

**THE
HUNT
FOR
KOMODO
CRACKER**
A NOVEL

MICHEL CLOUTIER

Excerpt from

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CRACKER**
A NOVEL

This excerpt contains chapter one of *The Hunt for Komodo Cracker*
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Scripture taken from the King James Version of the Bible

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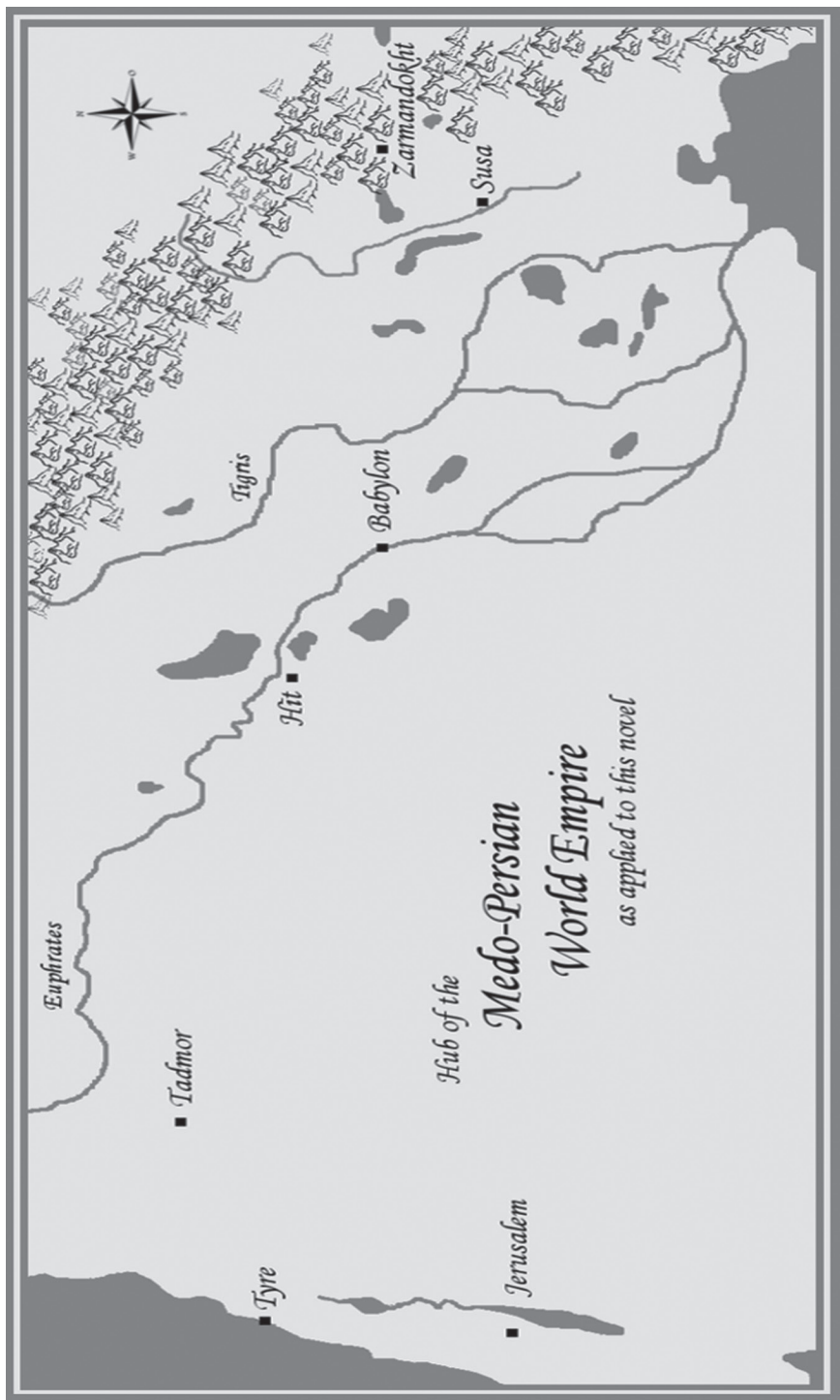
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I dedicate this book to my lovely wife who inspired me to believe that I was capable of writing a novel and without whose support and patience I would have never achieved my dream.



