

# HANDWRITING IN WATER

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KEVIN BOHACZ

"Transhumanism is as old as the story of Adam and Eve, and far more dangerous than that first bite of the apple."

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Unbridged Edition: Rev 1793 / December 30, 2022

*This story is dedicated to my best friend and wife,  
the wellspring of love for my second life, the love my  
life, the girl of my dreams, the beautiful artist and  
faery princess dancer, Dana.*

*This story is dedicated to my sweet little sister,  
Dori. No one more so than siblings go through all of  
life hand in hand. Now you are in one dream and I in  
another but still hand in hand.*



## Dustcover

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Transhumanism is as old as the story of Adam and Eve, and far more dangerous than that first bite of the apple. This is what Dylan Smith is about to learn. As a Berkeley professor of archeology and over-the-hill college football player, Dylan is about to receive his own personalized fifteen minutes of infamy. Since graduate school, he has been obsessed with discredited clues about a mysterious South American archeological site that could change the timeline of history as we know it. He should have been far more careful about that wish.

Scientists currently believe anatomically modern humans have walked this planet for at least 300,000 years and likely much longer. Since the beginning of recorded history 5,000 years ago, we've gone from stone tools to artificial intelligence, space travel, nuclear power, and more. Dylan believes it is the height of arrogance to suggest that we humans lived as little more than hairless apes for the prior 295,000 years. He instead believes human society has advanced and rebooted many times in our 300,000 year-long history. Perhaps it is not arrogance but ego that prevents humanity from admitting our all too obvious repeated failures?

After decades of work and ridicule, Dylan has finally located the

impossibly ancient archeological site for which he has been searching, but this discovery is also something for which he has no more comprehension than an ant has for the sole of a boot. Holding onto this discovery will cost him everything and everyone he loves.

## Preface

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*Handwriting in Water* marks a return to my techno-thriller writer's roots and the roots of my two bestsellers. It is a highly realistic contemporary techno-thriller. The themes are transhumanism, ancient technology, conspiracy, reincarnation, and possibly the end of the world. This is not a story of Atlantis or some other wondrous mythological place. This is a realistic gritty story about human evolution, cycles of global destruction, and science instead of magic.



## Ten Cent Bio

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I started life as a scientist, inventor, engineer, and environmentalist. I founded a successful high-tech company or two before becoming a full-time novelist. I was widowed at a young age after the woman I loved with all my heart died from pancreatic cancer. A few years after being widowed, I put everything I owned in storage and did my own version of Eat, Pray, Love by wandering the California coastline renting oceanfront cottages while searching for a good place to heal and write. Along that journey, I published my second bestseller and found and married my second wife, the second love of my life, a remarkable woman and artist named Dana. So I have loved, lost, grieved, created, founded companies, wandered, invented, written about it all, and been metaphorically reborn more than once. All this life experience is distilled into my writing.



## ONE

### Ancient Technology

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” — Arthur C. Clarke

1

Dylan squinted as rays of a late afternoon sun poured onto his broad face. He was standing a short distance from the edge of a rocky cliff beyond which the earth seemed to vanish into a vast mile deep abyss. Towering all around him at a height equal to that depth were the snow-capped peaks of the Andes. It was more magnificent than the Grand Canyon, he thought, then shivered again. The temperature had dropped. Even his prized antique bomber jacket was no longer enough to shield him from these savage winds.

He deserved to suffer. Why had he stolen that pre-Columbian artifact all those years ago? Doing that went against everything he believed in as an archeologist. He had a long list of weak justifications that did not make sense. What did make sense was that as soon as he'd discovered it buried in that dry New Mexico riverbed, he knew he'd had no choice. He had been

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in charge of that dig. Stealing the artifact had been child's play. The Spanish conquistadors, whose campsite his team had been excavating, had likely, in turn, stolen the artifact from one of many tribes of indigenous people they'd conquered.

The wind screamed harder against Dylan as if it were angry at him. He sunk his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket, wrapping it tighter around him. As an ex-college football lineman, he was a bull of a man in both build and stubbornness. His heavy muscles strained reassuringly against the jacket's weatherworn leather as his fingers sought out the small stolen object in his pocket.

It was a flawlessly well-preserved gold ring encircled with Maya script. Earlier today, he'd taken it off while working on the dig and forgotten to put it back on. It was unlike any pre-Columbian ring that had been discovered in the Americas. It looked like something that could have been on sale in a modern jewelry store. He seldom took the ring off. Everyone thought it was a custom ring that he'd had engraved with some of the script found on the tablet he'd been laboring to translate for years. Like the tablet, the Maya script on the ring had resulted in gibberish instead of a logical translation. As if that had not been enough of a mystery, the inside of the band bore an inscription in a completely unknown language.

Any archeologist worth his PhD would have considered the ring an enigma, or worse, a fraud constructed in the time of the Spaniards. As an authority in ancient languages, Dylan had immediately realized the ring was a key to the tablet he'd been working on and regarded it with near religious reverence.

He had been a child prodigy with languages and was now fluent in over fifty, including more dead languages than possibly anyone alive. Decades ago, a small two-foot stone tablet was unearthed in Mexico by a construction company. The badly damaged tablet, with its unintelligible Maya script, had fascinated only academics. It was just one of many examples of Maya script that resulted in gibberish.

No one knew exactly why some Maya texts were untranslatable, and no one other than academics cared. The tablet had been relegated to the

dusty backrooms of the Mexican National Museum of Anthropology until Dylan, as an assistant professor, had decided to make his name by cracking the mystery.

Instead, years later, he had allegedly deciphered an even greater mystery that had ultimately led him to the mountains of Peru. No one believed his translation was accurate except a few close friends and colleagues. Likewise, no one had believed the legend that Dylan had partially gleaned from the tablet had been about a real place and a lost people, no one, that is, except those same close friends and colleagues.

The tablet's translated story of the "*Many Voices*" had been real. The megalithic limestone slab they'd unearthed a short walk from where he now stood proved that and so much more. The stolen Mayan ring had been the linguistic key that had unlocked the tablet and revealed the location of the archeological site he and his team would soon enter beneath the limestone slab.

Despite the cold, Dylan remained at the cliff as late afternoon turned into twilight. The bare rock that formed the cliff was uncomfortable to sit on, but he did not care. He had been ruminating while staring off into the vast emptiness of that abyss as if he could find answers there. He touched the Mayan ring that was now on his finger to once more reconfirm that all his hopes and dreams were concrete and about to be proven real.

He reached into a pocket for an almost empty pack of cigarettes and lighter. Fighting against the wind, he lit one after several tries. He had promised to quit so many times, but it helped him think. Halfway through the smoke, he was again simmering with the kind of fury that had turned him into an unstoppable brawler on the gridiron. It was his anger issues that had brought him to this cliff to think.

His mind, as it often did when he was angry, dredged up some of the bottomless rage he harbored toward a father he had never known. What kind of man caused a pregnant woman to change her name and disappear? Between Dylan's mother, who was an orphan, and his father, the

monster, Dylan had been left with a stunted family tree. He had no biological roots, no anchor for stormy seas.

The Peruvian government had no right to replace him on this dig. So far no one knew about this development except him, not even their selected replacement, his old mentor, Carlos Aguilar. Dylan supposed it could have been worse. They could have chosen an outsider. Soon the site would officially be under the care of Carlos, who was the onsite representative of the Peruvian government and a world authority on its antiquities.

Dylan and Carlos had worked together on and off for almost two decades. Carlos had been the leader of the first field expedition Dylan had ever gone on. Back then, Dylan had been an embarrassingly wet behind the ears grad student. In time, Carlos had become almost a second surrogate father or uncle, which meant a lot since Dylan had never known his biological father.

Dylan ground out his cigarette beside him on the rock ledge he was sitting on. Wind swept the burning embers off into the abyss that seemed to beckon to him. He wondered if his father was still alive. He wondered if the monster would read about a great archeological discovery in Peru and never know it was his son's accomplishment.

Dylan got up, stretched his back, working the kinks out of it, then began making his way to the basecamp across the boulder-strewn landscape. The massive cliff-top plateau on which everything sat had been carved erratically out of the heart-stone of the mountain as if some god of old had swung an axe into its slope.

Dylan negotiated the rugged terrain with athletic ease, though he was sometimes forced to clamber down over a huge boulder or squeeze through a tight crevice. The path eventually turned down into a shallow ravine large enough to contain a village. Sheltered within it was the expedition's base camp. Funnels of smoke from cooking fires spiraled into the air before being erased by the ever-present crosswinds. Dozens of people were milling about, absorbed by their evening rituals. It was a scene that had been relived countless times since his archeological work had begun here six months ago.

As he threaded his way through the base camp, breathing in the smoke laced air invoked a primal sense of home. Walking past a row of cabin tents, he spotted Jenny and stopped. She was sitting beside their fire, huddled under a thick red blanket. Her long blonde hair was lazily tied into a ponytail. Engrossed with her sketchbook, she had not sensed his presence. She was one of those rare individuals who made a living as an artist. She would never be wealthy, but her watercolors sometimes sold for thousands of dollars.

