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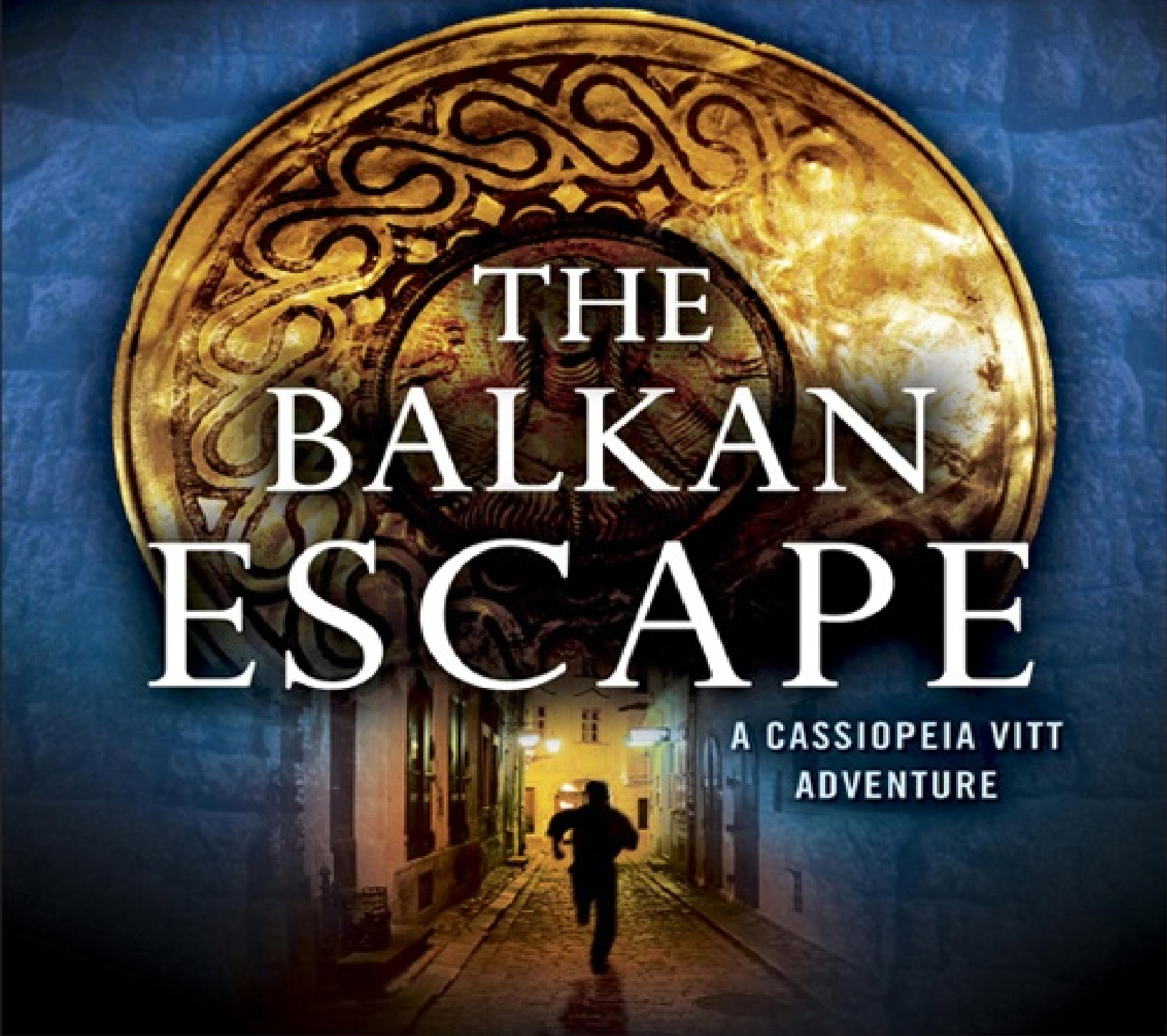
# STEVE BERRY



# THE BALKAN ESCAPE

A CASSIOPEIA VITT ADVENTURE

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BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

*The Balkan Escape* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Published in the United States by Ballantine, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *The Emperor's Tomb*. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

eISBN: 978-0-345-52517-8

www.ballantinebooks.com

v3.1_r1

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## 5 YEARS AGO

Cassiopeia Vitt wasn't sure if they would kill her now or later. But they would kill her, that much was certain.

Or at least they'd try.

Which meant she needed to do something, but her options were limited. Her hands were bound behind her back with nylon twine, her feet chained to the rock wall that encased her like a dark cocoon. She was deep in the Rila mountains, more than two hundred kilometers south of Bulgaria's capital, Sofia, alone. Worse, no one knew her location, and the deep cirques, sharp peaks, and glacial moraines surrounding her were among the remotest in the Balkans.

She'd arrived yesterday, finding the camp at the base of a forested slope.