PART I

THE GATHERING

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CHAPTER 1

473 BC, Persia

"There's more dust in the light," Hutan said. "They're getting closer."

He was used to staring death in the face. It excited him. He felt cheated when given duties that kept him away from a battle. So when his best friend asked for his help working deep in the cave with the other troglodytes, he felt restless. He wanted more than anything else to be with his comrades on the battlefield.

"Then get away from the door and help me finish," Ramin said.

"We should be out there fighting, not digging holes," Hutan said. "Our brothers—and needless to say, my wife—need us now."

"For God's sake, Hutan, stop complaining and help me. The sooner we're done, the sooner we'll be out there fighting with them."

Hutan took one more look at the entrance of the cave before closing the door. "How do you know this stone will work, anyway?" he asked as he turned back to Ramin. He was already halfway through digging a hole.

"We've been through this." Hutan heard the annoyance in Ramin's voice. "You promised to help me bury this stela, and all you're doing is talking."

"I know," he said, grabbing a shovel. "And I owe you my life. But you spent all your gold in having this stone carved. It's an obsession with you. And still you won't talk to anyone about it. Why is it so important?"

Ramin leaned on his shovel. "Listen to me, Hutan. You know it's my only chance to get back home." He lifted his hand in a shrug. "Even if I went into detail, you could never understand. You'd think me crazy. Besides, I told you: once we're finished here, we're done. From then on it's in the hands of the god."

"Right—Chronos. Whatever you say," Hutan drawled.

"Thank you, Hutan; I knew I could count on you."

Hutan wasn't sure if Ramin had noted his sarcasm and chose to ignore it, or if he'd missed Hutan's skepticism altogether.

"I don't want to interrupt," Pantea interjected. Hutan's mother-in-law had taken up his former post at the door. "But I think the Amalekites have broken through our defenses."

Hutan rushed to the open door. "Mother, I told you to stay with the children. You heard the order. All seniors and children must stay in the cave during the battle. It's the safest place for everyone." He grasped her elbow and pulled her gently away from the door. "Now go back and sit down."

They both watched as she returned to her grandchildren. "She's right, you know," Hutan said. "The fight has reached the cave. They're bringing in the injured. We need to go, my friend. We can finish here later."

"Fine, I'm coming," Ramin said as he rushed to fill the hole with the last of the dirt.

Hutan kissed his mother-in-law. "Don't worry, I'll find your daughter," he assured her. "You and I both know she can fight as well as any man." He hugged his three children. "Stay here with your grandma, you understand? I'll be back with your mother very soon."

"Leave everything as-is," Ramin said. "We'll finish when we return." He hesitated, then retrieved a papyrus scroll from a leather bag at his waist and handed it to Pantea. "Just in case, this is the story to pass on—it is written in this document."

Pantea pushed the papyrus back at him. "You can explain it to us when you get back."

"We have to go," Hutan urged.

Ramin reluctantly pushed the papyrus back into the bag and nodded to Hutan.

They turned to the door, both unsheathing their swords. Hutan was first to exit the house. With a glance at the buried stela, Ramin followed Hutan, and they trotted through the maze of cave dwellings to engage the enemy out in the open.

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January 2032, Zagros Mountains, Iran

For three hours the Persian sun blazed down on the old SUV. Barnaby Lancaster and the other occupants of the battered vehicle were traveling east at an average speed of fifty kilometers per hour. To Barnaby it seemed the sun had a personal vendetta against him. Salty sweat stained his matching safari

shirt and trousers. To make matters worse, he had a heat rash developing in his armpits and burning sand induced irritations in unspeakable places.