Dylan was close enough to call to her but kept his silence. She endlessly fascinated him. Even the simple things she did were captivating. She was the kindest person he'd ever known. She was average in appearance but what was in her heart made her seem far more beautiful than a movie star. Even in worn jeans, a flannel shirt, and a blanket, he found her seductive. Her softness, her warmth, pulled at his heart and his desires.

His thoughts drifted back to the day not long ago when she'd arrived at the base camp along with a resupply team. His expedition had looked like it was nearing a bad end. His leadership had been faltering. He had been so desperately lost, his days filled with endless work, digging, scraping, and finding nothing of value. His dreams had been shipwrecked, his soul thirsty and dry. In all the emails he'd written her, never had he betrayed his agony, but she had known.

One lost day he had looked up with the dust from his work settling around him and seen a beautiful phantom walking down a trail toward him. It had to be a dream, a hallucination. How could she be here? Yet, there she was smiling and laughing, eyes squinting with delight. God, she had given him back his life that day.

As that warm memory faded, Dylan found himself unable to say a word. Will you ever really know, he thought. Will you ever fully understand what you gave me that day? Jenny looked up from her reading, and her large brown eyes met his gaze. Her skin was so flushed and warm from the fire that her whole face seemed to glow as she smiled.

"Where did you sneak off to?" she asked.

"The cliff."

He shrugged, then settled down beside her and wrapped her blanket around both their shoulders. The wool was thick and prickly.

"You've been smoking again," said Jenny. "I can smell it."

"I should go into the site alone without Carlos."

"Don't change the subject," said Jenny. "Besides, I thought all that was settled. Carlos is going with you, or the Ministry of Culture is shutting everything down."

"They're shutting me down anyway. They want their representative to take over the site and are graciously allowing me to continue under the supervision of Carlos."

"What! That's crazy. There must be something you can do?"

"I guess I can always quit."

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Precisely two hours after breakfast, the Archeological team had gathered for a briefing. Everyone was seated or standing beneath a large brown tarp that they ironically referred to as the command center. The incessant sounds of feet shuffling and metal chairs creaking spoke of nervous energy.

Most of Dylan's inner circle had gathered around a large metal folding table. They were studying its contents and conversing as he studied their faces. The table was rusted and beaten from long years of fieldwork. Scattered across its surface were notebook computers, iPads, and blueprint-like drawings. There were two empty chairs. Dylan was waiting for them to be filled before starting the meeting.

His iPhone vibrated, alerting him to a text message. The base camp was bathed in a mesh wi-fi network that was fed by a pair of satellite internet dishes the size of pizza boxes. The system was the only reliable high-speed connection they had with the outside world. He glanced at his phone, knowing before he looked that the text was from Alan Porter, their largest donor. Alan was as nervous as an expectant father.

Carlos met Dylan's eyes from across the table. Carlos was sixty-eight

years old, short, slab-chested, and proud. A brown friendship bracelet from his granddaughter was on his wrist. Dylan noticed how his mentor looked oddly older than he had just the other day. He wondered if Carlos already knew he was going to be ordered by the Ministry of Culture to replace a younger man he considered a son. Carlos would bristle at that order.

Dylan looked away from Carlos, feeling some of the anger from the other day rekindling. What was happening was an insult. For Dylan, it was as if his entire life had been leading up to this morning. All those early years of starving while on one meager football scholarship after another was about to pay off. Today was the reason for working harder than anyone else to earn his advanced degrees as an athlete scholar. Today was the reason for his subsequent long years of work as a professor of Archeology at Berkeley.

Now, while still just barely in his thirties, this remote place in the mountains of Peru would be his chance to experience something extraordinary that was truly snatched out of time. He knew what had been partially unearthed a week ago was a find that could make him famous. In a few hours, he would enter a shrine that was intact, unsoiled, and incredibly ancient, and the Ministry of Culture was trying to steal the spotlight from all his hard work instead of praising him.

Jenny walked up behind Dylan and momentarily rested her hands on his shoulders. He jumped at her touch and realized he was far angrier than he'd thought, and he'd thought he was more than angry enough. His stomach was beginning to feel sour. He needed to get control of this anger and get on with the business at hand. He excused himself to use the latrine but instead snuck an Ativan once safely out of sight. He then wandered off to have a smoke until he felt the drug beginning to work. Sublingual Ativan tended to kick in quickly for him. Fifteen minutes later, his anger had started to slowly cool.

After he returned to the command center, all the chairs were filled. Dylan started the meeting with a review of the ingress and egress plan. The limestone slab, which was the size of a double-wide doorway, had sealed the entrance for millennia. This slab, which the team had twice

previously painstakingly lifted nine inches and then reclosed, would now be fully opened. The slab was three feet thick, lay flat on the ground like a megalithic gravesite ledger, and was covered with inscriptions. Its estimated weight was eleven tons. It was a mystery how the ancients opened and closed the lid to enter the site for their rituals.

Dylan gave the team an update on his translations and thoughts about the slab. It was inscribed with both Maya script and the same completely unknown language as his Mayan ring, the key that unlocked the location of this site. No one at the table knew the truth about that ring or that it might prove to be a Rosetta Stone.

"I've come to the conclusion that the unknown language is clearly alphabetic, and its resemblances to Proto-Sinaitic script cannot be ignored," said Dylan. "As some of you know, Proto-Sinaitic script originated in the Middle East and is the oldest known alphabetic writing system in the world.

"That slab, with its two different languages, is keeping its secrets far too well. I've spent more time on the translation of its Maya glyphs than any other task. It's still producing mostly gibberish as if it were encrypted the same as the *Many Voices* tablet that led us here.

"All I'm able to glean is that this is, as theorized, the entrance to a temple and initiation chamber named *Twin-Moon-Gate*, the supposedly imaginary Mayan-Andean shrine described on the *Many Voices* tablet."

"So your origin theory, she is still holding up?" asked Carlos, prompting Dylan to explain more.

"Yes," said Dylan. He could not suppress his smile of pride. "We've already made history and about to make even more. Unlike Mesoamerica, no written language has ever been discovered in pre-Columbian South America. This unearthed slab will radically change the prevailing theories for the origin of civilization in the Americas, the same way Copernicus changed everything with his proof that the planets orbited the sun.

"This slab proves, at the very least, that the Mayan language had spread far beyond what anyone had imagined all the way to Peru. More than that, it suggests that Peru was the true linguistic epicenter and that

the Mayan cities in Mesoamerica were merely far-flung places within the region of influence of a long-lost Andean civilization."

As the meeting wore on, Dylan began checking his watch. The quadcopter should have been ready by now. Before anyone entered the underground structure, it would be explored by the drone. He glanced over to where the slab had been raised twenty-four inches. The drone operator, Ricardo, was prepping the flight by lowering an antenna into the opening.

"Ready," shouted Dylan.

He got a thumbs-up from Ricardo.

"Let's do it," shouted Dylan.

Ricardo jogged back to the command center and sat down behind his console. Dylan watched the camera feed from the drone as it lifted off and flew into the opening. The view from the drone was limited by what was revealed by its high-intensity camera light. Every inch of the corridor appeared to be covered in a fine black dust that the quadcopter rotors blew into swirling clouds which limited visibility. What loomed in and out on the screen was a medieval-looking corridor that vanished into utter darkness as the light from the drone was swallowed by what lay ahead.

The walls and floor were constructed from various naturally shaped stone blocks, while the ceiling was made of stone slabs that spanned the width of the corridor. All of it apparently fitted without mortar. The workmanship rivaled the best ancient structures of South America, and it was in an exceptionally well-preserved state. The only surprise so far was the black dust.

"We're going to need respirators," said Carlos.

"Agreed," said Dylan. "The ceiling looks solid. Collapse is always going to be a risk, but so far, it all looks safe to me."

"Sí," said Carlos. "It is good that there are no deathtraps."

"Deathtraps?" said Jenny with alarm.

"Deathtraps are nothing but Hollywood tropes," said Dylan to calm her fear.

"Por favor, forgive an old man for his gallows sense of humor," said Carlos. "In our business, there are always the dark rumors of poisons, pit

traps, pools of liquid mercury, and such, but I promise you, Jenny, it is all nonsense."

The drone passed several side passageways. Each time Ricardo asked how to proceed, and each time Dylan told him to keep going straight. The unusually large number of side passageways suggested the warren might have been used for some kind of initiation ritual that involved progressive stages.

Dylan checked his watch. They'd been exploring for twenty-eight minutes. The tunnel was far longer than anyone had originally thought. Without warning, the drone crashed to the floor, and the screen went black. No one said a word for several seconds.

"Que mierda!" said Ricardo.

"Did you hit something?" asked Dylan.

"No, nada," said Ricardo.

"I was watching," said Carlos. "It looked like our little birdy just died for no reason."

It was their only drone. Radio waves propagated poorly in stone tunnels, but in a straight line, at approximately three hundred feet, where this failure occurred, those laws of physics had not been the cause.

"Alright, that's it," said Dylan. "Time to put boots on the ground."