*A low methodic hum rising from one of the tents, and two black cables snaking a path into the mountain, signaled a generator. She was just about to follow their trail and enter the cave when a man appeared in the entrance. He was short, thick through the shoulders, with tanned features and a thin mustache. He wore sooty blue coveralls with butterfly stains in both armpits. Surprise flooded his face when he spotted his visitor, but it quickly vanished.*

*He said something to her in Bulgarian. Slavic languages were not her strong point, so she tried English. "I was in the village and learned of your camp. I thought I would have a look."*

*He carried a pick and shovel, which he set aside. "Afraid there is not much but archaeologists digging for bones."*

*The English was clean and crisp, only a hint of a Russian accent.*

*"That's fascinating," she said, but she thought about how the person in town, who'd pointed her this way, had said the men identified themselves as rock hounds.*

*“It is cold and dirty in there, and not many bones.” He squatted down and rested his legs. “Feels better out here in fresh air.”*

*He slipped a pack of cigarettes from a pocket and offered her a smoke. She declined, and he lit one for himself with a disposable lighter. The man said his name was Petar Varga.*

*“How long have you been here?” she asked.*

*“Too long. I think this is bad idea. Dry cave, yes?” He enjoyed his cigarette.*

*“A university sponsoring the dig?”*

*He stood. “More than one. But this is small project. Exploratory. Just seeing what earth will yield.”*

*“I have always been fascinated by archaeology,” she said. “Think I could see the dig site?”*

*He cocked his head and frowned. “Pretty tight space in there.”*

*She flashed a smile. “I’m not afraid.”*

*He flicked his cigarette to the ground. “Why not? Come, I show you around.”*

⁂

“Get up,” she was told.

They’d come for her.

Two men with guns.

She was unchained and led back into the same tunnel that Varga had shown her yesterday. Narrow at first, but fifteen meters into the mountain it opened to nearly two meters wide. Weak bulbs periodically dissolved the darkness, revealing sharp walls, the floor a mixture of sand and gravel. Offshoot tunnels opened into more black chasms. Their level changed twice and rose steadily. The air hung thick and fetid, like a basement flooded after a storm.

Ahead, the passage ended in the same rectangular chamber she’d seen yesterday, about twenty meters long with a low ceiling of jagged rock cast in a bluish tint by steaming halogens. At the far end was what appeared to be an altar—a rectangular slab of blackened stone supported by round pillars, the structure elevated by a platform hewn from the

floor's rock.

Behind the altar were faint wall frescoes.

A hunting scene in which a boar was attacked by a horse-mounted hunter and a naked man wielding a double ax. She knew the double ax represented royal power, while the naked man signified Zalmoxix, the Thracian solar god. The artwork had triggered Varga's mistake yesterday when he incorrectly identified them as Roman. Her mistake had come when she hadn't made a speedy retreat.

A new man waited for her near the altar.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, with a narrow waist and matching hips. A tiny nose with a slight bump protruded from his round face, and strands of black hair brushed the tips of his ears. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt.

"I am Lev Sokolov," he said to her, his English infused with an even thicker Russian flavor. "I have been told to question you."

"By who?"

"Russians. They control here."

"The last time I looked, Bulgaria was an independent nation."

He shrugged. "Maybe so. But the Russians control here."

"What's so special about this place?"

"Why are you here?"

She couldn't say that Henrik Thorvaldsen had asked her to check out the locale. Her Danish friend, fascinated by anything lost and twenty times wealthier than she could ever hope to be, had stumbled onto the possible location of an undiscovered Thracian tomb.

Which was rare.

The Thracians were a warlike, nomadic people who'd settled the central Balkans nearly 5000 years ago. They were first mentioned in the *Iliad* as allies of the Trojans against the Greeks, and Herodotus cynically noted that *they sell their children and let their wives commerce with whatever men they please*. Two and half millennia ago they dominated the mountains of northern Greece and what would later become southern Bulgaria. Eventually conquered by Alexander the Great, then

reconquered by the Romans, they were finally assimilated by Slavs in the 6th century. They developed no written language and left no trace of their existence, save for tombs littered with fabulous gold and silver treasures. Most had been found farther north, in central Bulgaria, in what had been dubbed the Valley of the Thracian Kings. But Thorvaldsen had happened on to the location of a more obscure site, to the south. A place that had once been a vital part of ancient Thrace, whose residents had named the mountains Rila—meaning "well watered." He'd hoped that the site might prove virgin. Unfortunately, others had found it first.

And they weren't after treasure.

"I'm on holiday and have never seen this part of Bulgaria," she said to Sokolov.

"Ms. Vitt, you are important. You own multibillion-dollar corporation, inherited from your father. You own grand estate in southern France. Woman like yourself, a person of great means, does not take holiday in these mountains."

They'd confiscated her passport yesterday after taking her captive, and clearly somebody had been busy.

"What do you plan to do?" she asked. "Hold me for ransom?"

"I simply ask, why are you here?"

She caught something in Sokolov's eyes, a gentle request that she answer honestly. She wondered if the two other men, who stood on the far side of the chamber, understood the conversation. Their actions did not indicate that they were even listening.

"This is a Thracian tomb," she said, opting for the truth.

"I wondered who built it," Sokolov said. "How old is it?"

"Probably third to fifth century BCE."

"We find this by accident. A demolition in another tunnel opened shaft to here."

It was bare. No artifacts. "Was it empty?"

He nodded. "This is exactly as chamber appeared when we entered five days ago."

At least it existed. Thorvaldsen would be thrilled.

Of course, in order to tell him she'd need to escape.

But her hunch was proving correct. She'd thought about it all night while chained to the wall. Bulgaria was rich in manganese, coal, copper, lead, zinc, and gold. These men could be geologists. But if they were simply a survey crew, why take her captive? Why the guns?

Only one explanation made sense.

Another ore came from these mountains, one the former Soviet Union had openly exploited.

"How big a uranium deposit have you found?" she asked.

Sokolov's eyes betrayed the fact that she'd guessed correctly. "Enough to know you won't see daylight again."

Sokolov's threat carried no menace. It was more informational, one that made clear she was in trouble, but not necessarily from him. He motioned to one of the other armed men and barked out some Russian. The man found a knife and cut the nylon bindings that held her arms behind her back.