Even at the advanced age of sixty-four and a height of only one point eight meters, Barnaby was irresistible to women. Knowing this, Barnaby took full advantage of his bachelorhood, wining and dining women of all ages as often as he dared. The only passion he put ahead of his desire for beautiful women was his love for archaeology.

Right now, however, neither women nor archaeology occupied his mind. He was contemplating an opportunity to teach Near Eastern Archaeology—or as some would call it, Biblical Archaeology—at England's prestigious Oxford University. He had been putting it off for almost five years, but this god-awful experience had convinced him that the time had come to consider the teaching position. He mused on this while being tossed in every direction without let-up.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Barnaby blurted at the driver, "Why in God's name did you rent a bloody convertible to take us out in this bloody dry, dusty furnace? Are you insane?"

The driver was a local Iranian with the body of a fifty-year-old wrestler. He wore a thawb the same color as the desert around them. He'd said nothing the entire trip. He looked at Barnaby with an expression that almost made him regret his outburst. Five seconds later, the man smiled and said in a strong local accent, "This only available. It goes there. Is good, yes—okay?"

Barnaby gaped at him, surprised he could speak. He had little respect for anyone he deemed ignorant or poorly educated. Discouraged, he rubbed a hand across his neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard and looked ahead at the never changing scenery. To his right, endless desert stretched to the horizon, broken only by rocks scattered like debris. To his left, the sheer vertical rock face of a plateau seemed to go on forever. It rose to irregular heights of at least one hundred meters, with no way up.

After yet another sigh, he held his hand over his shoulder. Without saying a word, a tall, thin man sitting in the back handed him a bottle of water. Barnaby groaned and shook his head as he realized the bottle was almost as hot as the dashboard in front of him. "Bloody hell," he said before he took a long, slow swallow of the warm water.

At this exact point in time Barnaby decided this would be his last trip in the field. He would remember this experience each time he found himself tempted to leave the comfort of his English home for yet another archaeological site. For over thirty years he'd been looking for the elusive Persian

stela. The time had come for someone younger, someone with more zeal and enthusiasm, to take his place.

Reaching this conclusion, he felt a heavy load lift off his shoulders. *By tomorrow morning this will all be over*, he told himself. The thought of retiring from fieldwork relaxed him. He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and somehow over the next few minutes, he fell asleep.

"We are here," the driver said with an air of satisfaction. "I welcome you to Zarmandokht."

Barnaby tried to open his eyes but could not focus on what lay ahead, so he looked down at his watch. He had been sleeping for two hours. Cupping his hands over his eyes, he tried once again to focus. Now he could see the large opening as the plateau gradually materialized.

They passed through the gap in the ten meter-high walls rising to the plateau and entered the small village under excavation. The driver stopped the SUV in the shade created by the walls, near the village square. Barnaby let his head fall against the back of the seat, exhilarated by the cool, refreshing breeze in this narrow passage protected from the sun.

"I can see Farshad," the driver said in a deep, commanding voice. "He waits. Look, he waits—you see? In front of big cave, under . . . how I say?" He muttered the word "canopy" in Arabic. "We must go now."

They moved straight ahead, into what Farshad had called in his communiqué "the Horseshoe." It seemed the endless plateau paused at this point, forming a horseshoe-shaped crater. The walls were of equal height all around. The only way in or out was through the narrow entrance.

For the last thirteen months, this had been an active archaeological site sponsored by the Iranian government. About one thousand people had inhabited this village in 473 BC. At the time a large, two-leafed wooden gate protected the village. In the open air within the horseshoe, tradesmen had their shops, with stalls for horses and other conveniences. Their homes were built deep into the cave located far back in the horseshoe, where water could be found.

"Welcome, Mr. Lancaster," Farshad said as the SUV came to a stop in front of him. "I hope the trip was not too difficult."

"You could have found a better guide," Barnaby said, ignoring the driver sitting next to him.

