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Opening extract from

Scorpia Rising

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STOLEN GODS

The man in the black cashmere coat climbed down the steps of his private six-seater Learjet 40 and stood for a moment, his breath frosting in the chill morning air. He glanced across the tarmac as a refuelling truck rumbled past. In the distance two men in fluorescent jackets were standing talking in front of a hangar. Otherwise, he seemed to be alone. Ahead of him a sign read WELCOME TO LONDON CITY AIRPORT, and beneath it an open door beckoned, leading to immigration. He headed for it, unaware that he was being watched every step of the way.

The man was in his fifties, bald and expressionless. Inside the terminal he gave his passport to the official and watched with blank eyes as it was examined and handed back, then continued on his way. He had no luggage. There was a black limousine waiting for him outside with a grey-suited chauffeur behind the wheel. The man offered no greeting as he got in, nor did he speak

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as they set off, following the curve of the River Thames up towards Canning Town and on towards the centre of London itself.

His name was Zeljan Kurst and he was wanted by the police in seventeen different countries. He was the chief executive of the international criminal organization known as Scorpia and, as far as it was known, he had never been seen on the streets of London. However, MI6 had been tipped off that he was coming, and they had been waiting for him to land. The passport official was one of their secret agents. They were following him now.

"Heading west on the A13 Commercial Road towards Whitechapel. Car three take over at the next intersection."

"Car three moving into position..."

"OK. Dropping back..."

The disembodied voices bounced across the airwaves on a channel so secret that anyone trying to tune in without the necessary filters would hear only the hiss of static. It would have been easier to arrest Kurst at the airport. He could have been made to disappear in five seconds, bundled out in a crate and never seen again. But it had been decided, at the very highest level, to follow him and see where he went. For the head of Scorpia to be in England at all was remarkable. For him to be on his own, and on his way to a meeting, was beyond belief.

Zeljan Kurst was not aware that he was surrounded. He had no idea that his flight plan had

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been leaked by one of his own people in return for a complete change of identity and a new life in Panama. But even so, he was uneasy. Everything had told him that he shouldn't be here. When the invitation had first arrived on his desk, delivered by a series of middlemen and travelling halfway round the world and back again, he had thought about refusing. He was not an errand boy. He couldn't be summoned like a waiter in a restaurant. But then he had reconsidered.

When the fourth richest man in the world asks you to meet him, and pays you one million euros just to turn up, it might be as well to hear what he has to say.

"We're on High Holborn. Car four moving to intercept."

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute. He's turning off…"

The limousine had crossed the main road and entered a narrow street full of old-fashioned shops and cafés. The move had taken the MI6 men by surprise, and for a moment, there was panic as they struggled to catch up. Two of their cars swerved across the traffic – to a blast of horns – and plunged in after it. They were just in time to see the limousine stop and Zeljan Kurst get out.

"Car four. Where are you?" The voice was suddenly urgent. "Where is the target?"

A pause. Then: "He's entering the British Museum."

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It was true. Kurst had passed through the gates and was crossing the open area in front of the famous building which rose up ahead of him, its huge pillars stretching from one side to the other. He was carrying an ebony walking stick that measured out his progress, rapping against the concrete. The MI6 men were already piling out of their own cars but they were too late. Even as they watched from the other side of the gates, Kurst disappeared into the building and they knew that if they didn't act swiftly, they would lose him for good. There was more than one way out. It was unlikely that the Scorpia man would have travelled all the way to England just to look at an exhibit. He might have gone inside deliberately to shake them off.

"He's inside the museum. Cars one, two and three, surround the building. Watch all possible exits. We need immediate backup."

Someone had taken charge. But whoever it was, his voice sounded high-pitched and uncertain. It was eleven o'clock on a bright February morning. The museum would be crowded with tourists and schoolchildren. If there was going to be any action, if they were going to arrest Zeljan Kurst, this was the last place they would want to do it.

In fact, Kurst was still unaware of his pursuers as he crossed the Great Court, a gleaming white space with a spectacular glass roof sweeping in a huge curve overhead. He skirted round the gift shops and information booths, making for the

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first galleries. As he went he noticed a Japanese couple, tiny and almost identical, taking photographs of each other against a twisting staircase. A bearded student with a backpack was looking at the postcards, pulling them out one at a time and studying them as if trying to find hidden codes. Tap, tap, tap. The end of the walking stick beat out its rhythm as Kurst continued on his way. He knew exactly where he was going and would arrive at the precise minute that had been agreed.

