

# WHITE POWDER OF GOLD



**Sarah Brewer**

Legend Press Ltd, 51 Gower Street, London, WC1E 6HJ  
info@legendtimesgroup.co.uk | www.legendpress.co.uk

Contents © Sarah Brewer 2024

The right of the above author to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

Print ISBN 9781835631980

Set in Times.

All characters, other than those clearly in the public domain, and place names, other than those well-established such as towns and cities, are fictitious and any resemblance is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher. Any person who commits any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

## Mount Pichu Pichu, Peru, 12,800 Years Ago

Smoke billowed from the volcano across the valley, obscuring the stars and turning the moon an eerie, luminous blue. An alpaca snorted as hot stones rattled down on the narrow mountain track, then all fell silent again.

Tehuti took a long, last inhalation of *men-hetch-t* and waited for the sweet powder to suffuse his senses before ducking through the tall, narrow entrance of his tomb. Three raven-haired priests followed, their crystal lamps bringing a hint of warmth to the icy chamber. The ground trembled and the whites of their eyes grew large as the priests started a low-pitched ritual chant.

Breathing heavily, Tehuti untied the neck of his leather sack and unwrapped a translucent crystal skull. He caressed its smooth surface and the deep eye sockets fluoresced a pale green as he placed the skull in its niche at the head of the funerary ledge.

Next, he shrugged off his dark cloak, unclasped his heavy belt threaded with blue diamond obelisks and wound it into a thick coil. When placed in the cylindrical depression at the foot of the ledge, the glittering diamonds stood in a tight circle with their single points thrusting upwards. Finally, he twisted the crystal ring from the sixth finger of his left hand and placed it beside them.

The priests' death chant grew louder and higher in pitch as Tehuti lay down between the crystal skull at his head and the prisms and ring at his feet. With everything in its rightful place, he closed his eyes and barked a single word. '*Sehi!*' *Go.*

EnKi and EnTi needed no further encouragement and their chanting stopped mid crescendo as they fled. But EnLil stooped to kiss the feet of his supine God and deftly palmed Tehuti's ring before darting outside.

The chamber echoed with thuds and scrapes as the three priests sealed the entrance with waiting blocks of pink granite. Alone in the dark, Tehuti smiled. He had not underestimated EnLil's capacity for deceit. While his ring would no longer access the crystal technology he'd left behind, its possession would stop his priests' descendants from seeking and plundering his tomb.

Tugging a thin leather cord from around his neck, Tehuti released a second *gasar* ring that once belonged to his beloved twin wife, Ma'at. He twisted it onto the sixth finger of his left hand and its crystal glowed. Then, with a shuddering sigh, he willed his pulse to slow. Focussing inwards, he forced his awareness down through the upper levels of consciousness to the seething maroon in which free-scry meditation took place.

An hour later, the volcano on the neighbouring ridge erupted, burying his tomb beneath thousands of tons of volcanic ash.

# **PART 1**

**PERU**

# 1

Doctor Saxon de Carey inched forward on his stomach and peered over the icy precipice at the newly exposed cave. Another tremor stirred the ground and more blocks fell away, widening the pink stain on the white, almost vertical slope. Across the valley, El Misti's snow-capped cone belched grey smoke while behind him, ominous dark clouds roiled in.

'D'you think it's a burial site?' Spud's voice was thick with excitement.

'Probably, but we'll never know for sure.' Saxon wriggled back from the edge until he felt safe to stand. 'We need to get off this mountain.'

'Come on!' Spud pleaded. 'You can't just leave it!'

'We can and we will.' Saxon removed his goggles and squinted at Spud in exasperation. 'Finish packing while I go check on George.'

Ignoring Spud's huff, Saxon patted the pockets of his insulated suit, found his mountain sunglasses and crunched across the ice to where their team leader lay slumped against a boulder.

'Is it a tomb?' George rasped.

'Could be.' Saxon removed a glove stiff with rime and squatted to check his pulse. 'But pink granite suggests it's not typically Incan.'

'Then I'm going down to explore.' George struggled to sit upright.

'Don't be an idiot.' Saxon rolled his eyes. 'You can't even

stand, let alone rappel down a cliff.’ With his rapid heart rate, laboured breathing and cyanosed lips, the diagnosis was in little doubt.

Rifling through his medical kit, Saxon fumbled tablets from a container and held them out for George to swallow with a handful of snow. A burst of laughter caught his attention, and he glanced over at the six medical students. When he looked back, George was wiping blood from his nose.

‘Doesn’t mean anything,’ George said gruffly. ‘I’m prone to nose bleeds.’