She rubbed away the soreness. "I appreciate that. They were tight."

"These men are not to be fooled," he said. "They have a job and will do it. I need to know why you here."

She wondered if Sokolov's task was to make her feel comfortable, vulnerable, to gain her trust. There was something about him she was drawn to, not the usual arrogance Russians seemed to project. More reserved. Likeable. She told herself to be careful and not say more than she should.

To buy time, she studied the vault.

Thracian kings and nobility were buried in underground temples called *heroons*. Usually either multichambered and rectangular or singular and circular with a domed roof, they served as places for ritual ceremonies to honor the deceased with funeral gifts. Until the early 20th century the entire culture had been practically unknown, and when Thorvaldsen offered her the chance, she'd been excited about the

prospect of visiting one of their forgotten sanctuaries.

But this tomb had obviously been looted. There was nothing here to find.

And it was time for her to leave.

She counted three tunnels leading out. One was the path back outside. Two more led deeper into the mountain. Mentally, she ticked off the distance between herself and the nearest exit. About fifteen paces. Straight line. Nothing in the way.

She admired the frescoes again and marveled at the obvious lack of Greek influence. Thracians had enjoyed a rich culture, and, if not for their disunity, they could well have developed into a lasting civilization. Unfortunately, when they were Hellenized, the beards, tattoos, cloaks, boots, and hats that had distinguished them disappeared from both their lives and their art. The images here were from a time before that influence, showing them as they originally had been, not blue-eyed and red-haired as one observer incorrectly described, but dark-haired with features more common to Europeans.

“Will you tell me why you here?” Sokolov asked again.

“Please tell us,” a new voice said. “I want to know answer to that question.”

Petar Varga entered the chamber.

Today he was dressed in more stylish clothes, his dirty work overalls gone. He approached the spot where she and Sokolov stood, each step crunching loose gravel beneath his soles, his swagger that of a man in charge.

“You can stick it up your ass,” she said.

Varga’s arm swept up and the back of his hand smacked the side of her face. The blow jarred her, but she regained her balance and was about to pounce when Varga produced a pistol.

“You’re tough with a gun,” she said. “How are you in a fight?”

He laughed. “Not so good. I like advantage of you not knowing what I do.”

She rubbed her cheek and her stinging jaw. He'd regret doing that. Just one opportunity, that's all she'd need.

"I hope last night show you we are not to be ignored," Varga said. "Why you here?"

She decided to play him, since it really didn't matter what she said. "I came to find you."

Varga's face twisted. "For who?"

She turned away and stepped close to the altar where some fist-sized rocks lay scattered. The chamber was large for a Thracian tomb. Some research done a few days ago had revealed that, usually, the rectangular-type vaults consisted of three separate rooms, each rich in ornamentation with columns, friezes, and caryatids. This one, though, displayed only frescoes.

Which was odd.

She wondered if the other two exits led to more chambers or tunnels. Impossible to know for sure. Power cables snaked a path into the darkness of each. Unfortunately, she could not make it to the exit that she knew led to fresh air, because two armed men guarded it, one on each side.

She lifted one of the stones and tested its weight.

Plenty heavy.

"What do you do?" Varga said. "Throw rock at me?"

She stole one last look around and grabbed her bearings. "That would be stupid. But—"

She whirled the rock at the light bar.

It slammed into the center of the panel, the bulbs erupting in a frenzy of blue-white sparks. The chamber plunged into blackness and she ducked behind the altar. Using the faint light from bulbs beyond the three exits as beacons, she shifted her position, rushing the fifteen paces across the blackness toward the opening. She had no idea where it led, but anything was better than here.

The men were screaming Russian at one another.

She kept on course and hoped she did not slam into any of her captors

or rock.

She found the tunnel and plunged forward.

Two shots rang out from behind.

Far more darkness loomed here than light, the bulbs fewer and farther apart. She slowed her pace. Her boots caught on loose gravel, and she kept one arm extended, groping the air ahead.

She came to a place where the tunnel drew to the right. A light appeared behind her as she angled around. Flashlights were headed her way. She kept moving, one arm out front, the other tracing the tunnel wall.

One moment she was walking on firm earth, the next she was falling.

Her stomach folded up into her throat.

For a few seconds she was weightless.

Then she slammed into hard ground and consciousness slipped away.

She opened her eyes, but a cascade of water forced her lids shut. The cold liquid rushed over her with the force of a waterfall. She pushed herself up from a rocky floor, swiping wet eyes with her sleeve. Darkness surrounded her save for a hole in the ceiling ten meters above. Her vision was blurry but slowly revealed Varga and Sokolov, each holding a flashlight, staring down at her through the opening.

“I thought water might help,” Varga called down.

Her legs were sore, and the small of her back ached, but nothing seemed broken. Her hair and clothes were soaked and a chill began to work its way toward her skin.

“Good you find hole,” Varga said. “Save me trouble of dumping you here. Let it not be said that I not a fair man.” He tossed down his flashlight, which she caught. “At least you won’t be in dark. As long as batteries work.”

Then Varga disappeared, apparently walking off.

Only Sokolov’s face remained.

“Go left,” he whispered.

Then he, too, vanished.

The light from above receded and darkness overtook her.

She switched on the flashlight and walked to the right, specifically ignoring Sokolov's instruction.

The walls were bone-dry, and the path ahead angled. Turning the corner, she spotted something on the floor, a red glow rhythmically pulsating, like a tiny searchlight. As she stepped close, her light revealed a digital timer attached to a thick bundle of pink material.