"You mean Samir? He's the best," Farshad replied. "You have no idea how difficult it was to find someone to come out here at this time of year. In fact, we were fortunate to have anyone at all. You would still be at the airport if it wasn't for Samir."

"Two peas in a pod," Barnaby quipped.

Farshad did a double take. "Excuse me?"

Barnaby ignored him. He was too busy fighting leg cramps.

"Anyway," continued Farshad, "would you and your companion like some ice cold water?"

"No," Barnaby snapped, grabbing the bottle out of Farshad's hand, "we much prefer a steaming hot cup of tea."

Barnaby knew Farshad had lived most of his adult life in the United States, but he seemed to be struggling with the snide comment, uncertain whether the remark was meant to be funny or sarcastic. Then his brows drew down, and Barnaby knew he realized he was being mocked. Barnaby didn't care.

"As we drove through the square I noticed a marble structure of some kind." Barnaby turned and pointed up the eastern wall. "Over there, up high. Is it a tomb?"

"Yes, it's a tomb. We found the body of a boy inside. The inscriptions over its entrance indicate the boy was some kind of war hero."

"A war hero boy, you say. I very much doubt that." Barnaby turned back to face Farshad. "I sure hope you found the real thing this time, because this is the worst trip I've ever made."

"Please come with me and see for yourself. Don't forget to take your water with you. We don't have much time—you must be on your way before the workers return from their afternoon siesta." Farshad turned and led Barnaby and the tall thin man toward the entrance of the cave.

They paused just inside to let their eyes adjust to the light. Barnaby held his eyes shut, then opened them—and stood amazed at what he saw. "Bloody hell, this place is huge. It looks like a cathedral with most of its lights turned off."

"Be careful where you step." Farshad held out his hand to prevent Barnaby from stepping forward. "There are many trenches and tools lying around and they're hard to see in this light. Now, please be very careful as you follow me."

They shadowed Farshad through a maze of dirt paths, frequently crossing wooden planks spanning trenches thirty, sometimes sixty centimeters deep. After snaking their way over the broad network of trenches, they stepped onto solid ground at the back of the cave. It was nearly pitch dark. Farshad moved away; a moment later a halogen light came to life, illuminating the now helmeted Farshad standing at a large wooden table. He came back with two more security helmets. Barnaby put one on before giving one to the tall, thin man.

"There's no danger of falling rocks in this section of the cave," Farshad said, "but the ceiling is low in certain places. I wouldn't want anyone to crack their skull."

"How did you come across the stela?" Barnaby asked as he secured his helmet.

"Six days ago I was working in one of the trenches—that one over there with the marker B-14." Barnaby didn't look in the direction Farshad pointed. "Anyway, while clearing some debris in my assigned trench I came across a basalt slab. Since I happen to be working alone in this particular trench, it was easy for me to reveal a few centimeters at a time. I would then cover it up, only to start revealing more at a different place until I was able to identify with a measure of accuracy that I had the real thing. I reburied it, then came back that night to hide it deeper inside the cave. Two days later I called my contact in England to have someone come and fetch it."

"Why did you wait two days to contact us?"

"It took me most of two days to record its exact position," Farshad replied. "It's not easy doing it in secret. You have to properly survey and document a find like this for future analysis. To have removed the stone without recording its precise location would make me no better than a common thief, a relic hunter, a—"

"Bloody hell, Farshad, what in God's name were you thinking?" Barnaby blurted. "This stela will never end up in a museum. It's much too valuable to the League for your stupid dig protocols. Your delay could have cost us the stela."

Farshad stepped back and grimaced as Barnaby's spit sprayed over his face.

"So where's the stela now?" Barnaby demanded.

"Right over there, buried under a shaker screen."

They walked toward the shaker screens stacked at the back of the cave. "This is also where they stack all the discovered artifacts, right next to the expensive equipment," Farshad added.

Barnaby stopped to look around. "Shouldn't there be a security guard here?"