"Agreed," said Carlos.

"What about the drone?" asked Jenny. "What happened to it could happen to your radio."

"The dust probably clogged up one of its motors," lied Dylan.

Jenny looked worried and was not buying it. She glanced at Ricardo, who shrugged. Carlos was already standing as if impatient to get going. His expression was unreadable. His skin was furrowed with deep wrinkles from far too many decades of hard work in the field, making him seem that much more impenetrable.

"We're going to leave a breadcrumb trail of radio relays, so there's no chance of losing voice contact," said Dylan. "We're going to be fine. Okay?"

He put his hands on Jenny's shoulders as he stared into her eyes. His

smile felt false to him for some reason he could not articulate. Jenny's face was stormy with defiance.

"Okay?" he asked again.

"Okay, fine," said Jenny. "But if anything happens, I'm never forgiving you."

3

Several long hours had passed since the briefing. The videographer, Karen, had just started recording the ingress video. Dylan was painfully aware that if successful, every move he made would be saved forever as Carlos and he pulled on the orange protective coveralls designed for caving. The clothing was difficult to slip into because of its waterproofing. Dylan was stiff with tension. His hands moved with clumsy impatience as he tugged up the zipper. A nasty wind had started to blow. The cloth shelters in the encampment flapped angrily with each gust.

Dylan attached a tiny wireless GoPro video camera to his Petzl caving helmet, then set the rig down to check his comms gear. The batteries were weak. He felt anger and almost lashed out but held it in as he gazed at Karen and her camera with a smile. It was no one's fault but his own that the gear had not been fully checked.

After replacing all batteries and stowing spares in his pack, the rest of the preparations proceeded smoothly. Dylan slipped on a small leather backpack. The thing was bruised and beaten but went with him everywhere, from city to caves. He believed it brought him luck. Carlos came up and embraced him in a rough bear hug.

"History awaits us, my friend," said Carlos.

As soon as Carlos stepped back, Jenny threw her arms around Dylan and held on with such fierce passion. He tried to stop hugging, but Jenny wouldn't let go. When he finally had to pry her away, he saw real fear in her eyes. Such a strong reaction was so unlike her that he suddenly felt unnerved. Was this some kind of intuition? He didn't believe in intuition. The ruins were old, but they had remained intact for thousands of years.

Entering a site always entailed some risks, but it was more dangerous to get into a car or cross a street. He gazed back into her eyes with an assurance he did not really feel.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Nothing’s going to happen to me. I’ll be careful. I promise.”

Jenny was staring deep into his eyes as if searching for something she could not find. A tear wandered down her cheek and caught the sunlight, sparkling like a small liquid jewel. All she said was, “You better.”

A grinding noise came from behind her. He looked past her as one side of the limestone lid was slowly rising like a hatch. A complex arrangement of cable winches, a wooden frame, and scaffolding had been required. The attachment of cables to the lid had been a complicated painstaking process.

He walked over to the opening in the ground, followed by Jenny and Carlos. It was a perfect rectangle cut into the roof of the passage that ran beneath it. The underground corridor was twelve feet high by eight wide and ran precisely west to east toward the side of the mountain.

Winds swept into the large opening and stirred clouds of fine soot-colored dust from the breached gate. It was as if an ageless black smoke was venting. Dylan felt as if he was staring down into an abyss, a great vastness that reached into the very soul of the Earth and time. Something inside that darkened corridor was drawing him on, seducing him with thoughts and whispers of what? Fame, wealth, recognition?

Dylan inserted a pair of earbuds then switched on the cellphone-sized comms package that was attached to his utility belt. A bleep indicated the gear was working. The earbuds blended amplified ambient sound with the comms feed. He adjusted the ambient volume until things sounded normal.

He then fitted a Bluetooth tactical throat microphone around his neck. The mic pressing against his larynx was mildly uncomfortable, but there was nothing to be done about it. He seated a pair of clear tactical goggles over his eyes. His prized Petzl caving helmet fit like a glove. The helmet was scarred from long years of use and had saved him more than once. He

clicked on the helmet-mounted headlamp and GoPro video camera, checking both for operation.

He glanced at Jenny and smiled. She smiled awkwardly back at him as he cinched up a half-face respirator that fit snugly over his nose and mouth. He performed a communications test, keying the comms button and speaking into the throat microphone. The other end of the comms system ran on a MacBook set up on the metal table at the command center. He heard several voices reply. The communications going both ways were good. The comms package did not support a video feed, so footage would not be available until he returned. All communications were being recorded and would become part of the permanent record.

He was finished gearing up. He lifted a canvas shoulder bag that contained radio relays designed specifically for caving. Each one was equipped with a large battery that could last for days. Carlos had an identical bag.

Without hesitating a moment, he unceremoniously stepped down over the ledge onto a rope ladder that extended twelve feet to the floor. Pausing on the last rung, he probed the passageway's footing with a walking stick before putting his weight onto the ground. The end of the stick repeatedly struck stone that felt like a sidewalk. He stepped over to a wall to examine it as Carlos came down.

The stonework resembled that of a medieval citadel. He brushed the soot-colored dust from a small area of the wall. The light gray stonework had an unusual coarseness that was similar to concrete. The origin of the dust that coated everything was a minor mystery all its own. When disturbed, it floated off into the air like poisonous black smoke. As planned, they had left their microphones open. Everything they said and described was being relayed back to the command center and recorded.

Dylan and Carlos advanced methodically down the corridor, constantly checking above for anything loose and probing the floor ahead with their walking sticks. The layer of black dust could easily hide unstable footing or something more dangerous.

They soon reached the first intersection. It was a side passageway that ran off to the left. As Dylan looked down it, the beam from his headlamp

withered to nothing before reaching its end. Glancing about, he spotted no obvious clue about which path led to the ceremonial chamber. In the absence of any sign, it seemed logical to continue to follow the main corridor. Carlos agreed.

With each step, Dylan felt he was moving deeper into the past as his headlamp was swallowed by an oil-thick night that loomed before him. Noises from their walking stick tapping the ground were muffled. He sensed from the lack of sound echoing back that the corridor was impossibly deep, which made no sense. The air through the respirator was stale and lifeless. It became harder to breathe as he wandered deeper into the dark abyss. He knew the cause was psychological and not physical. He came upon a side passage heading off to the right. Again after conferring with Carlos, they stayed the course.

After passing several more side corridors that they chose to ignore, they reached the downed drone. It looked so out of place in this ancient ruin. It reminded Dylan of the technological artifacts early NASA explorers had left on the moon for future generations to find.

A short distance past the drone, the main corridor turned ninety degrees to the right. Carlos set up and tested the first of the radio relays. The comms package used radio frequencies that were optimized for caves, but the waves were still significantly absorbed by thick stone and soil instead of reflected or scattered. So, without relays, turns like this one would eventually sap far too much signal strength.

The relay sat on top of a low tripod base and included a status display. Carlos started wandering down the new corridor after the relay was working. Instead of following Carlos, Dylan took a few steps down the corridor they'd come by and gazed back toward the entrance. Nothing but darkness appeared beyond his headlamp. He extinguished it, and black emptiness enfolded everything in front of him. For a moment, he saw nothing, then slowly, like a moon emerging on a cloudy night, something grew brighter. Soon a tiny rectangular glow of light from the entrance was floating like a portal in the depths of empty space.

Other than the doorway home, he was in a world of smooth blackness that possessed a texture, a thickness he could almost touch and breathe.

His skin began to crawl. Without his eyes to guide him, he felt exposed and vulnerable. He was unable to dismiss a growing sense that something was stalking toward him. He fumbled with the headlamp. A beam of light washed out like a laser, slashing apart his fears. He felt childish yet satisfied with his technological power over the spirits of this nocturnal realm. He turned to catch up with Carlos while carefully probing the ground ahead of him and glancing at his mentor's footsteps left in the virgin dust.

After a short time, the passage came to an end at a descending flight of stairs. Carlos had set up another relay. He looked stunned as he turned to face Dylan.

"This can't be, but it is," said Carlos. "Your temple has more than one level."

"What the hell have we found?"

"We have found more things that will change everything," said Carlos. "After you."

As Dylan descended the steps, he experienced an odd sensation of being drawn downward as if gravity were increasing. The ceiling was no longer made from slabs but raw stone. This stairwell had been excavated out of the mountain itself. How many generations might it have taken just to create those corridors and these stairs? This complex was beginning to feel like an engineering feat equal to the pyramids in Mesoamerica and Egypt.

The stairway unexpectedly switched back on a landing that connected to a second flight of stairs that led ever deeper into the mountain. This stairwell was starting to seem all wrong. It felt both too modern and too ancient.

"Dios mío," said Carlos. "Who built this?"

Dylan thought about his as yet undisclosed radical timeline theory about the cyclical rise and fall of incrementally more technologically advanced civilizations throughout prehistory. The overly ancient aspects of this temple complex were something he could accept and find explanations for, but the seemingly far too modern aspects were troubling. The incremental advancements and losses he'd theorized were things like the development of the wheel or oil lamps, not something modern.

