

# **MOON MASK**

A circular, textured mask, possibly made of wood or stone, with a weathered appearance. It features two large, almond-shaped eye openings with horizontal slits. The mask is adorned with intricate carvings, including a central triangular motif and swirling patterns on the cheeks. The overall design is symmetrical and traditional.

**JAMES  
RICHARDSON**

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14:  
*Xibalba*

Xibalba,  
Sarisariñama Tepui,  
Venezuela,

Bullets strafed the ancient walls as Raine and King darted through the darkness. They swung around the side of the gate and skidded to a halt just inside the entrance.

“What are you doing?” King asked when Raine held him back from venturing further into the ancient ruins. “We’ve got to keep going?”

“The moment you switch that torch back on, they’ll see us. And I, for one, don’t plan on spending eternity running around aimlessly in the dark in some Inca hell.”

“Mayan,” King felt the need to correct him. Luckily, he couldn’t see the fierce glare Raine shot him through the blackness. “Okay, so how do we get out of here?”

“Same way as the crocs,” Raine replied. Crocodiles weren’t nocturnal animals. They basked in sunlight for hours, their bodies needing the warmth it provided. Their reptilian hosts didn’t spend all day inside the hollowed out interior of a mountain, Raine knew. For such a large colony to have developed and survived, they had to have access to the outside world.

“How are we going to-”

“Shut up,” Raine snapped at him. He knew it was part of an academic’s nature to question everything, but in a fire-fight it was damned annoying. Right now, he missed the discipline of well trained soldiers watching his back.

The firing had stopped and a painful silence had descended

upon the two men. All of Raine's senses were on alert, ultra-sensitive. King's breathing seemed impossibly loud in his ears as he strained to listen for the soldiers' approach. He focussed passed the beating of his own heart, the dripping of moisture and the roar of the distant falls-

There!

The crunch of earth beneath a boot. Quiet, almost silent. But definitely there.

It came again, one stealthy footstep followed by another, cautiously approaching the gate; ten feet away, nine.

He wished he hadn't lost the night vision goggles in his tumble over the waterfall. At least they would have evened the odds a little. Instead, right now, one heavily armed predator that could see in the dark stalked its totally blind prey.

Feeling with his hands, he reached down and silently took the torch from King while gently tugging him down into a crouch. The archaeologist didn't resist and, whether or not he had heard the soldier's approach, he knew enough not to say a word.

Raine took hold of the torch's shaft, repositioning it in his palm while in his head he pictured the soldier's position, listening to the sounds of his footfalls.

*Crunch.*

He was right on the other side of the gateway now. Raine could picture him slowly creeping along the narrow path between the gate and the water's edge, rifle held before him, NVGs casting a green pall about his surroundings. Even the most highly trained, highly disciplined soldier would be anxious now, not knowing what or who was lying in wait.

The soldier paused for just a fraction of a second, gathering his nerve, and then Raine *sensed* rather than saw the man swing around the gatepost, rifle scanning the space just above his and King's heads.

Nathan Raine however, even though totally blind, never hesitated.

Like a striking viper, he jumped to his feet, one arm knocking the soldier's rifle to the side while his finger thumbed the torch's ON switch. The beam of light flared in the soldier's goggles, overloading them and searing his eyes. Raine knew how painful the sudden overload of light through NVGs could be and he took full advantage of the disorientation he knew the soldier now felt. His fist slammed into his belly, doubling him over. Then he brought the base of the torch down against his exposed neck, shattering vertebrae and

dropping the man to the ground.

“Raine?” King asked quietly, uncertain of who had won the fight.

“Shut up,” Raine snapped as he quickly removed the downed soldier’s goggles. The underground ruins came to life around him but he forced his mind not to be distracted by the overwhelming enormity of what he saw.

*This would give Benny an orgasm, he thought. Too bad he can’t see it.*

Taking hold of the soldier’s QBZ-95 assault rifle, he did a quick sweep of the surrounding area. It was clear, for the moment.