Zeljan Kurst was a large man with heavy, broad shoulders that formed a straight line on either side of an unnaturally thick neck. He was bald by choice. His head had been shaved and there was a dark grey shadow beneath the skin. His eyes, a muddy brown, showed little intelligence and he had the thick lips and small, squashed nose of a wrestler, or perhaps a bouncer at a shady nightclub. Many people had underestimated him and occasionally Kurst had found it necessary to correct them. This usually involved killing them.

He walked past the statue of a crouching naked goddess. An elderly woman in a deerstalker hat, sitting on a stool with brushes and oil paints, was making a bad copy of it on a large white canvas. Ahead of him were two stone animals – strangely shaped lions – and to one side an entire temple, more than two thousand years old, brought from south-west Turkey and reconstructed piece by piece. He barely glanced at them. He didn't like

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museums, although his house was furnished with rare objects that had been stolen from several of them. But that was the point. Why should something that might be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds be left to moulder in a dark room, stared at by idiot members of the general public who had little or no idea of its true value? Kurst had a simple rule in life. To enjoy something fully you had to own it. And if you couldn't buy it, then you would have to steal it.

Ahead of him two glass doors led into a final gallery. He watched as a tall, well-built black man carrying a notebook and pen walked through, then went in himself. The gallery was huge, stretching out in both directions like an airport runway. Although more than a hundred people were there, it wasn't even half full. Everything was grey: the walls, the floor, the very air. But spotlights, shining down from a ceiling five times higher than the visitors who stood beneath it, picked out the treasures that the room contained, and these shone, soft and gold.

They ran along both walls, from one end to the other, a series of marble tablets with a crowd of figures that had been brought together to form a single line. They were men and women, ancient Greeks, some sitting, others standing, some talking, some riding on horseback. Some carried musical instruments, others bundles of linen or plates and glasses for a feast. Many were

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incomplete. Two and a half millennia had worn away their faces, broken off arms and legs. But there was something remarkable about the details that remained. It was easy to see that these had been real people who had once lived ordinary lives until they had been frozen in this waking dream, an entire world captured in stone.

Zeljan Kurst barely glanced at them. The gallery had two raised platforms, one at each end, reached by a short flight of steps with a disabled lift – which must have been used by the man he had come to see. There he was in a wheelchair, on the far right, sitting alone, with a blanket over his knees. Kurst walked over to him.

"Mr Kurst?" The voice was dry and strangled. It came from a lizard neck.

Kurst nodded. He was a careful man and made it a rule never to speak unless there was a particular need.

"I am Ariston."

"I know who you are."

"Thank you for coming."

Yannis Ariston Xenopolos was said to be worth about thirty-five billion dollars – nearly twenty-five billion pounds. He had made this fortune from a huge shipping empire which he controlled from his offices in Athens. To this he had added an airline, Ariston Air, and a chain of hotels. And now he was dying. Kurst would have known it even without reading the stories in the newspapers.

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It was obvious from the sunken cheeks, the dreadful white of the man's skin, the way he sat like a hunched-up Egyptian mummy, his body disappearing into itself. But most of all it was in his eyes. Kurst had once been the head of the Yugoslavian police force and he had always been interested in the way the prisoners had looked at him just before he executed them. He could see the same thing right here. The Greek had accepted death. All hope had gone.

"I took a considerable risk coming here." Kurst spoke with a heavy mid-European accent which somehow dragged his words down. "What is it you want?"

"I would have thought the answer would be obvious to you."

"The Elgin Marbles."

"Exactly. I wanted you to come here so that you would understand."

Ariston reached out with a hand that was more like a claw, gripping a lever on one wheel of his chair. The whole thing was battery-operated and, with a soft whirr, it spun him round so that he faced the room.

"This is one of the greatest pieces of art that the world has ever produced," he began. "Take a look at the figures, Mr Kurst. They are so beautiful that it is almost impossible to find the words to describe them. They once decorated a temple in the heart of Athens – the Parthenon, dedicated to

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Athena, the goddess of wisdom. The frieze which you are examining depicts the summer festival that took place every year in honour of the goddess…"

Again the claw pressed down, turning him so that he faced a group of statues which stood behind him. First there was a horse rising as if out of water, with only its head showing. Then came a naked man, lying on his back. Then three women, all missing their heads. From the way they were arranged, it was clear that these figures had once stood in one of the pediments at each end of the Parthenon.

"The horse belonged to Helios, the sun god," Ariston explained. "Next comes Dionysus, the god of wine. The figures to his left are the goddess Demeter and her daughter—"

"I am familiar with the Elgin Marbles," Kurst interrupted. It didn't matter how much he had been paid. He hadn't come here for a lecture.