Carlos set up his last relay on the landing and set the bag aside. Dylan gave him his shoulder bag of relays, and they continued down. Just as Dylan was growing worried the stairwell would go on forever and they would run out of relays, they abruptly reached the bottom. Dylan had misgivings as his boots sank into the remarkably deeper river of soot that filled this new lower level.

Carlos set up a relay at the bottom of the stairwell. Once Carlos was satisfied the relay was working, they shuffled on, stirring up billowing clouds of black smoke in their wake.

Dylan wondered about the source of so much ultrafine carbon dust. Had these ruins been cut through veins of coal? The entire place felt like it was far older than any logic or theory dictated, which began to awaken childhood fears of things that went bump in the night.

The farther they cautiously ventured into this leg of the ruins, the greater became his unease. They could become stranded if their lights and technology failed them. How long would it take to climb those stairs in total darkness?

Walking so deep beneath a mountain, Dylan was soon fighting to deny growing irrational fears that stemmed from being so far underground. His fingers were wrapped tight around the cellphone-sized comms package attached to his belt. It was security, a beacon to the world above. Mindlessly his thumb pressed the power switch. A soft bleep that indicated the comms had been turned off startled him, and he quickly turned it back on.

Dylan knew from past experience inside the larger pyramids in Egypt the consequences of being underground with millions of tons of crumbling ancient stone above you. Under that type of pressure, the human brain started behaving illogically in many ways. He knew if his headlamp failed, plunging him into darkness, the pressure and sensory deprivation would cause his brain to release chemicals that induced anxiety, including panic and hallucinations. Even with his headlamp working, he suspected that smaller amounts of these chemicals were trickling into his bloodstream at that very moment.

Here in this manmade abyss, the immense weight of rock and dirt piled high above his head was a tangible presence, a claustrophobic

monster pressing down upon his body and mind. He was in an unnatural state of isolation and risk. Millions of years of evolution had honed human instincts for survival. Being buried alive was a grievous violation of that hard-wired cellular imperative.

He soon felt an electrical current driven by those millions of years of evolution vibrating through his nerves. His senses were exaggerated, eyes scanning, ears reaching. Living shadows cast by Carlos's headlamp were deep and threatening. At any moment, Dylan irrationally expected both their headlamps to fail and the world to cave in all around him. The fear was so out of proportion that some small part of him was wondering about unnatural causes, such as ethylene or methane vapor from geological cracks. It was believed a vapor of this sort was the cause of the hallucinations of the Oracle of Delphi as she sat in her cave.

Dylan came to a dead stop along with Carlos. Both men were spell-bound. His deep unease from moments ago was gone as his eyes drank in what was before him. The enigma had come into view immediately after a ninety-degree turn.

The corridor ended at a gateway set into a wall fashioned from a single block of smooth stone like a monolith. The gateway opening itself was the size and shape of a small arched doorway. Its threshold was raised about a foot from the floor. A symbol was engraved above the arch. It was one of the Proto-Sinaitic-like script letters from both the stone slab and the stolen Mayan ring that was on his finger.

"Increíble," mumbled Carlos. "The arch, she has a keystone. A Mayan keystone. This cannot be."

Dylan stared in silent awe. No architectural keystone had ever been found in the Americas, while common elsewhere in the world. He had been so captivated by the Proto-Sinaitic-like letter that he had failed to realize it had been chiseled into a keystone.

Unlike the rest of the temple, the gateway wall was largely free of soot. Dylan ran a finger across it. The light dusting of soot just fell away as if the wall was Teflon. Its surface was blacker than black, blacker than even the soot. The wall seemed to swallow or absorb light from his headlamp. The effect was disturbing. The beam was a dim circle on the wall and far

brighter when aimed elsewhere. A chill worked its way through him, and then he shook it off.

Looking closer, it became clear that the gateway was not fashioned from a solid piece of stone as it had first appeared. It was instead made from precision-cut and fit uniform black stone blocks or tiles that were as smooth as water-slick ice and uniform in color. The seams were almost invisible.

"The construction is too perfect to be solid blocks," said Dylan. "It must be stone sheathed in black tiles."

"Sí, tiles make sense."

"This stonework is unlike anything previously found anywhere in the ancient world," said Dylan, conscious that his every word was being recorded. "It's so precise it looks manufactured, and what about that paint or glaze on the tiles? It's made with some kind of black pigment that absorbs light more effectively than the soot."

"This will upset a lot of archeologists I know," said Carlos.

After encountering the stairwell that seemed far too modern, something like this architecture was not exactly unexpected by Dylan, but it still felt surreal to have at last discovered solid evidence for his radical timeline theory. He had not dared to tell anyone about that theory, not even Jenny or Carlos. His origin theory and many of his other published papers were already fringe enough.

Shining their lights through the gateway revealed a continuation of the passage. The dimness of the beam on the interior surfaces indicated the entire corridor was sheathed in the same black tiles.

Dylan began examining the inside of the gateway opening. He wanted to make sure there would be no surprises stepping through it. The tiled opening absorbed light so effectively that when he initially reached inside the three-dimensional blackness, it was as if his arm was swallowed by it. Aiming his light directly at his arm was the only way to see it. The genius behind the effect was unsettling. Dylan ran his fingers along the inside surface and found it was similarly largely free of dust. Along the bottom of the gateway was a shallow dusting of pitch-black soot. Even the dirt in this place absorbed light.

The construction of the gateway appeared solid. Dylan stepped through it. Carlos handed him the bag of relays. There was far less soot on the floor and none on the walls. Something else was different. It took Dylan a moment to realize the hissing and occasional voices of people in the command center were gone from the earbuds.

"Comms check," said Dylan.

He got no reply.

"Comms check," said Carlos.

"Command center, we hear you," came the reply.

"Comms check," said Dylan.

Still no reply.

"Damn it," said Dylan.

He stepped back through the gateway. Broken comms gear required an abort. The background hiss and voices from the command center were back.

"Comms check," said Dylan.

"Command center, we hear you," came the reply. "What's going on down there?"

"Nothing," said Dylan.

Carlos gave him a concerned look. He mouthed, "We have to tell them." Dylan shook his head no. He motioned for Carlos to turn off the open mic. Once they were off the air, Dylan spoke freely.

"I am not going to screw up this exploration because of a single glitch. My comms is back."

"What if it goes out again?"

"Forget it for now. If it happens again, we'll abort."

"Alright," said Carlos. "For now."

Dylan stepped back through the gateway, and his comms went out again.

"What the fuck," muttered Dylan.

"Is it out again?" asked Carlos.

"Damn it!"

Dylan stepped out again, and his comms came back again. He

repeated it three more times, and every time his comms dropped and then came back. Carlos tried it next and got the same results.

"It is the gateway," said Carlos. "How?"

"I don't know."

"We should run a test using a relay."

Dylan set up a relay just inside the interior corridor. It did not help.

"Let me try something," said Dylan. "I want to set up a second relay in here and see if they can communicate between themselves."

"Good idea. They have to be at least twenty feet apart or they will not sync."

"Got it."

Dylan walked twenty feet into the corridor and encountered a ninety-degree turn that he had not seen until right on top of it. The tile's effect on light was crazy. It then dawned on him what was likely going on with their comms.

"Carlos," he shouted. "What if the tiles absorb the full electromagnetic spectrum, not just light?"

"Qué?" shouted Carlos.

"What if the tiles absorb radio waves?" bellowed Dylan.

"Maybe?" shouted Carlos. "Set up the relay. That would be proof."

Dylan pulled a relay from the bag and began unfolding its tripod base. The effect of the light absorbing pigment all around him was disorienting. It was difficult to judge what was only a short distance away. It was like being in a nonmaterial void.

He felt a seasickness-like swaying motion that seemed imaginary. Carlos was saying something, but Dylan could not concentrate. It felt like the ground was moving in a gentle rocking motion as if he was in a rowboat in a placid lake. In a few seconds, the sensation was gone, and with its passing came absolute stillness.

Dylan suddenly realized what was happening and started running for the gateway. Living in California made recognition of the sensation almost instinctive. It was an earth tremor, and what might follow could be far worse.

"Get out! Get out!" he yelled.

The earthquake struck, and it was vicious. Dylan was knocked from his feet into a wall and then the floor. The brutal thrashing seemed to go on forever. It was like being trapped in a runaway freight train. He began yelling at the earthquake to stop. A primal anger to thrash out raged inside him.

As if the gods were listening, the thrashing suddenly stopped. Bruised and scraped, but not any worse than what he'd regularly received in football practice, Dylan got up and staggered toward the gateway, then stopped and stared. A section of the ceiling had collapsed. It looked like countless feet of rubble stood between him and escape. He was trapped. Terrifyingly morbid images flooded his mind. He felt a trickle of blood on his forehead and wiped it away.

"Shit!" he muttered. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

He checked his comms and heard nothing. Not that it mattered, but all the relays were probably lying on their sides or worse.

"Carlos!" he bellowed.

There was no answer.

"Carlos!" he bellowed again, shouting so hard that his head ached.