Numbers were clicking down.

Recognition was instant.

A bomb.

The timer at 15 seconds.

14. 13. 12.

She raced in the opposite direction, leaping forward just as the plastique exploded.

The impact shook the mountain and sent rock crumbling in an avalanche that quickly consumed the tunnel behind her. As the ceiling collapsed she scrambled to her feet and bolted away, the opening Varga and Sokolov had filled a few moments ago gone.

She dashed to another corner.

The tunnel walls behind her were imploding, rock pounding rock, dust rising in a dense storm, the air rapidly being replaced by a suffocating pall. She stared ahead and saw the tunnel end ten meters away. Even worse, another red glow pulsated at the base of a stone barricade. She ran forward and the light revealed another digital timer attached to another bundle of explosive, this clock at thirty seconds.

*Go left?*

Sokolov's idea of help?

The first explosion had annihilated the tunnel behind her, blocking any escape in that direction, and a bomb lay at her feet, less than twenty seconds from exploding.

She trotted back to the corner and shone the light. The first tunnel was cannibalizing itself. A loud crack split the air as a chunk the size of a Mercedes slammed down and disintegrated into boulders.

She shielded her eyes, then peered through a veil of dust.

Her mind was keeping count. Probably less than ten seconds. She whipped the beam to the left, then right, and spotted a smile forming in the remaining wall that was quickly expanding into a yawn.

She made a decision and leaped.

Another blast pulsated the mountain.

Behind her, the entire tunnel vanished but the crush of rock onto rock became muffled by a barrier of rubble, sealing off the hole that had existed only moments before.

Rumbles continued for another minute, then faded.

She lay on her stomach and held her breath.

Absolute darkness devoured her.

* * *

She exhaled and tried the flashlight.

The bulb still worked.

She examined her prison. The chamber was not tall enough to allow her to stand, maybe a meter and a half, the ceiling and floor slanted upward. To her dismay she was trapped inside a long, narrow box sealed at both ends. Her wet clothes were caked in dust, as were her face and hair.

She cleansed her lips with a spew of breath.

The air was breathable, but motes of dust hung thick like a blizzard.

She worked the flashlight around the confines and forced any negativity from her mind. The suspended dust bounced the photons back at her like tiny stars. She swiped a clear spot of air where she could breathe.

And noticed something.

She stretched out her hand and gently probed the beam.

No, it wasn't her imagination.

The particles were moving—slowly, nearly imperceptibly, but definitely shifting to the right.

She belly-crawled forward.

The floor sloped toward the ceiling. At the end of the chamber the floor gave way and, a few centimeters down into the blackness, she spotted a slit, a good meter long and a third that high. Rock filled the space, but not tightly. She hinged her torso down and peered through the opening. Dark beyond, but it looked like a crawl space, large enough for her to fit into.

More movement in the air encouraged her.

She tried to dislodge the rubble. The stones were stacked loosely, but held firm. She swung around so her legs stretched forward and slammed the soles of her boots into the stones.

Three whacks and the rock gave away.

She cleared a path and saw that the space was negotiable. What encouraged her even more was that the air had freshened. She was proud of herself for staying calm. Tight places, though, had never been her weakness. Heights, especially from airplanes and helicopters, bothered her. She had a rule. If she couldn't run around in it, she didn't fly in it. Unfortunately, time after time that rule seemed to be violated. Trouble had a way of following her. One thing after another. Today seemed a perfect example.

She crawled forward on her elbows and wiggled down into an even smaller space. Her beam revealed another rectangular path, less than a meter square, which stopped a few meters ahead. In the floor, at the far end, she spotted yet another opening.

She worked her way forward on her elbows and peered down to see a drop, at an angle, like the laundry chute she recalled from her childhood home. The path then appeared to rise again, and she noticed dust drifting that way.

Could she make it over the hump?

Becoming stuck did not sound pleasant.

She folded herself forward to where the rock angled back up. The space seemed wide enough so she wiggled over and pointed the

flashlight downward, spotting a rock floor about two meters away littered with lichens.

Freedom?

She curled over the hump and slid head first, hands extended forward, from her confines.

Her body came free.

She stood in what appeared to be a tunnel—roomy, long, extending in both directions—and brushed dust from her clothes.

She sucked a few deep breaths.

A light appeared to her right and grew in intensity. In the ambient glow she saw Lev Sokolov.

She readied a fist.

But released it when a gun appeared in the Russian's hand.

"I am not the enemy," Sokolov said.

"Go left? That's what you told me to do."

He nodded. "Bomb to right."

"Bomb to left, too."

His face registered surprise. "I thought only one. Sorry."

She wanted to hit him, but there was the matter of the gun, so she opted for, "What are you doing here?"

"I come for you. I hope you make it this far. We are twenty meters below the chamber where we speak before. This mountain is a big maze."

"Where are your pals?"

He motioned behind her. "Varga and the other two. I lose them. But you will never get past them. They are back there, behind me. Not a good way out in that direction."

He handed her his weapon.

"I am not one of them. I am scientist. I hate Soviets. I hate Russians."

She grasped the gun, checked the magazine, and—satisfied that it was

loaded—wrapped her finger around the trigger.

"You *are* a Russian," she said, motioning with the gun.

"I hate the country and everything it is. I want to leave."

"Find an embassy." She brushed past him.

Sokolov grabbed her arm. "I do not go back to Russia."

In the flashlight's glow she saw the desperation in his eyes. He was serious.