He expertly relieved the corpse of his equipment, pulling on the black tactical vest which he had worn over his NBC suit. He checked the equipment: a knife, three grenades, to replace those he had lost during his tumble over the falls, a wad of C4 plastic explosive, extra ammo clips for the rifle and a Norinco M-77B handgun.

“Here,” he handed King the Norinco and the torch but told him not to use either unless he really had to. “Follow me.”

Raine led the way through the ruins, rifle held at the ready. King kept hold of the back of his shirt so as not to get lost in the maze of ruined buildings which grew only more dense the further they ventured from the Gateway- the deeper they ventured into Xibalba.

The ghostly green glow of the goggles cast the ruins in an eerie aura. Crumbled walls and fallen statues of grotesquely depicted creatures, half man, half beast, lay scattered all about him, littering the narrow passageways between rows of terraced buildings. The stonework was covered in layers of moss and hardy vines which he presumed needed little, even no sunlight to survive. The spongy green coating gave the ruins an almost magical feel, as though they could be home to fairies or pixies.

*Hell’s not so bad after all, he thought.*

He came to a dead-end, turned a corner and peered down a long avenue lined with human skulls.

*Shut up, Nate!*

Most of the skulls were still hugged tightly within the rough mortar the ancients had used to affix them to the walls, but many had fallen to the ground and smashed, shattered craniums and hollow eye sockets peering up at him accusingly.

His eyes panned up the wall, registering its enormous height. Twelve feet, he guessed. The same as the gateway. But this was no

city wall, but an avenue which would only take them deeper into the metropolis.

“What’s the matter?” King whispered. “Why have we stopped?”

Raine had a bad feeling about this. He glanced back the way they had come, the path from the gateway following the water’s edge until now. It seemed the Avenue of Skulls was the only way to go.

“Nothing, I just-”

He saw movement only a fraction of a second before the first bullet erupted. He hurled King forward, pushing him in through one of the open doorways of a long abandoned building just as a cascade of bullets strafed across it.

“Stay down!” he told him, pushing him below the lintel of a window sill. Something crunched beneath them.

“What’s that noise?” King asked.

Raine peered down, already fearing he knew the answer. Skulls. Lots and lots of skulls. But also other ancient bones; ribs and fumes and spines. They covered the floor of the room, piling up higher towards the rear wall. A mass grave from eons ago.

“Uh, don’t ask,” he replied, focussing his attention back on their attackers.

Through the hollow window he saw them; two ghostly shapes perched high up on the frame of one of the tallest ruins, giving them a perfect vantage point of both the river-side path from the Gateway and the Avenue of Skulls.

They were trapped.

“What’s happening?” King demanded between bursts of automatic fire.

“We’re in a spot of bother.”

“I gathered that!”

“Come on.” He grabbed King’s arm and dragged him to his feet, forcing him to run towards the rear of the room. Each footfall crushed another skull or snapped another body, the sounds seeming colossal within the enclosed environment.

“They’re bodies, aren’t they?” King groaned in realisation.

“Yup.” He pulled King up the mountain of human remains at the rear of the room. They piled up almost to the top of the roofless wall, bringing the pair *closer* to the enemy’s position. Stunned by their prey’s unusual direction – moving towards them rather than away – the soldiers took a second to re-aim at them. Raine used that second to peer over the wall. It was a twelve foot drop into the alleyway on

the other side, but at least there were no more skulls down there.

"Try to land on your feet," he told King.

"What?!"

Raine hauled them both over just as a spray of bullets chattered into the wall!

They hit the ground, hard, the impact jarring, but they both rolled forward, crashing in a heap against the opposite wall.

"You really *are* insane!" King spat angrily.

"I told you." Without giving his unwilling partner a chance to complain further, he again dragged him to his feet and ran down the ancient alley. The wall temporarily blocked the shooters' line of fire but a quick glance up revealed them navigating the tops of the walls, deftly homing in on them.