‘It’s acute altitude sickness, if not pulmonary oedema, and you know it.’ Saxon hoped he sounded calmer than he felt as he rummaged for a nasal plug.

‘I’m still team leader and we’re checking that burial site,’ George slurred. ‘If I can’t do it, you’ll have to go down instead.’

Saxon’s jaw muscles tightened. ‘Why are you being so stubborn?’

‘Because priceless artefacts could be lost forever!’

‘We don’t even know it *is* a burial site.’

‘Pink granite?’ George snorted. ‘In white volcanic rock? I’m not moving ’til you rappel down and check it out – could have gone already in the time you’ve wasted arguing.’

‘Forget it.’ Saxon stood, suppressing a grunt as his ankles complained. ‘I’m calling Mountain Rescue to lift you off this mountain.’

Waving away George’s protests, he trudged back across the ice to where his medical students were huddled over flasks of hot chocolate. The three rowers, Danny, Spud and Kazuo were in their element, but he sensed Ahmed and the girls, Fenella and Abebi, were having second thoughts about the rigors of Expedition Medicine.

Danny grinned up at him. ‘How’s George?’

‘Not good. Can you make a rope sling? Like I showed you in training?’

‘Sure, Doc. What’s wrong?’

‘You tell me.’ Saxon reached for his orange rucksack.

‘What’s the most likely cause of headache, dizziness and nausea at this elevation?’

‘... acute mountain sickness?’

‘A.M.S. We’ll make a medic out of you yet.’ Suppressing a smile, Saxon unzipped the pack and extracted his satellite phone. ‘What’s the cause?’

‘Reduced oxygen percentage?’

Saxon tutted. ‘Percentage isn’t that different to sea level. What’s changed is air pressure so the atmosphere’s less dense, air molecules are further apart and less oxygen’s available. Treatment?’

Danny shrugged. ‘Oxygen?’

‘And urgent descent – why?’

When Danny remained silent, Fenella smirked and said, ‘To prevent high altitude pulmonary and cerebral oedema.’

‘Someone bothered to read my handbook! Abebi, grab a space blanket and give George this.’ He handed her an oxygen bottle and grimaced as the approaching dark clouds brayed with thunder.

As she plodded off, Saxon activated the satellite phone, speed dialled the High Mountain Rescue Unit and said, ‘Doctor Saxon de Carey, Cambridge University expedition on Mount Pichu Pichu.’

‘What’s your emergency, Doctor?’

‘A.M.S. George Arakos, forty-three, conscious but deteriorating.’

‘Your elevation?’

Saxon glanced at the phone’s GPS and faltered. The display of 5,609 metres could not be right. He wrestled with his padded sleeve and saw his digital wrist altimeter read 4,490 metres.

‘I need your altitude, Doctor.’

Knowing the phone’s readings were more accurate, he reluctantly said, ‘Looks like we’re at 5,609 metres.’

The operator clicked her tongue. ‘Our ’copters have a service ceiling of 4,600 metres.’



‘Then we’ll carry him down to base camp,’ Saxon said, heart thumping. ‘Can you meet us there?’

After giving the co-ordinates, Saxon agreed to call back in an hour and anxiously assessed his students. ‘How are you feeling? Any headache, dizziness, nausea, shortness of breath?’

They looked at each other and shook their heads. ‘We’re fine,’ Spud said. ‘Why?’

‘My wrist altimeter’s on the blink and we’re a tad higher than intended.’ Why hadn’t he double-checked his readings against the sat phone? He’d have to file an incident report and expect a severe bollocking for endangering his students.

‘It’ll be a slog but if Ahmed and the girls manage the extra equipment, I’ll take turns carrying George in a two-man sling with Danny, Spud and Kazuo.’

Abebi traipsed back across the ice. ‘George says he’s not going ’til you check out that tomb.’

‘For God’s sake!’ Saxon dropped his rucksack and marched across to where George was propped on his elbows. The space blanket winked his reflection as he approached, yellow on darkening silver against the coming storm.

‘You’ve a duty to explore that burial,’ George panted as another tremor rocked the ground.

‘My duty is to get you down to base camp in one piece!’ Saxon snapped. ‘Do I have to spell out the dangers of pulmonary oedema?’

‘What if there’s another Lady of Ampato inside?’ George persisted. ‘Her mummy will be lost to posterity if you don’t rescue it now.’

‘Mummies in distress aren’t my priority, you are.’ Saxon stared at his friend. ‘Why are you being so reckless? You know the potential dangers.’

‘Then hurry and check that site.’ His eyes narrowed. ‘What would your father have done?’

‘Cheap shot, George.’

‘You also have a duty to the funders of this expedition,’

George growled. 'Five minutes, in and out. You owe me, remember? I ain't moving.'