"Then leave. The Cold War is over."

"Not for me. Russians will make me stay."

There was nothing she could do. "Not my problem."

"I save you," he said, as if she owed him.

She stared him straight in the eye. "How have you saved me?"

"I can show."

Which would buy her time to think and make a smart decision.

Besides, she held the gun.

"Okay. Show me."

She stared at the spectacular scene.

They'd left the tunnel and were standing at the base of an inverted cone of towering rock. The funnel swept upward fifty-plus meters to a ragged opening that revealed a wind-ravaged sky.

A misty rain showered down.

The sides of the escarpment were stained black with moss and lichens. An irregular pool had formed in the floor beneath the opening high above, the water a blood red. A thousand raindrops disrupted its surface.

She stepped over and tested the water.

Warm. Red probably from iron.

She stared up to the sky. "What I wouldn't give for a rope, some crampons, and an ice pick."

She stepped back, allowing the rock to block the rain, and checked her watch. 8:20 A.M. Amazing the thing still worked. She watched more

clouds roll past above, driven by air that could only be heard.

“Chasm is here millions of years,” Sokolov said. “Formed when mountain formed.”

“What’s your story?”

“I am geologist. Oil research is my specialty, but Russians care not less. They need a rock expert. You are right. They want uranium. I come to confirm the find.”

The situation was infinitely better than just a few minutes ago, but she was still imprisoned. She should be home in France, working on her castle. Block by block she was re-creating the walls using the same tools and materials as 700 years ago. Medieval architecture was her passion. And, as Sokolov had correctly noted earlier, she could afford the indulgence. Yet here she was in southern Bulgaria, trapped inside a mountain with a man who she could not decide was friend or foe.

“Over there,” Sokolov said, pointing.

She stayed back, gun ready, and followed him to the far side where the rock floor dropped down five meters. Her flashlight beam revealed a façade chiseled from the stone, blocks rising on two sides and joined across the top, connected by clearly defined joints.

“A doorway,” she muttered.

“That is what you came for.”

She knew Thracians always framed the openings to their tombs in elaborate ways.

“I find it two days ago,” Sokolov said. “This is real tomb. The other is some sort of ante-chamber.”

“You didn’t tell the others about this?”

He shook his head. “Not a word.”

“Why?”

“Go and see.”

“How about we both go?” she said.

He climbed down first, using the boulders as makeshift steps. She

followed, her finger on the gun's trigger, ready to instantly react. Was this his plan? Lure her down here. Were the others waiting inside? If so, why give her a loaded gun?

At the bottom she examined the portal more closely.

"Another level extends out," he said to her. "Beneath where we stand, into the mountain. Maybe caused by lava flow from long ago. Not unusual. Creates caves."

She studied the doorway as he spoke. Definitely human-made. Rubble lay piled before the portal. The remnants of a marble door, blasted away.

"I do that," Sokolov said. "I wanted to see what is inside."

She stared at the chunks and realized the door itself had been a precious artifact. "You've been inside?"

"Twice."

She motioned with the flashlight and he disappeared into the blackness. She followed, met by a wall of dank, musty air. Enough daylight slipped in for her to see a circular room about twenty meters in diameter. She quickly aimed the flashlight at the far end and discovered limestone walls, still lined in places with ancient timbers. Her light angled upward and exposed the expected Thracian beehive architecture to a domed ceiling. The vault's central camera contained the image of a horseman being bestowed a wreath by a goddess, the maroon coloring of the frescoes still vibrant. A high relief of stone statues—women—encircled the vault. Parts of the walls had collapsed, rubble piled on the floor. She aimed the beam at the floor and noticed it was littered with debris. A glitter here and there alerted her that it was not insignificant.

Gold, silver, bronze, and clay objects were strewn amongst rock.

"Earthquakes do damage," he said. "But tomb is remarkable."

He was right. Perhaps the most fully intact Thracian sanctuary ever found.

In the center stood the deathbed, fashioned of stone, like the altar from the earlier chamber. Lying across the top were the remains of a skeleton, bones arranged anatomically as they'd been when released from the grip of flesh and muscle. The skull was large and possessed a

huge gash across the right side.

“He died from head wound,” Sokolov quietly said.

Her grip on the gun tightened as they threaded a path to the remains. She drifted three steps back, adding distance between them, enough that she could see exactly what he was doing.

Bits of cloth lay scattered amongst the bones—perhaps, she thought, burial robes long gone to dust. A gold band wrapped the neck bones. Gold brooches, earrings, and greaves lay to one side. A gold armlet, corded and patterned, encircled one of the wrists. Bits and pieces of a leather belt remained, inset with a gold band. A gold dagger, figured, tapered, and burnished, lay near the right hand. Remnants of shoes embellished with gold stripes rested opposite the skull.

“He is important,” Sokolov said.

She agreed. Only Thracian leaders possessed such wealth.

She kept one eye on the Russian and studied the rest of the room. Dark shadows signaled more objects. The flashlight cut a swath through the darkness. On the far side, to the right of the entrance, stood a bronze-plated wooden chariot, its four wheels more than a meter across. Amazingly, the petrified wood had survived. She stepped toward it and noticed lavish ornamentation. She’d read about the chariots, seen drawings, bits and pieces here and there. But nothing whole. This was a major archaeological find. Lying beside the chariot were wooden and leather objects that appeared to be harnesses. She knew somewhere nearby would be the bones of horses, sent with their master into the afterlife.

“I have wife in China,” Sokolov said. “We meet when I am there last year. I want to be with her.”