Raine fired a sporadic burst in their direction as he led King to a cross-road. He took the left-hand street, then at the next junction turned right, zigzagging his way away from the enemy.

But there were more soldiers, he saw, at least another half a dozen deftly jumping from wall to wall, trying to circle around the fleeing men. Raine fired again. Two men ducked for cover, jumping down into a distant alleyway but return fire sent him reeling.

Ahead, the narrow alleyways all opened on to a wide plaza, a series of eight, three foot-high steps rising up to a platform over a hundred feet, end to end. Immense, jig-saw-puzzle stone walls towered above them, leaving a fifty-foot wide avenue running down the centre. It looked almost like some ancient arena, with spectator stands looming on either side.

Raine felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. There was something he didn't like about this. The wide open space would leave them open to attack by the Chinese forces. There were no walls to hide behind, no alleyways to dash down. It was simply one long, straight avenue, five hundred feet in length. The only advantage was that the walls of the stadium were so high that the Chinese soldiers wouldn't be able to scale them. They would have no choice but to leave their elevated positions and pursue their quarry on the ground.

With no other option, Raine increased his speed, dragging King behind him. He helped him up the huge steps and then told him to run as fast as he could in a straight line.

Like two Olympic marathon runners, they shot off the mark and raced down the avenue. The only way they would survive would be to get to the far end before the Chinese.

That plan went to hell when King fell.

Blinded in the darkness, Benjamin King ran for all his worth, his muscular legs pumping hard, his boots hitting the ground and propelling him through the blackness, Raine's hand constantly clutching his upper arm.

He was reliant totally on the other man and, despite Raine keeping him alive this far, he still felt a niggle of distrust. He longed to have his sight back, not just so he could see the dangers around, but also so he could see what he was missing.

He was inside the *real* city of Xibalba, the Underworld of Mayan legend. No one had even suggested that it could be a real place, merely a figment of ancient imagination, a hellish realm beneath the earth dominated by twelve demonic lords. It was a place of torture, punishment, humiliation, misery and death, filled with diabolic tests: Houses of Darkness, Knives, Bats, Jaguars and Fire; Rivers of Scorpions, Blood and Pus. According to legend, the cenotes or sinkholes of Mesoamerica hid the entrance to Xibalba and he realised now the accuracy of that belief. Only Xibalba wasn't hidden beneath the limestone of the Yucatán, but beneath one of the giant sinkholes of Venezuela's table-mountains.

His mind struggled with the enormity of his discovery even as he raced in a straight line through the darkness. He had no idea where the Chinese were, or even where he was, only that he had to keep running. He clutched the pink purse containing the Moon Mask, a distant part of his mind contemplating what the discovery of Xibalba meant for his father's theories. The Moon Mask, the Bouda, the Progenitors, Xibalba. How were they all linked?

The thought was blasted out of his mind the instant his boot struck something in the darkness. He staggered, Raine's grip struggling to keep hold of him. He went down to one knee, his weight crushing something that felt very much like a ribcage, before sprawling across the ground.

The stone block beneath him decompressed with his weight. The grinding of stone as he was lowered only an inch seemed deafening in the enclosed environment. A sense of dread clutched at his churning stomach. With his ear to the ground, the sound of grating stone was replaced with another noise. The muffled rush of water below the floor.

*Oh no.*



Knowing he shouldn't, he grappled for the torch Raine had given him, clicked the switch and shone the beam back at whatever had tripped him. Sure enough, it was a body, the ribcage now shattered, its skull missing. But in its skeletal fingers, it clutched the hilt of an iron sword, slightly curved. It was as out of place in the Mayan underworld as he himself was.

It wasn't the body of an ancient sacrifice. It was the remains of a hapless eighteenth century sailor who had triggered the same trap as him.

"Switch the goddamn light off!" Raine cursed.

"Uh, we might have a problem."