"Then you will also be aware that they were plundered. Stolen! Two hundred years ago, a British aristocrat called Lord Elgin came to Athens. He tore them off the temple and transported them back to London. Since then my country has asked many times for them to be returned. We have even built a new museum in Athens to house them. They are the glory of Greece, Mr Kurst. They are part of our heritage. They should come home."

The old man fumbled in the folds of his blanket and produced an oxygen mask, which he pressed

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against his face. There was the hiss of compressed air and he sucked greedily. At last he continued.

"But the British government have refused. They insist on keeping this stolen property. They will not listen to the voice of the Greek people. And so I have decided that although it will be the last thing I do in my life, I will make them listen. That is why I have contacted you and your organization. I want you to steal the sculptures and return them to Greece."

In the street outside, four more cars had pulled up next to the British Museum, spilling out fifteen more agents. With the ones who had followed Kurst from City Airport, that brought the total to twenty-three. They were fairly confident that their man was still inside the building, but with seventy-six galleries covering a floor space of a fifth of a square mile, it was going to be almost impossible to find him. And already the order had gone out. "Do not, under any circumstances, approach him while he is in a public area. This man is extremely dangerous. If he feels trapped, there's no saying what he will do. The result could be a bloodbath."

Zeljan Kurst was quite unaware of the approaching MI6 men as he considered what the Greek billionaire had just said.

"Stealing the Elgin Marbles won't help you," he said. "The British government will simply demand them back. It would be better to threaten them. Blackmail them, perhaps."

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"Do whatever it takes. I don't care. You can kill half the population of this loathsome country if it will achieve what I want..." Ariston broke into a fit of coughing. Pearls of white saliva appeared at the corners of his mouth.

Kurst waited for him to recover. Then he nodded slowly. "It can be done," he said. "But it will take time. And it will be expensive."

Ariston nodded. "This work will be my legacy to the Greek people. If you agree to do it for me, I will pay you five million euros immediately, and a further fifteen million when you succeed."

"It's not enough," Kurst said.

Ariston looked at him slyly. "There was a time when you might have said that and I would have been forced to agree. But Scorpia is not what it was. There have been two failures in the space of a single year. The operation called Invisible Sword and, more recently, the business in north-west Australia." He smiled, showing grey teeth. "The very fact that you are here today shows how weak you have become."

"Scorpia has regrouped," Kurst retorted. "We have taken on new recruits. I would say we are stronger than ever. We can choose our clients, Mr Xenopolos, and we do not negotiate."

"Name your price."

"Forty million."

Ariston's eyes barely flickered. "Agreed."

"Half in advance."

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"As you wish."

Kurst turned and walked away without saying another word, his cane beating the same rhythm on the floor. As he made his way back towards the entrance, his mind was already focused on the task that lay ahead. Although he would never have dreamed of saying as much, he was glad he had come here today. It was very much his desire to take on the British government once again. The failures Ariston had mentioned had both involved the British secret service.

It was fortunate that the old man hadn't heard the full story. Would he have still approached Scorpia if he had known the almost incredible truth? That both failures had involved the same fourteen-year-old boy?

In the end it was just bad luck – bad timing – that Kurst left the gallery when he did. He was about to reach the Great Court when one of the MI6 agents crossed in front of him and suddenly the two of them were face to face, only inches apart. The agent – his name was Parker – was new and inexperienced. He was unable to keep the shock out of his eyes and at that moment Kurst knew he had been recognized.

Parker had no choice. He had been given his orders, but he knew that if he obeyed them he would die. He fumbled in his jacket and pulled out his pistol, a 9mm Browning, long a favourite of the SAS. At the same time, he shouted, louder than he

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needed to, "Stay where you are! If you move, I'll fire." It was exactly how he had been trained. He was both exerting his authority over his target and alerting any nearby agents that his cover had been blown.

In the silence of the museum and with the ceiling so high overhead, his words echoed out. A few tourists turned to see what was happening and caught sight of the gun. The first seeds of panic were planted and instantly began to grow.

Kurst raised his hands, one of them still holding the ebony walking stick, and moved very slightly to one side. Parker followed him with his eyes and didn't see something flash through the air over Kurst's shoulder, didn't even notice it until it had buried itself in his throat.

The old woman who had been painting a copy of the kneeling goddess had followed Kurst to the door. Underneath the make-up she wasn't old at all, and her brushes might have had tufts at one end but the handles were precision-made steel and razor sharp.

Parker fell to his knees. In the last second of his life his trigger finger tightened and the gun went off, the explosion amplified by the stone walls all around. That was when the panic began for real.