He had no idea how bad the cave-in might be. He had no idea if Carlos was alive. Taking painful breaths, he started shifting some of the rubble. He was soon sweating and had not made a dent in the wreckage. Instead of bringing mindless panic, the pressure of the moment sharpened his thinking. His mind became a razor dissecting the crisis into logical pieces. He'd probably die inside this damn mountain, but it would have to take him, and he would not go easily.

He stopped digging and eyed the wreckage, wondering how long it would be before rescue workers arrived at the blockage and tried to tunnel their way to him. It was pointless for him to waste another ounce of energy trying to clear that rubble himself. He needed to conserve his water, food, and air. He suddenly became very aware of his breathing. It had not occurred to him until this moment that he could run out of air and die of carbon dioxide poisoning.

Turning, he wondered about what lay beyond that invisible ninety-degree turn in the corridor. It was his ambition and lies that had led him

into this trap. He keyed the mic button a few times, knowing it was likely futile, then left the mic open.

“Hello, can anyone hear me? I’m trapped beyond the gateway at the bottom of the stairwell. I’m uninjured. I am going to see if there is another way out.”

He paused, feeling that the light absorbing passageway led to an even deeper more permanent darkness. He did not really expect to find another way out. Why had he voiced that false hope into a seemingly dead radio? The message was for Jenny. After a few minutes, he started talking again.

“Jenny, I know I’ve been difficult—”

His voice faltered. He was about to tell her everything would be all right but couldn’t. He was afraid to say anything hopeful, as if the words or even the thoughts would damn him to hell. He suddenly felt like all of this was a test by some vengeful god.

He stripped off the tactical throat microphone and earbuds and stuffed them into his backpack. He then switched the comms to its built-in speaker and microphone. With cold resolve, he walked toward the almost invisible ninety-degree turn, and then around it, and then down the corridor, feeling like he was walking to his own doom.

Dylan did not realize that he had reached the end of the passageway until he found himself standing in the ceremonial chamber he’d sought and imagined a thousand times over. He was only a few steps inside the huge open space. It felt like he had reached the end of the world. The same light-absorbing tiles covered the chamber’s walls. The same sound deadening effect as the passageways made everything seem far larger as if he was standing outside on an empty plateau.

All his senses struggled to gauge the scale of it. Something embedded in the walls and ceiling glistened like tiny stars when his headlamp reflected off them. He was awestruck. The chamber was spherical, and the ceiling was a dome. A sacrificial altar sat in the center of the floor. Large rectangular blocks that looked like pedestals or hassocks were arranged in a circle around the perimeter of the room. He had found what all those holier-than-thou experts believed was a myth.

The floor had far less black dust than any other areas of the complex,

and the air seemed clear. He removed his respirator and goggles. His dried lips were cracked. He was elated. He'd succeeded. He'd discovered an undisturbed ceremonial site of amazing significance, though he might not live to celebrate his achievement.

The light absorbing characteristics of the structure created an unnaturally deep gloom except wherever the narrow beam of his headlamp fell. The room was fifty feet in diameter and the dome reached twenty-five feet at its apex, according to his laser tape measure. The first six to ten feet of the curved walls were covered in a mural painted with a realism that was completely unknown in the ancient Americas. He examined the surface carefully and again wondered what kind of process could have possibly been used to create this slippery polished finish.

The subject matter of the mural was a single wrap-around image of the same Andes Mountains that encircled this chamber in the outside world. The black dome was covered with small sparkling pockmarks. Following a hunch, Dylan removed his Petzl helmet, aimed the headlamp up, and widened the beam so that it dimly illuminated much of the dome. The lower half of the room fell into darkness as the vista of a star-filled night sky greeted him. The reflective pockmarks in the dome had become stars. The effect was holographic with a true sense of depth. The slightest movement of his lamp caused the stars to flicker and dance. The chamber was an awe-inspiring amphitheater of light.

He recognized a few of the constellations. The view was so perfect it could have been real, but amid all the exactly recreated natural splendor reigned an element so inexplicably out of place that it felt like a violation of all that was right. There were two moons floating overhead in the star-filled sky instead of one. The larger one was the same moon that Dylan knew so well, while the smaller tobacco brownish-orange one was completely different and uncomfortably alien in appearance. The name of the temple, Twin-Moon-Gate, now made sense.

As Dylan continued to stare, he felt as if he were gazing into the depths of real space. The moons appeared to be rendered almost stereoscopically. His eyes were sore. Closing them, he felt the ghosts of priests carrying out the old rituals here. Child sacrifice, the end of precious life,

the emotions. It must have been unimaginably grotesque and yet also religiously inspiring for the superstitious people of that time.

Dylan tried to shake off the repulsive feelings conjured from imagining such an inhuman act. When that failed, he tried to distance himself by focusing on all the technical details that any well-trained archeologist would collect. He retrieved his Petzl helmet and headlamp, then refocused the beam to a narrow setting. He began walking the perimeter of the chamber, looking for inscriptions that could be clues to dating this temple of starlight and darkness.

Along the wall at equidistant spots were the seven rectangular backless hassocks or pedestals. At three feet tall, they were a little high for hassocks but seemed like they were intended for sitting upon. They appeared to be fashioned from polished limestone and all but glowed with craftsmanship.

The full-adult-length sacrificial altar was made from the same polished stone as the hassocks. Though the altar was far more ornate, decorated with inlaid gold of various hues, from silvery-white to coppery-pink. The bed was unusually low for an altar, supported only a couple of feet above the floor on a single gold inlaid pedestal that was at least two feet in diameter.

A collection of three-inch diameter holes bored through the altar's headrest formed a partial circle around the spot where a victim's head would lay. Each of the seven holes was lined with a gold sleeve. The odd holes were steeply angled inward, pointing toward the victim's head, and seemed like they might be used to guide short lances or some other gruesome means of execution. Next to each hole was a half-inch wide dimple. The purpose of the dimples was even less clear than the holes.

Dylan set his Petzl helmet and headlamp down on the altar at the center of the room and once again widened the beam so that it faintly illuminated the entire dome. He then retreated back to sit on one of the stone hassocks. He was captivated by the engineering and artistry incorporated into this place frozen in time but even more so by the deepening mystery in the sky. It was hard to take his eyes off those moons. Both were rendered in slightly reflective pigments, which he suspected included rough ground quartz. The result was a near-perfect re-creation of the shimmer, texture,

and three-dimensional shape of actual celestial objects. Why was the smaller anemic moon so disturbing? It seemed even more alien than at first, almost angry, but something about it pulled at him with feelings akin to *déjà vu*. It haunted him like an old memory of a dream from some long-forgotten time. It made his flesh crawl.

He soon lost track of everything, including time. He was no longer stranded in a hollowed-out space in the heart of a mountain. He was lost in the illusion of being outside and breathing fresh air under a heaven of stars. Time drifted until a tickle on his forehead broke the spell. A few strands of hair lifted again in a phantom breeze, and with that, thoughts of his plight returned. Where was that ephemeral breeze coming from? There had to be an opening to the outside world. A strand of his hair lifted once more.

He searched the chamber for hidden seams, sliding his fingers along the glass-like walls while peering closely using his headlamp. He checked every inch within reach and found nothing. Dispirited, he brushed away some of the soot on the floor and slumped to the ground with his back against a wall. In the beam of his headlamp, he noticed some of the sooty smoke he'd just stirred circulating off in an unnatural lazy swirl that hung near the floor. He followed the smoky current back to an exit port at the base of the wall.

Peering closely, he spotted a slit-like opening between the junction of floor and wall. The opening was maybe a quarter of an inch tall and over a foot in length. Searching along the baseboard, he found another slit, then another, and another. The entire wall was ringed with vents pulling air out of the chamber. He looked up at the dome and realized cool air had to be flowing from the ceiling through openings too small to see.

Dylan scientifically pondered the implications. The flow was clearly caused by something non-mechanical and ingenious; natural convection currents would not be enough, and where was the air supply coming from this deep under a mountain? Logically, part of the solution was that an entire system of ducts had to service this chamber. In addition to the blocked passageway he'd come through, there had to be at least one inlet and one outlet duct for the air.

He got out his iPad, snapped a few photos, and scribbled some notes on them using his Apple pencil. It was his scientific duty to document his find for whoever came next. He tossed a small handful of soot and watched it float in the air like the veils of a dancer, but the previous euphoria was missing. His stomach grumbled, and with that sensation, reality came crashing back like a steel door slammed in his face.

As his eyes fogged over, all he could think about was the irony. No carbon dioxide poisoning for him. He had more nice fresh air than he'd ever need. A pleasant death by starvation or dehydration was the dish at the banquet reserved for him. He could hardly wait. He had enough energy bars and water to last a couple of days if rationed conservatively. The room felt so dark and lonely. When he looked up, even the stars appeared a dreary yellow, like grimy chips of ice.

In this strange headlamp-illuminated world, he set about the task of making camp, which he also suspected would be his final resting place. At least he would be entombed like a king. After dusting off and inspecting the sacrificial altar, he decided it would be an appropriate place to *sleep* when the time came. It was precisely inclined so that the last thing its occupant would see was the anemic moon surrounded by stars.