"You only just realised that?"

Another sound echoed from below, louder than ever. The ground began to tremble.

*It's a Ball Court!*

"Get down!" King pulled on Raine's arm, dragging him to the ground just as *something* whipped through the space his head had just occupied and around them, a river of fire ignited.

Colonel Ming rendezvoused with Lieutenant Xan's team at the foot of a series of eight giant stairs. He nodded to his subordinate, the silent communication that he was now in charge of the mission. Then he led the six men he had brought with him, as well as Xan and his two surviving team members up the steps and into the long avenue, weapons ready.

With a stroke of luck, his eyes immediately focussed on the ghostly green and white shapes of two struggling humanoids on the ground, only a hundred feet from the far exit of the avenue.

*Got you!*

He raised his QBZ-95, took aim and-

He registered the rumble beneath his feet only a second before his NVGs illuminated an object hurtling towards him- a rubber ball with razor-sharp blades protruding from its sides.

He dropped flat to the ground but the man behind him was too slow. In the blink of an eye, the blades sliced across his throat, cut through the tendons and muscle of his neck and shattered his spine. Both head and ball hit the ground and rolled into a semi-circular gully which directed them both towards the base of the spectator-like stands to the right of the avenue, vanishing into a hole.

"Retreat!" he barked at his men as, shuffling on haunches,

they turned and-

The incredible wall of flame erupted fifty feet into the underground void, totally blocking the entrance to the avenue, and any hopes of escape.

The ancient mechanism, in some ways crude, in some ways ingenious, had not failed. Unlike other booby traps in ancient ruins the world over, the Xibalbans had not relied on bio-degradable rope or rotten wooden contraptions. They relied, instead, on the power of water and the combustion of a single spark.

As Benjamin King's weight had depressed the block of stone he had fallen on, a one-inch gap had opened in an underground reservoir. Fed and replenished over hundreds of years by the rainforest's downpours being directed through an ancient sewage system, built originally for the irrigation of crops, the unleashed fury of the water had surged into the crack. It had pushed the depressed block lower, allowing more and more water to surge through a network of tubes beneath the avenue. Each tube led to a stone 'plug' in front of which was a rubber ball, smeared with razors. Each ball was fractionally larger than the hole facing the avenue which prevented it from merely rolling out. As the water built the pressure behind the plug, the ball was compressed until at last it gave in to the weight of water. It *popped* with tremendous force and speed out of the hole, shooting with deadly menace across the enclosed avenue.

An independent flood of water was directed through the pipes to push against six further 'plugs'. These plugs did not push against rubber balls, but instead held back reservoirs of highly flammable oil. As the oil was unleashed, it poured out of six holes in the sides of the walls at either end of the avenue. Each 'tap' was carved into the ferocious visage of a jaguar-head and, as the oil spilt forth, a single spark created by the stone blocks rubbing against one another ignited it so that it looked as though the monstrous felines spewed forth the fires of hell.

The wall of fire blocked the avenue, but it did not stop there. Instead, the river of oil gushed into indents in the ground, washing away from the Xibalban Ball Court, swirling around corners, sluicing down alleyways, roiling down the gutters of ancient streets, carrying atop it a seething river of flame.

In moments, the entire, enormous underground cavern was alight with the fiery glow. Shadows flickered and flames danced,

illuminating ancient stone work, elaborate carvings of mythological beasts, of great and epic heroes, of the demonic overloads of the Mayan Underworld. Skull-lined avenues blazed, the hollow gaze of the dead staring into oblivion. And still the river of fire advanced, circling the entire city to bring light to a world of darkness.

Great columned halls, a rival to the wonders of Karnak, were revealed. Arched gates and monolithic walls all shimmered under the molten glow. Vast sweeps of Andean-like terraces clung to the inner walls of the enormous cave, once the lifeblood of a subterranean culture. The great manors of the Lords of Xibalba were revealed in all their hideous glory, decorated with the bones of sacrificial victims. Limestone temples, hewn and twisted by stonemasons of old stood atop vast platforms which towered above the crumbled slums of the city's general population. Elaborate networks of aqueducts, viaducts and canals ringed the urban centre, small streams branching off to irrigate the farming terraces, long since abandoned and left to decay in the void.