His tone suggested that he meant it. If so, she envied his conviction and wondered if she’d ever meet anybody for whom she’d risk everything.

“Russians do not let me go. I work in oil production and know too many secrets.”

“Why are you even here?” she asked. “This doesn’t involve oil.”

“That was my question to you, which you never answer.”

“I came for this tomb. Nothing more.”

She saw that he believed her.

“Russian’s short on experts in geology. My colleague was to come but he became sick. They tell me just few days in Bulgaria, and Comrade Varga will watch over me. He is Russian security. My keeper. Not someone to take lightly.”

She still wanted that one opportunity with Varga.

“I decide to leave,” Sokolov said. “When you show up I know the time is now.”

But she had to say, “We’re both trapped.” She motioned around with the gun. “Of course, we do have a fabulous treasure.”

Beside the cart lay exquisitely shaped rhytons, amphorae, and phials, each gilded and embossed with more mythological scenes.

She shook her head. The find was priceless.

Thorvaldsen had told her that, if anything was found, he’d finance a dig to study the site. That was the thing she admired about her friend, one way they were exactly alike. History was far more important than wealth.

“If I get to Greece,” Sokolov said. “I get to China.”

She knew the border was less than fifty kilometers south.

“Varga does not want me to go.”

She glanced beside the chariot to a stone slab where more gold bracelets, hatches, and ornaments lay. Propped at its base was some bronze body armor adorned, she saw, with more goddesses. A sword with a gold-studded pommel stood beside it. Though the Thracians had been fierce warriors and accomplished horse breeders, they’d also excelled as goldsmiths.

And this tomb was clear proof of that fact.

She stepped back toward the deathbed.

“I want to be with my wife,” he said. “Varga knows I am gone. He is looking for me.”

A detail he’d omitted earlier.

“I trust you,” he said. “You have my gun.”

“Comrade Sokolov,” a voice called out from outside.

Varga.

She stared at Sokolov.

“Did you think me that stupid?” the disembodied voice asked. “I knew you wanted to help her yesterday. Your eyes, comrade. They betray you. I was told to watch you carefully.”

Her gaze raked the tomb. Only one exit.

Had it been Sokolov’s task to lead her here?

“You are important man,” Varga called out. “But I care not. Neither do your superiors. They told me to deal with any problems you create as I wanted.”

Something thudded to the ground just outside the portal.

Her gaze locked on it.

Another bundle of plastique explosive with another timer clicking down.

40 seconds.

39.

38.

Her question about Sokolov’s loyalty had just been answered.

The Russian ignored the bomb and rushed toward a pile of rock.

“Help me,” he said, as he started clearing the pile.

She immediately assisted.

As they worked she saw an arched opening appear in the circular wall, maybe a meter high. Tight, but enough to crawl through. Now she knew why he’d led her here.

She glanced back.

23 seconds.

22.

“Go,” he said. “Fast.”

On all fours, still gripping the gun and the light, she scooted through the tunnel, Sokolov following.

“I find this tunnel when I am inside,” Sokolov said as they kept crawling. “It became exposed when I blast. I hide it. Is to be my way out.”

Her mind was still counting.

Under 10 seconds.

The darting beam of her light revealed the end five meters ahead and she quickened her pace, emerging and clearing a path for Sokolov, who leaped out just as the concussion from the explosion spewed dust and gravel from the crawl space.

She lay face down, arms covering her head, eyes closed.

The blast subsided. Debris settled.

She raised her head, as did Sokolov.

“Where are we?” she asked.

He stood. “Good place.” His tone had changed. More exuberant. “Come.”

She followed him through the tunnel on a straight run. Two turns and fifty meters later they emerged out into a light rain.

“This is the far side of mountain,” he said. “Long way from camp.”

She was glad to be out of there.

“Now Russians think me dead,” he said. “I can leave and no one cares.”

“I thought you were important to them.”

“This is the thing about Russians. Nothing is *really* important. That belief will be their destruction one day.”

“Are you always so depressing?”

He shook his head. “Not anymore. I am free. I know you to be a capable woman when I first see you. I am glad you do not shoot me back there.”

“How did you know that I might?”

“Not hard to realize. But you are good person. You don’t pull a trigger

unless necessary.”

“How would you know that?”

He pointed to her face. “It is there. I take a chance with you. Much better than trusting Russians.”

She smiled. “I assume that’s a compliment?”

He gave her a slight bow. “Most respectful.”

This man had saved her life. She owed him.

“Thanks,” she said. “For everything.”

He pointed to what she thought was west. “Village is not far. You can make it there on foot and find your way back to Sofia. I go this way.” He pointed south. “My wife waits for me.”

“You must love her so much.”

“I do. She is with child. My child. I hope it is a son.”

He extended a hand, which she shook.

“Too bad about tomb,” he said. “Probably destroyed.”

She shrugged. “Not necessarily. It’s been there a long time. We’ll come back and dig it out.”

He nodded. “Good-bye. Take care.”

She watched as he trotted off toward a thick stand of trees. She couldn’t just let him leave. “Comrade Sokolov.”

He stopped and turned.

“I can get you out of the country,” she said. “You’ll need some money. I can make it easier.”

He shook his head. “Getting away from those men inside mountain. That was what I need your help for. I am okay. We both get what we want.”

That they did.

“You take care, too,” she said to him.

He smiled. “Who knows? Maybe one day you return favor.”

Maybe so, she thought.