Saxon threw up his hands and stomped over to the pile of equipment, tossing items aside to find what he needed.

'Spud!' he yelled as he stepped into a sit harness, adjusting the leg loops around his thighs. 'I'm rappelling down. You and Kazuo, set the webbing anchor around that boulder.' He thrust on a climbing helmet and tucked grip gloves into his belt. 'Danny? How's George's sling going?'

'We're golden.'

'Good. Soon as I'm back, we're off.'

Saxon roped up, double-checked his harness and pulled on his climbing rucksack and gloves.

Thunder rumbled overhead and El Misti volcano grumbled in front. This was madness and he wouldn't relax until George was safely back at base camp. Flexing his ankles, he tried to ease the tight, aching scars over both his Achilles tendons. He wasn't a great climber, but he knew he could do this.

Saxon inched once more towards the cliff edge on his stomach. Far below, the white stones of Arequipa city flared through the haze. Activating his helmet microphone, he gave Spud the thumbs up and said, 'Ready when you are.'

On Spud's signal, Saxon gripped the rappel lines, swung his legs over the edge of the cliff and launched into space. There'd better be a mummy to justify this risk.

Saxon braked level with the mouth of the cave and sought toeholds against the icy cliff. More pink granite tumbled into the chasm as he crabbed towards the entrance and launched himself through. 'I'm in.'

'Cool.' Spud sounded as if he were chewing gum. 'Any Inca gold?'

Saxon flipped on his head torch. 'Definitely a tomb. Goes back about four metres, narrowing down to a funerary ledge.' He crept forwards. 'Skeletal remains... not mummified and there's... whoa!' He caught his breath as he realised what he

was seeing. The skeleton was at least three metres long with an unusually elongated skull rising to a smooth, darkened cone.

George's voice came over the mike. 'What've you found?'

'God knows, but it's not Incan – and what are you doing up?'

'Artefacts?' George asked.

'Just bones. Hang on, I'll take some footage.' Saxon shrugged off the rucksack, pulled his video camera from its pouch and looped the strap around one wrist. As he started filming, the ground vibrated with another earth tremor and dust rained down. 'Roof's caving in.'

'Storm's coming in fast, too.' George's voice crackled in his ear. 'Look for relics.'

Saxon crept towards the skeleton whose elongated head and neck gave way to broad shoulders and a massive ribcage. From the relatively narrow pelvis, he guessed the remains were male. Pulling off his gloves, he reached forward and traced the angle of the pubic bone. Despite his delicate touch the ancient bone crumbled, and he snatched his hand away.

'Check by the head and feet.' George sounded anxious. 'Look for crystals, especially a ring...'

Ignoring him, Saxon blew dust from the domed skull, hoping for a better view of its peculiar bony sutures. The teeth seemed too small and too few, widely spaced and lacking molars.

A granite block fell onto the skeletal chest and Saxon jumped back, coughing, as the ribcage collapsed in a cloud of dust. Lightning flashed and a mound of debris momentarily gleamed at one end of the funerary ledge.

Thunder growled as Saxon cleared the dirt from a translucent crystal skull. At his touch, the deep eye sockets fluoresced and seemed to stare straight at him. Heart racing, he panned his video camera to capture the scene.

'Saxon!' George yelled. 'Grab what you can and get out now!'

'Coming!' Saxon eased the heavy crystal skull into his

rucksack as another flash of lightning illuminated the cave. Something gleamed beyond the skeletal feet and Saxon gouged through the debris to reveal a cluster of grubby obelisks bound in decaying leather. Plucking them to safety, he stuffed them in the front of his rucksack and shrugged it onto his shoulders.

He lingered, his gaze flicking over the skeleton as he wondered what disease had afflicted the owner. Gigantism from a pituitary tumour? Marfan's syndrome like Cris? As he was about to leave, he spotted the skeleton's left hand... six lines of disintegrating finger bones... six digits, not five...

Icy wind whipped through the tomb, stirring dust to reveal the crystal ring encircling the skeletal sixth finger. Heart thumping, Saxon fished it from the crumbling bones and held it up. An intricate white metal band supported a milky quartz crystal.

Another tremor rocked the chamber, and he instinctively braced his arms against the walls. The camcorder hanging from his wrist cracked against the rock as he slipped the large ring over his left thumb and twisted it down, curling his fingers to keep it in place.

The chamber lurched and Saxon jumped for the entrance as the side of the cliff fell away. His gloves were gone, and the rope was going to burn all the way up.

Rocks rained down, bouncing off his helmet and smashing his torch. A white light burst inside his head, and he spun into the void as everything went black.