peru had all awakened in the group an appreciation for the presence of magic or, as Simon preferred to call them, “deeper levels of mechanistic reality than we currently understand.” Rylan didn’t care for such distinctions. Maybe Simon was right, and the horrors the group had encountered were little different from the robotic fiends they had thwarted in the Arctic five years ago. But it didn’t matter to Rylan. A threat was a threat, and needed heroes to address them.

Simon was craning his massive neck, trying to study the underside of the pavilion. “No machine parts. It’s just a concave slab of marble floating, somehow defying the air, or lighter than the air, or... Rylan! What are you doing?”

Rylan had already started pushing his way through the crowd to get a closer look at their visitor when a police inspector intoned to the Caesar, “You there! You must remove yourself from the arch at once! Even if this some sort of joke –”

“I offer you prosperity and love,” Caesar declared. “Though I require your obedience in the new world we shall be making! Send me your ambassadors to formally offer your surrender. I shall be at the base of the Eiffel Tower, and establish a new governor for this province.”

“I say again, you must come down here!”

The Caesar pointed to the man.

A bolt of lightning leapt from his fingertips and struck the inspector. The man’s body rolled over and flopped around. Finally it was still, while tendrils of smoke wafted up from the corpse.

The crowd let out a roar of terror, all heads turned towards the dead man.

Rylan hesitated, though only momentarily. He studied the New Caesar’s face, the crown. Ah! In the museum, the crown had been without adornment. But now there was a strange jewel fitted into its unremarkable front. Purple and silver light moved like swarms of fishes, moonlight glinting off their scales.

“The New Caesar promises you peace, or the horrors of my divine punishments! Any with the authority to entreat with me shall come to the Eiffel, for the sake of all of France!” The man smiled broadly. “Peace and prosperity in the New Empire!”

The police opened fire.

A barrage of bullets was unleashed upon the pavilion as it rose up from the Arch. The crowd screamed and scattered in all directions like a disintegrating swarm. Rylan felt himself tugged at by Simon, but he could only stare at the sight of the bullets shattered against some form of invisible force field.

This magical barrier seemed to be one way, for the Caesar calmly pointed into the crowd and struck several more officers dead even as his pavilion moved off, heading towards the city's famous tower.

Simon pulled at him again. "We need to leave! Now!"

"We will speak again!" promised the Caesar, and his vehicle floated off.

From a distance, the surviving police were still shooting at it. Then they stopped, as they all realized that the chariots were not departing. In fact, they were lowering to almost street level.

The gleaming silver centurions leapt out and fell upon all who remained. And though these men didn't seem protected with invisible shields like their master, the policemen's bullets were proving just as ineffective; the warriors were clad in white-silver armor from plumed helmet to soldier boots, with only a narrow window for their mouths. Even their eyes were covered, yet somehow this didn't hamper their fighting proficiency as they impaled, struck, and swatted at the defenders with their jeweled spears.

Rylan charged forward into the battle. One officer discharged a final shot at a nearby centurion, and seeing the slug glanced off the magical chest-plate with a spark of protest, he furiously tried to reload. The centurion ran at him with a grim eagerness, spear poised for a lethal pierce.

Rylan increased his speed. Bullets flew by him like hornets; the coppers were firing wildly now, and there was an increasing chance that they would hit an innocent. The centurion bore down on the cop, and Rylan pushed his muscular legs to greater speed to close to distance and reach the attacker first. The centurion let the spear fly.

Rylan snatched the weapon out of the air, startled by its lightness. The centurion

had time to show astonishment on his lips when Rylan brought the spear around, striking the man with a *clang!* on the helmet. The blow was so powerful that the man staggered back drunkenly, tripped over his own feet, and fell flat onto his back.

“There!” Rylan cried triumphantly.

Only his keen survival instincts, honed like a fine blade in the wild, saved his life. Pure animal instinct made him sense imminent danger, and he leapt aside, striking out his weapon in time to deflect someone’s thrown spear. The weapon clattered, rolled, and was scooped up by Simon.

Every centurion now made a ring around them, closing in.

“Any gadgets to get us out of this?” Rylan asked.

“Left them at the hotel.”

“Swell.”

As the attacking line constricted, the two men chose that instant to strike out while they still had some freedom of movement. There were twenty, no thirty centurions. Rylan tripped one with a swipe to the legs, stabbed another in the face. The street was soon covered with splotches of blood and the rattle of smashed teeth.

But they were hopelessly outnumbered. In the midst of a spinning attack, Rylan felt a huge weight crash into him. He stumbled to one knee, glanced over his shoulder to see Simon bleeding profusely from the chest. In desperation and disgust, Rylan threw his own spear at the nearest attacker and watched it lance him through the mouth.

“*Zol Sagul Eresh na!*”

The sudden words were like a waterfall of fury. They were also from a *female* throat.

It had barely registered in Rylan’s ears when a fog rolled in. The Parisian newspapers would later describe it like that, how at the height of an ill-fated melee with the New Empire’s foot-soldiers, a sudden fog had descended. But to Rylan and the barely-conscious Simon, it was as if the air had sprouted mist like a seeded yard erupting a forest... all in seconds.

For the second time in twenty-four hours, Rylan was blind. The grey mist pressed

against his eyes. Simon's hot blood kept running through his fingers; the frantic thought flashed through his mind that, after countless adventures across the world, he was about to lose his closest and most trusted friend.