## WRITER'S NOTE

Bulgaria has always interested me. It's a fascinating country tucked against the Black Sea, deep in the Balkans. I visited in 2007 and decided that one day it would appear in a story. Though its debut has come in a piece of short fiction, the locale will definitely return in a future novel.

Thracians are intriguing. The culture existed, as depicted in the story. It rose, thrived, then was absorbed by conquerors. Unfortunately, Thracians developed no written language and left only their tombs as reminders of their existence. Several hundred of those tombs have been the located, many containing a vast array of gold and silver objects. The Valley of the Thracian Kings, in central Bulgaria, is real and worth a visit. This tomb, in the southern Rila mountains, was my concoction. But it is accurately depicted, as is the surrounding geography.

This story is a prequel.

When Lev Sokolov trots off after Cassiopeia Vitt thanks him for saving her life, his final comment to her is prophetic.

Five years later they will meet again.

That tale is told in *The Emperor's Tomb*.

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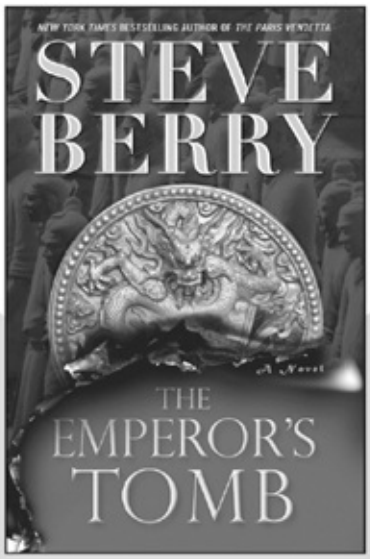
**featuring Cotton Malone
and Cassiopeia Vitt!**

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by
STEVE BERRY

Published by Ballantine Books

NORTHERN AREAS, PAKISTAN

FRIDAY, MAY 18

8:10 AM

A BULLET ZIPPED PAST COTTON MALONE. HE DOVE to the rocky ground and sought what cover the sparse poplars offered. Cassiopeia Vitt did the same and they belly-crawled across sharp gravel, finding a boulder large enough to provide the two of them protection.

More shots came their way.

"This is getting serious," Cassiopeia said.

"You think?"

Their trek had, so far, been uneventful. The greatest congregation of towering peaks on the planet surrounded them. The roof of the world, two thousand miles from Beijing, in the extreme southwestern corner of China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region—or the Northern Areas of Pakistan, depending on whom you asked—smack up against a hotly disputed border.

Which explained the soldiers.

"They're not Chinese," she said. "I caught a glimpse. Definitely Pakistanis."

Jagged, snowy summits as high as twenty thousand feet shielded glaciers, patches of green-black forest, and lush valleys. The Himalaya, Karakoum, Hindu Kush, and Pamir ranges all merged here. This was the land of black wolves and blue poppies, ibex and snow leopards. *Where fairies congregated*, Malone recalled one ancient observer noting.

Possibly even the inspiration behind James Hilton's *Shangri-la*. A paradise for trekkers, climbers, rafters, and skiers. Unfortunately, India and Pakistan both claimed sovereignty, China retained possession, and all three governments had fought over the desolate region for decades.

"They seem to know where we're headed," she said.

"That thought occurred to me, too." So he had to add, "I told you he was trouble."

They were dressed in leather jackets, jeans, and boots. Though they were more than eight thousand feet above sea level, the air was surprisingly mild. Maybe sixty degrees, he estimated. Luckily, both of them carried Chinese semi-automatic weapons and a few spare magazines.

"We have to go that way." He pointed behind them. "And those soldiers are close enough to do some damage."

He searched his eidetic brain for what they needed. Yesterday, he'd studied the local geography and noted that this slice of earth, which wasn't much larger than New Jersey, was once called Hunza, a princely state for over nine hundred years, whose independence finally evaporated in the 1970s. The fair-skinned and light-eyed locals claimed to be descendants of soldiers in Alexander the Great's army, from when Greeks invaded two millennia ago. Who knew? The land had remained isolated for centuries, until the 1980s, when the Karakoram Highway passed through and connected China to Pakistan.

"We have to trust that he'll handle it," she finally said.

"That was your call, not mine. You go first. I'll cover."

He gripped the Chinese double-action pistol. Not a bad weapon. Fifteen rounds, fairly accurate. Cassiopeia prepared herself, too. He liked that about her—ready for any situation. They made a good team, and this striking Spanish Arab definitely intrigued him.

She scampered off toward a stand of junipers.

He aimed the pistol across the boulder and readied himself to react at the slightest movement. To his right, in the tomb-like illumination that filtered through the spring foliage, he caught the glimmer of a rifle barrel being aimed around a tree trunk.

He fired.

The barrel disappeared.

He decided to use the moment and followed Cassiopeia, keeping the boulder between himself and their pursuers.

He reached her and they both raced forward, using more trees as cover.

Sharp bursts of rifle fire echoed. Bullets pinged around them.

The trail twisted out of the trees and rose in a steep but climbable slope, held to a rocky bluff by retaining walls of loose boulders. Not much cover here, but they had no choice. Beyond the trail, he spied canyons so deep and sheer that light could enter only at high noon. A gorge dropped away to their right, and they ran along its edge. Bright sun blazed on the far side, dulled by black mountain slate. A hundred feet below water rushed and tumbled, gray with sand, tossing foamy spray high into the air.

They clambered up the steep embankment.

He spotted the bridge.

Exactly where they'd been told.

Not much of a span, just shaky poles wedged upright between boulders on each end, horizontal timbers fastened on top, connected by thick hemp. A footwalk of boards dangled over the river.