His eyes fell on his trail of footprints that crisscrossed the chamber. As if on the lunar surface, those tracks would record for posterity his exploration of what would become his sepulcher. Some of the footprints were difficult to see since they were nothing more than compacted black marks on a larger black soot canvas. Other prints looked like they'd been left on water because the glossy stone beneath was partially exposed. From halfway across the room, an amber glint from one of the prints flashed in his eyes as his light slid across it.

Investigating the glint, he brushed away some of the soot with the toe of his boot. Part of a gold inlaid floor was revealed. Like a skydiver's thrill from free-fall, the discovery brought a rush of adrenaline. Soon on all fours, Dylan was brushing away the fine powder, using the side of his arm as a plow. More and more inlaid gold was exposed as the soot rose into a thickening black storm. He was soon coughing and had to put his respi-

rator and goggles back on. With his arm shoveling in large arcs, he laboriously shifted much of the soot to the sides of the chamber.

It felt like it had taken forever for the airborne dust to settle enough so that Dylan could again remove his respirator and goggles. Sitting on one of the hassocks, he savored the deepening dreamlike nature of this place as he scribbled more notes on his iPad. In the geometric center of the floor lay a sixteen-foot diameter disk of solid gold covered with intricate inscriptions. The altar's pedestal was located at the exact center of the disk. Radiating from the disk's outer rim were seven stylized rays of gold. It was a sun symbol forged in shimmering metal. Judging by the depth of the beveled edges, indentions, and deep engravings, the gold had to be at least an inch thick and possibly far thicker. This treasure alone was worth an incomprehensible amount of money.

Dylan used his laser tape measure and targets to study the design. The sun disk was divided into equal concentric rings like the cross-section of a tree. There were seven rings in all, each a different shade of gold. Each ring had engraved hash marks that ran around its circumference. The result was that the seven rings seemed like a set of nested bezels for a mechanical calculator. The outermost ring was dull yellow. Advancing toward its center, each new ring was formed of progressively brighter metal closer to achieving absolute purity. The ancients were clever in their design. The rings of brightening gold pulled the human eye irresistibly toward the heart of the sun. The core was a solid 41.2 inch diameter disk composed of dazzling gold.

Contemplating the layout of the sun disk and chamber, Dylan was intrigued because the apparent units of measure were so wrong for a South American culture and so right for ancient Egypt. Everything appeared to be laid out in Egyptian royal cubits, palms, and fingers. One royal cubit equaled 20.6 inches. The cubit was then divided into seven palms of four fingers, with each finger approximately 0.74 inches.

Dylan had determined the sun disk was exactly nine cubits in diameter. The width of each ring was exactly half a cubit. The altar's pedestal was

mounted in the center of the two-cubit wide central disk. On the right side of the pedestal was what looked like a half-cubit (10.3 inches) diameter cover plate that was recessed flush with the floor. The plate was fashioned from the same shade of gold as the surrounding material. The half-cubit plate had openings that appeared to be hand-sized grips that hinted it could be opened like a tiny manhole cover. Dylan jammed his fingers into the grips and pulled, but the cover plate refused to budge. Time must have welded it in place. Taking a deep breath, he pulled until his muscles were strained balls of pain.

“Come on, you bastard,” he muttered. “Give!”

He twisted and tugged right and left. It started to rotate clockwise. At a quarter-turn, the plate released with a clunk, and he lifted it off. The slab was three inches thick, or rather, four fingers thick, solid gold, and had to weigh over a hundred pounds. An almost foot-long cylinder fashioned from what looked like rock quartz and gold was attached to the bottom of it. Dylan grunted while hefting the assembly. Careful not to crush his fingers or damage anything, he rested the gold cover plate face down on an unadorned area of the stone floor. The cylinder, which was facing up, measured a half cubit in diameter and length.

Feverishly jotting down notes on his iPad, Dylan was in his element examining the relic. An electronic pocket gem tester pen quickly verified the cylinder was quartz and not glass or diamond, not that there had been any real doubt.

The gold cover plate had been locked into the floor receptacle with a quarter-turn fastener arrangement. The simple fastener mechanism was like nothing ever found in ancient America, making it a highly significant discovery.

Unsurprisingly, Dylan soon determined the quartz cylinder with its gold endcaps was wedged securely to the gold cover plate using the same quarter-turn fastener design. He twisted and pulled, separating the cylinder from the cover plate. The mechanical precision was remarkable.

Dylan was a natural-born scientist, objectivity was baked into his genes, but he couldn't help feeling like a child with a new toy as he held the perfectly honed cylinder of polished rock quartz. It had an unnatural heft

that reminded him of lead. Inscribed around the cylinder's curved surface were circular bands of text written in the same mysterious ancient lexicon of Proto-Sinaitic-like script.

The letters were delicately engraved, then filled with gold to such a level of perfection that it looked like the work of computer engraving. Each band of letters was separated from the next by a thin gold underline. It was impossible to identify the beginning of any one sentence since each beginning and end met without punctuation. Row after row of these circular statements were tightly packed along the entire length of the cylinder.

Dylan puzzled over this language found on the limestone slab, the gateway, his stolen Mayan ring, and now this cylinder. As its discoverer, he decided to name it Andean-Script. In the spaces between letters, he could make out what looked like a gold cylinder embedded inside the translucent quartz cylinder like a piston inside a sleeve. Peering through the quartz, it appeared as if the gold cylinder and both endcaps were somehow attached together. This suggested that the entire relic could come apart and that the inner gold cylinder might even be hollow. Dylan had a strong hunch the relic was not just hollow, but a container, and had secrets yet to be revealed.

He decided to try opening the cylinder. He carefully twisted and pulled on one endcap and then the other. Nothing budged. Examining the relic, he could not find anything that looked like a quarter-turn fastener or any other mechanism. The suspected coffer was not giving up its secrets any easier than the slab.

He entered more notes on his iPad, including rudimentary sketches drawn on top of a photo of the cylinder. As he completed his notes, he thought about the GoPro video camera attached to his helmet. The idea of a video record that would survive him felt maudlin but also pleasing.

The camera was wirelessly remote-controlled by an app on his iPad. He checked the camera to find out how much space it had left and found the answer was none. The GoPro app did not have a video download function to save recordings onto the iPad, and without an internet connection, he could not save it to any cloud. There was no way he was going to delete

the single existing large file that contained the record of his initial discovery, so he and the camera were out of luck.

Some small part of him knew it was scientific heresy to tamper with any relic like the cylinder, but he'd already tampered with so much. What was a little more? He felt wired with excitement and couldn't have stopped himself even if he'd wanted. He had no intention of waiting for a lab and better tools. He might be trapped in this hole for the next thousand years. All of this could be the first and last significant discovery of his life.

From his backpack, he retrieved a leather roll of jeweler's tools used for examining archeological finds and spread it out across the floor. Selecting a folding magnifying loupe and needlelike metal probe, he resumed his hunt for some hidden latching mechanism.

Using the loupe and probe, he tediously worked his way around both endcaps. A drop of sweat traced a random path from his hairline down across his soot-covered forehead.

He froze, realizing something that was in plain sight. He'd previously noted ruler-like hash marks along the edges of both endcaps. The hash marks were various lengths and randomly arranged, or so it had appeared. The random arrangement of hash marks looked to be the same on both endcaps, but they were not aligned.

Could it be that simple? Dylan had not tried to grip both endcaps and twist. Earlier, when trying each endcap, he had gripped the quartz part of the cylinder and one endcap or the other, which was the natural thing to do. Could the hash marks be instructions? He gripped both endcaps and tried to twist them in opposite directions into alignment. The caps resisted, then moved freely, and the whole thing came apart. The gold cylinder and one endcap remained a single piece, with the quartz sleeve sliding free of it.

The gold inner cylinder was hollow, and the cavity was not empty. The gold cylinder's walls were about two inches thick and as smooth as if bored in a machine shop. Inside the cavity rested a gemstone and gold artifact the shape and size of a large one-inch marble.

The artifact was constructed from a pair of wide gold bands that were the size and shape of oversized wedding rings. The bands were fastened

together at right angles to form a crisscrossed ball-shaped housing or cage. Mounted snugly inside the cage was a preternaturally clear gemstone sphere.

Dylan closed his eyes for a moment to think. What the hell was this thing? It looked technological, which was ridiculous. Slowly, he opened his eyes. He was determined to focus solely on the science and ignore all the peculiar illogical feelings bubbling up inside him.

The cavity was slightly larger in diameter than the artifact. Cluttering the cavity was a small amount of what looked like crumbled mummified green textile. Dylan jotted down every initial observation imaginable on his iPad before he dared to even think about disturbing anything inside the cavity.

At six-foot-three and two-hundred-and-fifty pounds, Dylan had a husky frame with hands and fingers that could solidly palm a football but were too large to delicately work inside the cylinder. Almost holding his breath, he gingerly reached inside the cavity with forceps and gripped the golden cage that housed the gemstone.