A patch of fog darkened into a slender silhouette. The miasma parted like phantom curtains around the serene face of Annick.

"Let's go," she said quickly, and winced as the unseen centurions began hissing desperately in the fog. "Quietly."

"Not that way," Rylan whispered, pulling away from her helping hands. "This way... towards the Eiffel."

Hearing this, Simon's eyes bulged. "Are you insane?" he sputtered.

"No. Just possessed by an idea."

The green yard in the front of the Eiffel had been entirely transformed in just a day. The floating pavilion was there, but now it was apparent it was only part of a larger structure. Rylan had spent much time in Italy, fighting off Mussolini's Ceka thugs, and he had seen the ruin-studded Italian countryside in depth. Here was a recreation of that nation's colonnaded courtyards, with white stone and a domed ceiling, with the New Caesar's pavilion sitting below. Bronze and silver statues to the full pantheon of Olympian deities ringed it; voluptuous Venus, scowling Mars, wing-footed Mercury, trident-wielding Neptune.

And Caesar. He sat in the middle of their attention, looking wrathful, pouring over documents held by his attendants. A massive crowd waited before him, kneeling, as he apparently was taking the time to see them one by one.

"Guess the ambassadors didn't please him," Annick observed. Rylan nodded grimly, seeing fourteen men crucified off to the pavilion's side, closer to the street. Other posts waited like fallen logs, centurions standing ready with hammers in hand, ready to add to the human forest at their master's command.

Rylan snorted in rage. "Whether guillotines or the Inquisition's rack, the desire

of men to oppress others continues. Past, present or future. The tools and props change, not the heart of the species!" He spat. "Wait here."

Annick cringed. "You're sure about this..."

But he was already marching down to the pavilion, boldly striding past the kneeling crowd.

"Mighty Caesar!" Rylan roared, and the cowering masses jumped at his voice. The Caesar shot him a murderous glance. Rylan walked with such a brisk pace that the crowd separated before him. Centurions crossed spears to halt his further advance.

Rylan stopped.

And knelt.

"Who dares approach without my permission?" the Caesar screamed, jumping to his feet.

Rylan gritted his teeth, having sworn to never submit before tyranny. "Your humble servant and advocate!"

This stopped the emperor. His scowl deepened. "Explain yourself."

Rylan held out his ancient medallion. A gift in his youth, it was this medallion which had inspired Rylan to take up adventuring in the first place. It was this medallion which he had long considered the manifestation of his luck. He never took it off.

In a flash the scowl vanished from the Caesar's face. Rylan doubted the man knew from what vanished culture the medallion had come from... he himself didn't know. Annick believed this New Caesar was simply a modern opportunist who had learned to mix and match ancient artifacts, and then set himself up as a god. It wouldn't be the first time, she said evasively.

"A gift for you," Rylan said, "and to pledge my obedience in your New Empire."

At Caesar's nod, a centurion snagged the medallion from Rylan's hand and gave it to his master. Caesar stared in open fascination. Rylan could almost see the gears of the man's mind working, trying to ascertain if this was another magical item. It wasn't, as far as Rylan knew, and he had no wish to part with it long enough for a villain like this to prove him wrong.

“Where did you come by this marvel?”

“It was foretold to me, from childhood, to deliver this to the greatest man I ever saw. It possesses some secret which only the rightful king can uncover!”

Caesar was now his captive audience. The man’s eyes twinkled, buying every honey-coated lie with foolish abandon.

“My own Gordian Knot?” Caesar asked quietly, and instantly began running his chubby fingers over it, poking and prying, discovering the strange device which Rylan had clipped to its underside.

Rylan kept his head bowed, seeing his own reflection on the mirrored blades of the centurions in front of him.

“Ah-ha!” Caesar cried, and tried to dig out the device.

Now.

As his fingers came in contact with Simon’s button, the electrical properties went to work. Caesar shrieked, convulsing in a violent electrocution, running like a bird all across the dais. The centurions gaped in dismay.

In that moment of distraction, Rylan leapt to his feet and disarmed the nearest guard. In a blinding flash of movement, far quicker than any other man, he had lopped the next guard’s head clean off.

The New Caesar continued screaming himself hoarse.

Rylan leapt onto the dais and smashed his sword against the man’s crown. The ancient artifact tumbled off, rolled around in a neat circle, and stopped. With the hilt of the blade, Rylan knocked the petty despot out cold.

“Citizens,” Rylan cried, turning to the crowd who were already rising to their feet. He saw Simon among them, a heavy bandage strapped across his chest. “You overthrew tyranny once more than a hundred years ago! *Do so again!*”

The crowd flung itself upon the centurions like a dark wave.

Rylan looked at the crown at his feet while the chaos erupted around him. So eas-

ily could he set it on his head, and have power for good. He, gadgeteer Simon, sharp-shooting Maximilian and the beautiful aviatrix Helena could face their enemies with ease, correct the wrongs of corrupt governments, and help the people of Earth. In time he would have armies at his command, and they would be unstoppable...

Rylan shook his head. He nodded to Simon, and tossed the crown high into the air.

“No!” Annick screamed, clawing helplessly at the air.

Simon wasn’t as fast or accurate as Peter. But with a single shotgun blast he blew the crown apart, which danced musically upon the marble pavilion.

In the chaos that ensued, Annick pawed helplessly at the fragments of the crown. Rylan and Simon left her there.

“There has to be good restaurant nearby,” Simon said. “I’m starving.”



The End... for *now!*