But, dominating it all, rearing above the city with majestic glory, towered an enormous step-pyramid. Not unlike the famous Temple of Kukulcan at Chichén Itzá, the pyramid's four faces were lined with protruding stairways, balustrades decorated with snarling jaguars and feathered serpents, rising to its flat-topped summit two hundred feet above its base. Covered with only the hardiest vines and vegetation which struggled to survive in the usually lightless world, the pyramid's white face, glistening with moisture, reflected the firelight and cast it aglow.

Trapped within the fiery depths of the Xibalban Ball Court as razor-edged projectiles shot from the walls, Benjamin King stared in both awe and horror at his surroundings.

"Yeah," he sighed. "We've got a problem."



15:  
*The Ball Game*

Xibalba,  
Sarisariñama Tepui,  
Venezuela,

Nathan Raine ripped the night vision goggles from his face, spitting out a curse as the eruption of firelight seared his retinas. Before he could do or say anything, however, a razor-edged ball sliced through the air above his head, taking a lock of black hair with it.

“Might want to keep your head down,” King warned.

“You think?!” He glanced about at his surroundings, now lit up by the fire glow, his vision quickly having to adapt from the muted, other-worldly green glow of the NVGs to the intense blazing red of the cavern. “What the hells going on, Benny?” he demanded.

“You walked us smack bang into the middle of a Mayan Ball Game. And not just any ball game,” he added. “A ball game in the Mayan *Underworld*.”

Raine could only think of one thing to say. “Oops.”

Down the far end of the avenue, one of the Chinese soldiers panicked and made a run for the curtain of fire blocking off the entrance. Whatever it was he intended to do when he got there, he didn’t have a chance to demonstrate. One of the razor-edged balls slammed with colossal force into the back of his head, pummeling his skull and splashing out brain matter and gore. He fell forward, into the intense fire and, somehow still alive for a fraction of a second after impact, gave out the most blood-curdling scream Raine had ever heard.

“Well, I guess that way is out of the question,” he said, glancing at an identical wall of fire blocking the other exit.

*So close!*

Another ball whistled above him, hit the far wall and bounced back. “Whoa!” He jumped out of its path, watched it until its inertia died and it rolled down a groove, into a hole at the base of the wall to be, no doubt, reloaded.

“Any ideas?” he asked King.

“Hey, you’re the super-duper action hero. You come up with something.”

Gunfire rattled from the far end as one of the Chinese soldiers tried firing at a ball. But the balls were not hollow and could not be burst. The solid lumps of rubber weighed in excess of nine pounds. At least the flying balls of death were keeping them distracted, however.

“Okay,” he said to King. Another ball flew out. He tracked it and both men crawled out of its path. “Tell me about these ball games. What’s the big deal?”

“You mean, other than the balls of razor sharp metal?”

Despite outward displays to the contrary, Raine was not a stupid man. He had been in enough tight situations to know that he needed to utilise every possible asset. The biggest asset in any situation was knowledge. Right now, he needed King’s knowledge.

“Ben!” he snapped.

“Okay, okay,” King struggled to wrap all his thoughts together. “The Mayan Ball Game, or Mesoamerican actually. Um, its called *Tlatchtli* in Náhuatl-”

“Something useful, Benny,” Raine urged, rolling to the left as a ball shot to his right.