Dylan lifted the artifact from the cylinder as if he were holding the most fragile thing imaginable. The crystal sphere inside its cage seemed to exist outside of time and space, radiating a presence like a living thing. It felt dangerously sacrilegious to touch it as he set it into his palm.

An ingenious single dowel pin held the two interlocking bands together like a pair of puzzle pieces. The gemstone sphere, given its size, was likely quartz and not diamond, though there was something unmistakably gemlike about it. A peculiar metallic sphere the size of a pea was embedded in the exact center of the gem. The cylindrical quartz jar and orb were such remarkable works of craftsmanship that neither seemed handmade, and instead felt more like modern replicas of something ancient.

On closer inspection with his loupe, he saw the gold bands were engraved with impossibly minuscule Andean-Script letters and hash marks. The tiny symbols and markings on the band seemed to designate cardinal points and reminded him of a compass bezel. The featureless stone smoothly rotated in its setting like a miniature cartographer's globe of the

Earth. Examining every aspect of it with his loupe, he confirmed it was a flawless orb of shimmering petrified ice. The pocket gem tester verified it was rock quartz, which begged the question, what was that mysterious pea-sized sphere of metal doing inside it?

He couldn't shake the feeling that what he held was more scientifically valuable than any other artifact in the world. As his lamplight passed through the quartz, it intermittently cast rainbows on his hands and the floor, yet he could find no flaw or internal facet to explain the refraction.

"What are you?" he mumbled.

It was a religious talisman of great significance. That much was obvious, based on where he'd found it. What confused Dylan was that this quartz jar and globe seemed to have nothing to do with the purpose of this chamber, which was child sacrifice. He knew that no simple answer would be forthcoming. In any event, those questions were overshadowed for now. The greatness of his find was all that mattered. This was his legacy.

"I've done it," he whispered. "I've changed history."

The corridor, the stairs, the chamber, the relics, they were not remotely like anything that had been unearthed in South America before. These were antiquities of a lost civilization that strongly hinted at a link between the new world and Egypt.

Using his backpack as a pillow, Dylan stretched out sacrilegiously on the altar to bask in his find. He was smoking his second to last cigarette using a collapsible metal camping cup as an ashtray. His Petzl helmet was next to him, with the headlamp at its widest setting and aimed toward the ceiling.

He picked up the artifact and held it near his eyes. It was hypnotic how the dome's starry sky reflected inside the quartz sphere. He began to wonder about the true age of this ancient object and place. Would he live long enough to find an answer? Without giving it a thought, he slipped the artifact into one of the cargo pockets in his coveralls, which was far from the proper protocol for such a valuable find. He was tired. His muscles unwound as if by a whispered command. His eyes began to close as his mind wandered into exhaustion-fueled dreams.

Dylan awoke startled. Had he heard something scampering across the floor? The chamber was in absolute oil thick darkness. Sitting up, he found his helmet next to him by feel and switched on the headlamp. Nothing happened. He ran the switch back and forth with no effect.

“No,” he cried. “No... No... No!”

He must have left the light on, and the batteries had drained. An irreplaceable resource had been lost. There was an extra set of batteries in his backpack. How much light did that give him? Damn it, how could he have been so stupid?

Sitting cross-legged with the backpack open in front of him on the altar, he blindly searched for batteries while careful not to lose anything to the darkness. From inside a cargo pocket, he felt the artifact pressing against his leg and worried it might slip out the unbuttoned flap. He reached to button it and instead froze in confusion. A weak ultraviolet glow was seeping out from under the flap causing the cloth to fluoresce. He opened the pocket. Inside, the crystalline sphere was giving off a faint luminescence. This was the first time he'd seen it in complete darkness. The anemic glow would have easily gone undetected in the normal darkness of anything other than a sealed crypt.

As he picked up the ancient object, it felt like a chunk of ice melting in his fingers. The passing sensation vanished rapidly. The light was radiating from the metallic pit at the center of the sphere. It was like a dying star encased in ice. The wane ultraviolet glow illuminated little more than his hands. Had the glow increased a little after he'd picked it up? It was hard to tell. It now almost seemed like it might be faintly throbbing. The flicker was likely nothing more than an optical illusion caused by extreme dimness teetering at the threshold of the detectability of his eyes, or maybe not?

As he stared, he thought he spotted faint vapors coming off the orb like sublimation from dry ice. He fixedly stared at the orb for a long time, saw nothing more, and eventually gave up. The weakness of the glow was definitely playing tricks on his eyes.

His best scientific guess about the glow was that the metallic pit was a

naturally occurring radioactive element that was exciting photoluminescent impurities in a few millimeters of the quartz immediately surrounding it. He was not a physicist or chemist. He'd done well in all the prerequisite hard science courses for his archeology degrees, but it was really just enough to make him sound knowledgeable at cocktail parties.

Still, his theory seemed solid or at least a good start. He hoped the metal pit was not something highly radioactive. Though emissions that caused radioluminescence on this tiny scale were probably not dangerous unless the radioactive material was ingested or inhaled.

It was curious how the pit was sealed inside quartz the same way nuclear reactor waste was sealed inside glass for safe disposal. He then thought about the thickness of the gold cylinder that had held the orb. Gold was denser than lead. What better way to store something sacred that was radioactive? This hinted at ancient technology and scientific understanding that was completely unsettling.

As he stared at the seed of light trapped inside the orb, it pulled like a tide irresistibly at the depths of his consciousness. His hand cradling the artifact slowly relaxed in his lap. Soon his mind was completely silenced. With his hands suffused in the blue wane light, he sat like a mystic surrounded by the vast emptiness of the lightless chamber.

Strange incomprehensible hallucinations came floating in on a tidal flow of midnight black seawater. Dylan saw utter darkness, a deep pool of nothingness, then out of the void came sounds, smells, sensations, and half-formed shapes that morphed and changed as if his mind was trying to create order out of chaos.

Suddenly, all his senses sharpened as if a radio broadcast that had been poorly tuned had been readjusted. He saw the top of the stairwell leading down to the chamber he was in. There were distant voices of people who sounded like construction workers, along with sounds of digging. There was a smell of rubber from a respirator. There was a feeling of hands gripping a pole that was weighted at one end and might have been the handle of a shovel. The visual part of the immersive experience kept jumping around as if Dylan was looking through someone else's eyes as they

scanned the area above the stairwell, taking in detail after detail as well as repeatedly glancing up at the ceiling.

As if the channel button for a television had been accidentally bumped, everything switched to a new program. He was in a mansion with twenty-foot ceilings and big game animal trophies grotesquely mounted on the walls. Dylan saw the shadowed face of a man who paralyzed him with terror, or more accurately, paralyzed the person he was experiencing this nightmare through.

The menacing face appeared psychotic with dark Halloween green eyes that were bloodshot and twitching with the predatorial malice of a wild animal. Dylan somehow empathically felt that he was in the presence of an all-consuming hunger that could drive any man to evil. The psychotic's expression changed. Dylan suddenly had a sense that the man had somehow spotted him behind the eyes of his intended victim.

The remote experience shattered into a cloud of dying embers as if a fatal blow had been struck. Dylan opened his eyes and glanced about the pitch-black reaches of the chamber, expecting the psychotic to emerge out of the darkness. His nerves seemed frayed to the point of breaking as he struggled with himself to find proof that this was only a trick of his mind, just the grinding wheel of his imagination wearing him down.

He looked at the artifact in his hands. The metallic star remained alive within its translucent quartz prison. The cold radioactive light coming from it felt like it was trickling directly into his eyes and his mind as it cleansed the stormy emotions from his soul. At first, he was amazed at how it relaxed him but soon forgot that it had. Any remaining fears or doubts soon also dimmed. He was quiet and filled with peace as his mind once more drifted in a dark smooth meditative sea.

As time passed, Dylan began to hear what might have been distant muffled voices. The sounds were accompanied by faint electrical crackles like radio static. His five senses began to coalesce, and everything, including the voices, became clearer. To Dylan, this was no figment of his subconscious. In that moment, he blindly accepted, without any of his normal scientific objectivity, that he was somehow remotely perceiving

reality through other people's senses. He had become a disembodied point of awareness inside someone else's head.

Snatches of respirator garbled conversations came from earbuds someone else was wearing. None of the voices were recognizable. The pitch and tone were unfamiliar, bordering on alien. Dylan suspected this was due to differences in hearing from one person to the next.

From haphazard glimpses, Dylan saw that the person he was perceiving through was in the lowest level of the complex near the gateway. He gleaned from fragments of conversations that there was concern about aftershocks, and they had about ten more feet of rubble to clear. The cave-in had apparently been far less serious than Dylan had thought and only blocked the gateway.

The hands of the man he was perceiving through came into view. He was operating a ground-penetrating radar. The man radiated a complete painter's palette of emotions but no hint of what he was thinking. Dylan saw thick hairy forearms and a brown friendship bracelet. It was Carlos who was operating the ground-penetrating radar. It was Carlos who he was perceiving through.