Cassiopeia reached the top of the trail. "We have to cross."

He didn't like that prospect, but she was right. Their destination was on the far side.

Gunfire echoed in the distance and he glanced behind them.

No soldiers.

Which bothered him.

"Maybe he's leading them away," she said.

His distrust made him defensive, but there was no time to analyze the situation. He stuffed the gun into his pocket. Cassiopeia did the same, then stepped onto the bridge.

He followed.

The boards vibrated from the rush of water below. He estimated less than a hundred feet to the other side, but they'd be suspended in open air with zero cover, moving from shadows to sunlight. Another trail could be seen on the far side, leading across loose gravel into more trees. He spotted a figure, maybe fifteen feet high, carved in the rock face beyond the trail—a Buddhist image, just as they'd been told.

Cassiopeia turned back toward him, Eastern eyes peering from her Western face. "This bridge has seen better days."

"I hope it has at least one more left."

She gripped the twisted ropes that held the span aloft.

He tightened his fingers around the coarse strands, too, then decided, "I'll go first."

"And the reason for that?"

"I'm heavier. If they hold me, they'll hold you."

"Since I can't argue with that logic"—she stepped aside—"be my guest."

He assumed the lead, his feet attuned to the steady vibrations.

No sign of any pursuers.

He decided a brisk pace would be better, not giving the boards time to react. Cassiopeia followed.

A new sound rose over the rushing water.

Deep bass tones. Far off, but growing louder.

*Thump. Thump. Thump*.

He whipped his head to the right and caught the first glimpse of a shadow on a rock wall, maybe a mile away, where the gorge they were negotiating met another running perpendicular.

At the halfway point it seemed the bridge was holding, though the moldy boards gave like a sponge. His palms loosely gripped the rough hemp, ready to apply a death lock if the bottom fell out beneath him.

The distant shadow grew in size, then was replaced with the distinct shape of an AH-l Cobra attack helicopter.

American-made, but this was no salvation.

Pakistan operated them, too, provided by Washington to help a supposed ally with the war on terrorism.

The Cobra powered straight toward them. Twin-bladed, dual-engined, it carried 20mm guns, antitank missiles, and aerial rockets. Fast as a bumblebee, and equally maneuverable.

"That's not here to help," he heard Cassiopeia say.

He agreed, but there was no need to voice that he'd been right all along. They'd been herded to this spot, for this precise purpose.

Damn that son of a bitch—

The Cobra started firing.

A steady procession of pops sent 20mm rounds their way.

He dove belly-first to the bridge boards and rolled, staring past his feet as Cassiopeia did the same. The Cobra roared toward them, its turboshafts sucking through the dry, limpid air. Rounds found the bridge, ripping wood and rope with a savage fury.

Another burst arrived.

Concentrated on the ten feet between him and Cassiopeia.

He spied fury in her eyes and watched as she found her gun, came to her knees and fired at the copter's canopy. But he knew that armor plating and an aircraft moving at more than 170 miles an hour reduced the chances of causing damage to zero.

"Get the hell down," he yelled.

Another burst of cannon fire annihilated the bridge between him and Cassiopeia. One moment the wood-and-rope construction existed, the next it was gone in a cloud of debris.

He sprang to his feet and realized the entire span was about to collapse. He could not go back, so he ran ahead, the final twenty feet, clinging to the ropes as the bridge dropped away.

The Cobra flew past, toward the opposite end of the gorge.

He held tight to the ropes and, as the bridge divided, each half swinging back toward opposite sides of the gorge, he flew through the air.

He slammed into rock, rebounded, then settled.

He did not give himself time to be terrified. Slowly, he pulled himself upward, scaling the remaining few feet to the top. Rushing water and the thump of chopper blades filled his ears. He focused across the gorge, searching for Cassiopeia, hoping she'd managed to make it up to the other side.

His heart sank when he saw her clinging with both hands to the other half of the bridge as it dangled against the sheer cliff face. He wanted to help her, but there was nothing he could do. She was a hundred feet away. Only air between them.

The Cobra executed a tight turn within the gorge, arching upward, then began another run their way.

"Can you climb?" he screamed over the noise.

Her head shook.

"Do it," he yelled.

She craned her neck his way. "Get out of here."

"Not without you."

The Cobra was less than a mile away. Its cannon would start firing any second.

"Climb," he screamed.

One hand reached up.

Then she fell fifty feet into the rushing river.

How deep it flowed he did not know, but the boulders that protruded along its path did not offer him any solace.

She disappeared into the churning water, which had to be nearly freezing, considering its source was mountain snow.

He waited for her to surface. Somewhere.

But she never did.

He stared down at the roaring gray gush, which carried silt and rock along with a swish of foam in a formidable current. He wanted to leap after her, but realized that was impossible. He wouldn't survive the fall, either.

He stood and watched, disbelieving.

After all they'd been through the past three days.
Cassiopeia Vitt was gone.

## About the Author

Steve Berry is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Emperor's Tomb, The Paris Vendetta, The Charlemagne Pursuit, The Venetian Betrayal, The Alexandria Link, The Templar Legacy, The Third Secret, The Romanov Prophecy, The Amber Room*, and the short story "The Balkan Escape." His books have been translated into thirty-seven languages and sold in fifty countries. He lives in the historic city of St. Augustine, Florida, and is at work on his next novel. He and his wife, Elizabeth, have founded History Matters, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving our heritage. To learn more about Steve Berry and the foundation, visit www.steveberry.org.

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