“I’m trying, I’m trying!” he rubbed his tired eyes hard with the palm of his hand, trying to focus, then he looked up and took in his surroundings. “Okay, up there, I’m guessing they’re the twelve lords of Xibalba.” He pointed to the very top of the enormous walls at six statues on either side, sitting in thrones. While some distance away, he could make out the depictions of tortured human beings carved into the thrones, while the statues themselves depicted the personifications of the lords: Hun-Came (One Death) and Vucub-Came (Seven Death); Xiquiripat (Flying Scab) and Cuchumaquic (Gathered Blood); Ahalpuh (Pus Demon) and Ahalgana (Jaundice Demon); Chamiabac (Bone Staff) and Chamiaholom (Skull Staff); Ahaalmez (Sweepings Demon) and Ahaltocob (Stabbing Demon); and finally, Xic (Wing)

and Patan (Packstrap).

They sat atop the cornice, below which the slanting eighty-foot high 'Apron' walls depicted scenes of human sacrifice.

"These are the 'Bench Walls'," he indicated the vertical walls rising twenty feet above the 'Playing Area'. About six feet up their sides were twelve holes, spaced out underneath the statue of each Lord, six to a side. From these, the vicious balls were spat, as though propelled by the Mayan demons. Another twelve holes at ground level directed the balls back inside.

"The Ball Game was much more than football is to the British, or baseball is to you Yanks," he explained, dodging another ball. A cry from the Chinese followed the near severing of an arm. "It was a deep, spiritual ritual, played for at least three thousand years, though I'm guessing this place is older than that. Sometimes it was just played for fun, but often it was associated with battle and with human sacrifice- the losers would quite literally lose their heads."

"Soccer hooligans, huh?"

"In myth, the Xibalbans took it one step further. They used a ball, covered with razors, to injure, humiliate, and eventually kill the players. They killed Hun-Hunahpu, the father of the Hero Twins, the central heroes of the Popol Vuh . . . the Mayan bible," he very crudely answered Raine's quizzical look. "The Hero Twins eventually came to Xibalba and were challenged by the Lords to a Ball Game."

"Did they win?" Another ball bounced against the far side and almost slammed back into King's shoulder, missing by an inch.

"Uh . . . not really. They allowed themselves to be defeated and eventually killed, so that they could return to life and trick the Lords."

"So, you're saying we've got to die to win?"

King frowned, not liking what he was saying any more than Raine.

"How was the game played?"

A bouncing ball nearly took out Raine's leg as King answered. "No one knows for sure. There were probably two teams who had to stick to their own side of the court. If it was anything like the modern day descendant, *uluma*, it was a bit like volley ball, only without the net. The teams had to bounce the ball to one another using only their hips until one team didn't return it."

"So it doesn't always involve shooting razor-sharp balls jettisoned from holes in the wall?"

"No."

Raine cursed, unsure of how King knowledge benefited them after all. He considered trying to block the holes on the ground, but even if they could prevent the balls from shooting at them, they would still be trapped within the fiery gates with half a dozen pissed off Chinese soldiers!

But then, gazing up, he noticed a further series of holes in the Bench Walls, again six to a side, only these were almost at the top, twenty feet above the ground.

“What are they for?” he asked.

King looked. While the holes shooting the balls were designed to look like the mouth of a snarling jaguar, the higher holes were worked into carvings of snakes.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “On several ruined courts, archaeologists have found protruding stone rings. Theoretically, if a player got the ball through the ring – almost impossible considering they were twenty feet off the ground – then it would be an instant win.”

Raine stared at the holes for several more seconds. “Its not volleyball,” he realised. “Its basket ball.”

Then, before King could protest, Raine rose to his full height, spinning the assault rifle he carried so that he held the barrel. Like a baseball bat, he swung the rifle’s stock at a ball as it hurtled towards him.

The ball and the rifle struck with a metallic clang, before the rubber bounced off the weapon and hit the wall. It came back at Raine and he changed his position, ducking as another ball rushed at him from behind-

The hilt of the sixteenth century cutlass struck the second ball and sent it rebounding back. King felt the jar of impact shudder through his muscular shoulders and then stood back to back with Raine, each of them parrying against the flying balls of death.