"Yes, of course."

"So, where is he?"

Farshad smiled. "I'm the one assigned security duties today."

Barnaby smiled for the first time. "Very good; well done. Now show me the stela."

Farshad used a shovel to displace a thin layer of dirt, revealing a jute canvas. He bent and scooped away the loose dirt around the edges of the

object with his fingers, then lifted his head and nodded. Barnaby bent at the other end of the rectangular object to work his fingers underneath, and they lifted it gently and put it on top of one of the shaker screens. The three men paused, looking at it, then Barnaby stepped forward and peeled back the canvas, revealing a well-preserved basalt stela.

He gazed at it for a moment, then removed his glasses and cleaned them while he ran details through his mind. He pulled a tape measure from his pants pocket and checked the stela's dimensions: fifty-two centimeters wide, ninety-eight centimeters long, and eight centimeters thick. "The dimensions seem accurate."

Next he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a piece of paper he'd folded and unfolded a hundred times. Unfolding it one more time, he compared the image on it with the stela. "There's no doubt about it. This is the stela we've been looking for all these years."

With great care he moved his hands over the surface, exploring it with his fingertips as if somehow it would communicate with him through touch. He analyzed the details found at the bottom of the stela. He began to decode the text in his mind.

"Mr. Barnaby, we must go now," Farshad said, his tone urgent. "The workers will return within the next fifteen minutes."

"Yes, yes," Barnaby murmured, his mind still in a cloud. He turned to the tall, thin man who waited nearby, his backpack open. "Put it in quickly, and let's go. And for God's sake, be careful—the future of the world is in your rucksack."

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The morning after, enroute to Aylesbury, England

Sipping on a tall glass of iced tea, Barnaby gazed absently out the window of the company's private jet as he waited, his cell phone pressed to his ear. The morning sun limned the dwindling Zagros Mountains in gold light. He was well quit of those, he thought smugly; life would be good, now that he'd found the stela.

After a short while, a woman's voice interrupted his reverie. "Mr. Harding will speak to you now, Mr. Lancaster."

Barnaby sat up straight, as if the vice-president of the ULRA were sitting in front of him.

"What is it, Barnaby?"

"Good morning, Mr. Harding. I sure hope I'm not disturbing you."

"I don't have much time, Barnaby," Harding said, his voice tinged with impatience. "You said it was important, so what is it?"

"Well, Mr. Harding—" he paused for effect "—we found it."

There was silence for a beat. Then: "Are you sure it's the real thing?"

"There's no doubt about it. I've seen it with my own two eyes."

"If you're wrong, this will cause irreparable damage."

"Mr. Harding, I've been searching for this for almost thirty years. I'm not making a mistake; this is what we've been waiting for. I'm one hundred percent sure."

"Did you decipher the code?"

"No, not yet—that is, I did translate it, but I don't understand its meaning."

After a long pause, Harding said. "All right then, Barnaby, I will contact the others and begin the process." The dial tone droned in Barnaby's ear. Harding had disconnected.

Barnaby looked at his ice tea and smiled. "Hey there, sweetheart, would you please take this away and fetch me a martini?" He held his glass out to the hostess. "And don't give me none of that cheap vodka or gin; today I deserve the good stuff."

Relaxing back into his seat, Barnaby pulled his note pad from his breast pocket and flipped it open to the translation. "Who are you, Thomas K Faraday," he said slowly, "and why is your name on a twenty-five-hundred-year-old Persian stela?"

About the Author



For over eighteen years Michel Cloutier has taught computer networking environments in Montreal, Canada. Occasionally, he manages to tear himself away to scuba dive the many local shipwrecks that dot the bottom of the Saint Lawrence River. His love for history has also moved him to travel to exotic and history-rich countries such as Italy, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and many other areas in Europe, the Middle East, and Central America.

In the pages of this novel, Michel has merged his two passions of network security and ancient history to create an adventure sure to hold your interest until the climactic end.

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