The tourists screamed and scattered, some of them diving into the shops or behind the information desks. A group of primary school children who had been visiting the Egyptian mummies crouched down beside the stairs, cowering together.

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An American woman standing next to them began to scream. The British Museum guards, many of them old and long retired from their real careers, remained frozen to the spot, completely unprepared for an event like this. Kurst stepped over the dead man and continued to move slowly towards the main door.

Of course he hadn't come to the museum alone. Scorpia would not have risked the life of its chief executive, even for a million euros, and its agents surrounded him on all sides. As the MI6 men closed in from every direction, still unsure what had happened but knowing that all the rules had changed, they were met by a hail of machine-gun fire. The bearded student who had been examining the postcards had reached into his backpack and drawn out a miniature machine gun with folding shoulder stock and was spraying the court with bullets. An MI6 man, halfway down the West Stairs, threw his arms back in surprise, then jerked forward and tumbled down. The American woman was still screaming. The primary school children were crying in terror. All the alarms in the building had gone off. People were running in every direction.

The Japanese man who had been photographing his wife threw his camera on the floor and it exploded with a soft woomph, releasing thick, dark green fumes into the air. In seconds Kurst had disappeared. The Great Court had become a battle zone.

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Two MI6 agents slid to a halt, trying to peer through the smoke. There was a loud crack, then another, and they fell to the ground. They had been shot in the legs by the Japanese woman, who had produced a pearl-handled Nambu pistol from her handbag.

Meanwhile, holding a handkerchief across his face, Kurst had reached the main doors. There had been little security when he came in; there was none as he left. Out of the corner of his eye he saw an MI6 agent try to rush him, then fall back as he was grabbed by his personal bodyguard, the black man with the notebook whom he had registered on his way to the Elgin Marbles. The human neck makes an unmistakable sound when it is snapped, and he heard it now. The agent slumped to the ground. Kurst walked out into the fresh air.

There were people running between the pillars, tumbling down the steps and hurling themselves across the open area in front of the museum. Already the police were on their way, their sirens growing in volume as they came together from different parts of the city. Kurst's limousine was waiting for him at the gates. But there were two men moving purposefully towards him, both dressed in charcoal grey suits and sunglasses. He briefly wondered why people who worked in espionage had to make themselves look so obvious. They had become aware of the chaos inside the British Museum and were racing in. Perhaps they hadn't expected him to emerge so quickly.

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Kurst lifted his walking stick. It was in fact a hollowed-out tube with a single gas-fired bullet and an electric trigger concealed just beneath the handle. The bullet had been specially modified. It wouldn't just kill a man. It would tear him in half.

He fired. The man on the left was blown off his feet, landing in a spinning, bloody ball. The second man froze for just one second. It was much too long. Moving surprisingly fast for someone of his age, Kurst swung the walking stick through the air, using it like a sword. The metal casing slammed into the agent's throat and he crumpled. Kurst ran for the car. The back door was already open and he threw himself in, slamming it behind him. There was a series of gunshots. But the car windows were bulletproof and the bodywork was armour-plated. With a screech of tyres, the limousine swung out. Another man stood in the way, his gun held commando-style, in both hands. The chauffeur accelerated. There was a thud as the man hit the bumper and he was hurled out of the way.

Two hours later, a man in a blond wig, wearing sunglasses and holding a huge bunch of flowers, boarded the Eurostar train to Paris. Zeljan Kurst hated these disguises, but it was something else he had learned in his long career. If you're trying not to be seen, it often helps to make yourself as prominent as possible. The flowers and the wig were ridiculous, but although the police and MI6

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were looking for him all over London, they certainly wouldn't associate them with him.

As he settled into his pre-booked seat in first class and sipped his complimentary glass of champagne, Kurst's mind was focused on the problem he had been given. The shoot-out at the museum was already forgotten. The question was – who would be the best person to handle this quite interesting business of the Elgin Marbles? There were now twelve members of Scorpia, including him, and he mentally went over them one by one.

Levi Kroll, the former Israeli agent who, in a moment of carelessness, had shot out his own eye? Mikato, the Japanese policeman turned yakuza gangster? Dr Three? Or perhaps this might be an opportunity for their newest recruit? He had the sort of mind that would enjoy working out a problem of this complexity, along with the ruthlessness to see it through to the end.

There was a blast of a whistle and the train moved off. Kurst took out his mobile phone – encrypted, of course – and dialled a number. The train slid down the platform and picked up speed, and as they left St Pancras International, Kurst permitted himself the rare luxury of a smile. Yes. Razim was perfect. He would bring his unique talents to this new assignment. Kurst was sure of it. He had chosen exactly the right man.

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