“Are they insane?” Lieutenant Xan muttered in Mandarin as he watched the two men play the ancient ball game.

“Yes,” Ming said thoughtfully. “A little.” And then the colonel was on his feet, barking at his men to rise also. He flipped his QBZ-95 around, just like Raine, and used it like a bat, slapping at the balls as they came near.

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“Down!” Raine and King both shouted at the same time. Leaning against one another’s back, they dropped to the ground as the two balls, one from either side, flew above them, hit the far walls-

“Up!”

Again, bracing each other, they rose to their feet just in time to smack the balls back. This time, Raine managed to get under his and hit it from beneath, increasing its altitude. It hit the wall, only two feet away from one of the holes, bounced back-

He ran and leapt at it, swinging his rifle like a club. He smacked the ball at the centre of its gravity and it flew towards the hole. For a second he thought he had missed again, but then it slipped inside the wall, vanishing.

Almost instantly, to the rumble of stone, one of the jaguar heads spewing out oil into the Ball Court’s exit, choked and died. The raging fire at either end of the avenue diminished ever-so-slightly.

Spurred on, caring now more for their own lives than the mission, the Chinese soldiers ‘upped’ their game, throwing themselves into their swings.

Ming struck home first, followed by Xan.

One of the soldiers hit a ball. It slammed into the wall, bounced back. He ducked. It missed him. But a second ball, rebounding off of one of his comrades, slammed into his back in an explosion of blood and a cry of agony.

King struck home on the next one, his ball slipping inside a serpent’s mouth. Each time one of them scored, another jaguar head ceased belching flame and the curtain of fire shrank a little more.

But there were still eight balls left, firing out constantly now, bouncing back and forth, and all the men, Raine and King included, grew weary from hitting the heavy rubber.

“Benny!”

Two balls hurtled towards the archaeologist at the same time. He hit one and tried to duck the other but Raine hit it just in time. It hit the wall and came back at him forcing him to dive to the side. Its airborne momentum spent, it hit the floor and rolled down the incline, into one of the holes on the ground. Water pressure pushed it back into ‘firing’ position and only seconds later it was shooting towards them again.

One of the Chinese soldiers scored. The fire dimmed.

“Benny,” he called. “Back up towards the fire.” He knew that as soon as they were safe from the balls and the flame, the Chinese commander would be back on them in seconds.

King did so, smacking at another ball. On the rebound, he scored. Seconds later, so did Raine. He glanced at him, too much enjoyment twinkling in his blue eyes.

“You’re actually enjoying this, aren’t you?” he accused.

“Blows baseball out of the water!” he said, avoiding decapitation by a fraction of an inch.

Down the avenue, Ming scored again, then so did one of his subordinates.

*Four balls left.*

Raine looked at the fire. It was about six foot high now, still too much to jump. The heat rolled off of it, stinging his eyes with its oily perfume. He almost missed another ball, the rubber and metal glancing off his rifle’s stock.

Lieutenant Xan scored another.

*Three balls. Five feet.*

Ming glanced in his direction, eyes narrowed. He began to advance towards him, swinging at a ball that came too close.

King scored another hit!

*Two balls. Four feet. Still too high.*

With only two balls flying through the air, the danger had now diminished enough for Ming to reverse his rifle and take aim.

“Benny, when I say jump . . .”

“Jump?” King asked sarcastically.

A red laser sight trained itself on Raine’s chest just as a ball flew towards him. But, instead of hitting it towards one of the goals, he shifted his feet and threw his full weight into the blow, hurtling it down the length of the Ball Court, directly towards Ming.

Panicked, the colonel barely had time to move, rolling to the left but the razor-edged ball nevertheless sliced across his cheek, ripping out a wad of flesh and blood.

He howled in agonised fury but forced himself to stay focused, grasped his weapon, reacquired his target just as Xan slammed another ball into the goal.

The flames dropped another two feet.

“Jump!” Raine bellowed.

Ming fired.