

“Allister, the torch,” Max whispered frantically, pointing at my feet. I had stomped out the flame a few seconds ago, but smoke was still billowing up from it, and embers from the burnt end of the torch were glowing red. It was going to give our position away before we could even get to the Jade Scarab.

I ~~swiftly~~ ground the end of the torch into the stone floor with my boot, then hid behind the outcropping of stones in the small dark corridor off the main hallway. Two ~~other~~ gators crouched beside me: ~~My~~ best friend, Max, and our native Ubranhan guide, Sayid.

Footsteps approached, and firelight flickered on the stone walls of the dim hallway.

If ~~they~~ ~~rebels~~ found us here inside the ancient, lost city of Acvarú, we were goners. The turbans and ~~the~~ robes we wore over our clothes wouldn't ~~fool~~ anyone for long.

Taking a breath, I pulled the hammer on my revolver back and held the gun close to my chest, ~~aiming~~ it toward the hallway. Sayid followed suit. Max pushed his back up against the wall and closed his ~~yellow~~ eyes. We remained still.

Less than ten feet from our position, a mass of gator diggers and armed soldiers in dusty local garb ~~plodded past~~ ~~slowly passed~~ our dark stone corridor with torches in hand. ~~The~~ soldiers at the rear ~~dragged~~ two limp gator bodies, both with a half-~~dozen~~ arrows stuck in their bony-~~plated~~ backs.

“Omar, ~~Kadir~~,” Sayid whispered to me. They were the two native excavators I had hired—the ones who'd tried unsuccessfully to rob us outside the rebel encampment. Somehow, they'd found their way in here ~~and~~ met with a swift end. Served 'em right.

When the last guard finally ~~had~~ passed us, I exhaled quietly and released the gun's hammer with my thumb. Sayid did the same.

A cocky smile crossed my ~~sixteen-year-old~~ face. ~~I was only sixteen years old, but~~ I'd cheated death ~~yet~~ again.

Beside me, my heavyset friend timidly opened his eyes ~~and then widened them in panic~~. Max looked around ~~us~~ ~~fearfully~~ and whispered, “They're gonna find the guard. They're gonna find him, and we're going to die. Did you really have to lay him out like that?”

“Desperate times, pal,” I said, shoving the revolver in my shoulder bag and rubbing the sweat from my snout.

“I must agree with Mr. Banks, sir,” said Sayid. ~~He struck a match, picked up the torch, and relit it~~. “These Malthaas ~~R~~rebels are a nasty bunch. The only way to deal with them is with your fists ~~and~~ but they are changing workers earlier than usual. They must be close to the scarab. I do not like it.”

“You and me both,” Max said, shooting me an angry look. “My father wouldn't approve of any of this. Don't forget, he's the one funding this little expedition. ~~And~~ I've promised him he won't lose his investment. ~~Oh~~ ~~And~~ yeah, ~~and~~ it'd be nice if we didn't die down here either!”

What did Max think ~~when he signed up for this~~? That we'd be going to an amusement park like we did on our sixth-~~grade~~ field trip? Of course this place was dangerous. But all this sneaking around was necessary to gain access to the Acvarú dig site and the buried hallways that connected

Commented [BP1]: It helps to clarify who “they” are here. When the readers have an idea of who these gators are, they'll understand why our protagonists don't want to be caught.

Commented [BP2]: Consider adding a helpful detail here to assist in orienting the readers to the world: “The turbans and robes we wore over our clothes wouldn't fool anyone that we were Ubranhan for long.” If you don't quite like that wording, try something like this: “. . . wouldn't convince anyone we were Ubranhan for long.” Unless they're pretending to be from Malthaas? Depends on how your geography works.

Commented [BP3]: I think most alligators have yellowish/greenish eyes? Although I know some have bright blue eyes. Anyway, this could be a fun alligator detail to add, but feel free to change the color if you want!

Commented [BP4]: I've replaced the spaces in all ellipses with unbreaking spaces, meaning you won't have any periods getting separated across different lines when the final text is formatted for publishing.

Commented [BP5]: Try to avoid using adverbs when you can. If you can show an emotion rather than explaining an emotion, it's usually more powerful and engaging for readers. This is just an example of how you can alter this particular adverb, but there are lots of ways to rework them, so don't feel limited to whatever solutions I show you.

Commented [BP6]: I know Allister was worried about even the smoke from the torch potentially alerting the rebels and soldiers. Should they wait a moment to make sure they're really gone and aren't going to circle back? (It doesn't need to get too complicated, of course, but might be worth acknowledging here.)

the lost city's recently-discovered stone pyramids, temples, and buildings hidden underneath the hot, sandy desert.

"No one's going to die if we keep quiet," I said, trying to calm him down. "Nothing to it. Just a walk in the park."

"Yeah," Max replied, "a park where everyone tries to kill you, maybe."

"Exactly," I replied, patting him on the back and smiling. "Now tell me that doesn't sound like fun."

Max chuckled in spite of himself and nodded his agreement.

With that, I led my companions into the large stone hallway. Sayid's torch lit the way as we moved deeper into the old tunnel.

As we sprinted through the underground passage as quietly as we could, familiar doubts began to seep into my brain. *Would Am I ever going to be as good of a relic hunter as Dad was? Was I felt destined/fated for mediocrity. Or am I really simply going to die, as this time? Dad died had looking for the Jade Scarab...?* These thoughts haunted me wherever I went. But I wasn't going to let second-guessing weigh me down. Not now. I was so close.

~~There were n~~ Numerous passageways jutting off the main tunnel. Sayid consulted an ancient map to keep us on course. Finally, we turned ~~into a~~ a wide corridor. It curved slightly, then opened into a large chamber with a high ceiling. Fine sand danced down a column of light where a handful of ceiling stones had been removed. Bright beams from the arid sky above reached down and illuminated the chamber.

Sitting against the wall immediately to our right was a newer-looking explosive-detonation box with a large T-shaped plunger. The wires attached to the box led into the chamber and were connected to a number of brown sticks of dynamite placed all along the front wall. Obviously, the diggers were getting ready to blow up the stone wall so they could gain access to whatever was behind it. We had gotten here just in time.

Hurrying into the large chamber, I brushed the cobwebs from the stone pillars, face carvings, and geometric shapes ~~that cover~~ igned the enormous front wall. "The Imperial Hall is behind this wall," I said to Max. "That's where we'll find the Jade Scarab."

"A dark spirit lingers here," Sayid whispered, staring ~~hervously~~ at the front wall ~~and hunching his shoulders~~. "Something does not want to be disturbed."

As I looked at ~~the~~ curious swirling shape in the middle of the wall, Max asked, "Why are there explosives everywhere?"

"Because they don't have this," I said, carefully pulling out a large, oval-shaped crystal from the front pocket of my satchel.

"Mr. Banks, what is that?" Sayid asked, mesmerized by the dazzling object in my hand.

"The Jackal's Eye. Dad recovered it from a two-bit thief in New Aswan a few years ago."

"We have to hurry," Max said. "The morning crew will be here soon," Max said nervously.

“Ah, here it is.” I inserted the crystal into a hole in the middle of the wall. Clutching two sections of raised stone near the crystal's location, I pulled. They broke free and swung down just above the Jackal's Eye.

Suddenly, the carvings and designs started collapsing in on the crystal until it disappeared from our view, could no longer be seen; the stone pieces rearrangeding themselves into a massive circular vault door that cracked open.