It took a few minutes for Dylan to figure out what was going on. Carlos was using the radar to gauge how to safely dig out each subsequent foot of debris. As workers dug with shovels and prybars, laborers behind them collected the loose rubble in buckets and then handed it off to a bucket brigade of workers that ferried it away.

Dylan heard Jenny's voice come over the earbuds Carlos was wearing. The remote perceptions abruptly switched channels to someone who kept glancing at Jenny. Dylan guessed he was inside the head of the crew chief, Bob Riverman. Jenny was sitting on a step at the bottom of the stairwell and silently weeping. She was wearing a borrowed respirator, goggles, and hardhat. The name of the owner of the hardhat, Karen, was written on it in marker. Jenny's face was smudged and reddened from the burn of salty tears. She removed the goggles to dry her eyes with a tissue. Another bucket of debris was dumped on the floor nearby. Each grating pour of fractured rocks and gravel seemed to jolt her into greater anxiety and tears.

Dylan's emotions were equal and opposite to Jenny's suffering. For him, the remote experience was calming and somehow pleasant. Eventually, it all became serene. Dylan was vaguely aware of his muscles growing limper and rubbery as he relaxed ever more, and the remote perceptions became ever clearer. The artifact rolled unnoticed from his fingers. There was a sharp sound of breaking glass as crystal and gold impacted a hard unforgiving floor. Dylan snapped out of the trance amid a splintering flash of light.

In moments he was on his hands and knees. He repeatedly mumbled curses as he searched the floor with hands he could not see. Finally, the dim glow of the artifact swam out of the darkness. Dylan was relieved it was in one piece. He thought he spotted a hairline crack in the crystal orb that seemed to be melding before his eyes. In a few seconds, the crack had vanished as if it had never been there. After a moment, he was certain there had never been a crack.

His skull mildly ached as he dumped the contents of his backpack onto the altar. Using the artifact as a dim flashlight, he pawed through his gear, found, and then installed a fresh set of batteries into his headlamp.

White light speared the darkness around him once more. He closely examined the crystal and its setting with his magnifying loupe. Remarkably, he could not find the tiniest abrasion. This small improbability seemed to underscore all the even bigger improbabilities.

Dylan's gut instincts were clearly telling him those remote perceptions were real and that help would soon reach him. He felt certain what he'd experienced were not hallucinations. Oddly, more than anything else, it was the mundane nature of the experiences that convinced him over the doubts that were creeping in.

He glanced about at the chamber and its starry sky. Could the remote perceptions have been caused by the sensory deprivation of this place with its absence of sound, light, and constant temperature? He was unsure. He was unsure about a lot of things. He began to wonder if this was a sacrificial chamber at all or something far more inexplicable. He blasphemously wondered if he could be experiencing some hidden, impossibly advanced technological achievement of a long lost civilization. He looked at the

marble-sized artifact sitting amid the clutter from his backpack and wondered if the same was true for it.

Dylan picked up a chocolate energy bar from the pile of junk on the altar and ate it with a deep hunger. He washed it down with huge gulps of water, then woofed down another bar. While chewing, he thought about the rescue that was digging its way to him as if it was really happening. He stared at the no longer visibly glowing artifact awash in the light of his headlamp. Was he losing his mind?

He switched off the headlamp. As his eyes acclimated, he was soon once more faintly bathed in an anemic ultraviolet glow. The orb felt like a living thing in his hands. As his eyes adjusted farther, he again thought he saw it throbbing but could not be sure. It was like the phantom beat of a mineral heart.

In that moment, in that strange sacred chamber holding that artifact, he knew, just knew, that if the remote perceptions proved to be real, he would have no choice except to believe, and that belief would change so many of the pillars that he believed in that anchored him, and that terrified him even more than dying trapped inside that damn chamber.

He wanted things back to normal and comfortably within known scientific bounds. Without a thought for the proper preservation of the artifact, he tucked it back into the cargo pocket along with his last cigarette inside its flattened pack, a lighter, a bandana, and other small essential things. He was feeling weak, bordering on dizzy. Maybe another energy bar, then he'd pack up and leave.

Dylan paused at the exit from the chamber. He wondered if everything that had happened could have been a dream. Checking his backpack, he lingered at the sight of the quartz jar nestled in the padded section normally reserved for his iPad. He reached inside a cargo pocket and felt the artifact nested amid his almost empty pack of cigarettes and bandana. No, it had not been a dream.

He was certain he would return to this place, and the entire team would

return with him. He donned his respirator and goggles, and then walked toward his future. The farther he got from the chamber, the more alive he felt. When he reached the collapsed gateway, he eyed the debris and wondered how long he'd have to wait for the remote perceptions to prove themselves. He was not concerned. He *knew* they would prove themselves. He *knew* help was coming. It was not long before Dylan heard the distant picking of metal tools somewhere on the other side of the wreckage.

Dylan had not called out to his rescuers even after he knew they were close enough to hear him. This had not been a conscious decision and was proof that he was not thinking normally. A hole a couple of feet in diameter formed in the debris as it drained invisibly into the opposite side. Carlos poked his head into the chamber with a trickle of gravel and dirt sliding down to the floor. For Dylan, it was almost like watching the birth of some hard-shelled hardhat wearing creature. Dylan was grinning like a fool. Carlos looked bemused.

“Are you injured?” asked Carlos in a respirator-muffled voice.

“I’m fine,” answered Dylan.

Carlos immediately pulled his head back out and bellowed.

“We found him. The cocky bastard’s fine!”

Feeling like he was ritually returning from the land of the dead, Dylan emerged from the gateway. Wearing a respirator, goggles, and hardhat, Jenny embraced him fiercely. He could see how the ordeal had drained her.

“It was a nightmare,” she said. “Don’t you ever do that again.”

“It was utterly amazing,” said Dylan. “You won’t believe what I’ve found.”

“Your heretical temple?” said Jenny.

“It was breathtaking.”

Dylan’s brain froze when he noticed Karen’s name written on the hardhat Jenny was wearing. He glanced around at everyone and everything. The remote perceptions had been accurate down to the smallest

detail. His rescuers appeared jittery. Several people were mumbling about wanting to get out before an aftershock hit.

Carlos led the way, followed by Jenny and Dylan, with the others close behind. The pace quickened as they climbed the stairwell and then walked. Soon everyone was moving as fast as possible, stirring up clouds of soot that floated in the stale air as headlamps erratically spotlighted the walls, ceiling, and floor. No one spoke. Soon the rope ladder was in sight.

The sunlight hurt Dylan's eyes. Carlos was the last of the rescue team to emerge safely from the ruins. Everyone was sitting haphazardly in the dirt around the open entrance in the ground. It was late afternoon and refreshingly cool. Some people had sweat on their faces. Others were catching their breath. Dylan felt surprisingly alive as if he'd not been through any kind of ordeal at all.

"What was the temple chamber like?" asked Carlos.

"It was amazing," said Dylan. "I have something for you."

He unfastened the GoPro camera from his helmet and handed it to Carlos.

"Video?" said Carlos.

"What do you think?" said Dylan. "Shall we take a look?"

The grin on the old man's face was infectious.

"Perfecto," said Carlos. "Muy Perfecto."

Everyone got up and followed Carlos to the command center as if he were God's representative leading them to the promised land. Dylan plugged his iPad into a cradle with a USB power source. The tablet was frozen and needed a reboot. Once he got everything working, including the wireless connection to his camera, he was ready. He skipped the video ahead to just after the earthquake.

In minutes there was complete silence and open mouths as the iPad showed Dylan's view as he walked into the circular chamber of Twin-Moon-Gate. The faces of his colleagues were glued to the screen as he narrated his discovery of the dome's night sky, the altar, and more.

Sometime later, the video abruptly ended with his brushing soot wildly off the solid gold sun disk as if he were a man possessed. The final frame

of video frozen on the screen showed half the sun disk glinting amid air full of soot. This was long before he'd discovered the quartz jar.

"There's more," said Dylan. "Much more."

All eyes turned upon him. He opened his backpack, and like an actor creating a dramatic scene, he put on a pair of nitrile surgical gloves then withdrew the quartz cylinder. Gold and polished rock quartz glistened in the sunlight. After a pregnant silence, questions flooded him from every direction. Instead of answering anyone, he asked for patience, then handed a set of gloves to Jenny and offered her the cylinder, making her the second person in the entire world to hold it.

"It's so heavy," she said.

She stared at it with wonder, then passed it to Carlos, who cradled the relic as if it were about to crumble. His eyes were glistening with so much astonishment that Dylan thought he might tear up. Dylan watched with pleasure as his friend slid his gloved finger along the inscriptions with lips mumbling in awe. Carlos's face grew flushed, and then, like an over-filled water balloon, he burst into an explosion of words.

Dylan was almost embarrassed by his success as Carlos kept praising him and repeatedly pointing out things about the various discoveries to anyone who would listen. Dylan put a hand on the old man's shoulder and gently took the quartz cylinder from his fingers.

"There's still more," said Dylan. "This relic is a jar that opens."

He demonstrated how the quartz jar unlatched and handed the two pieces back to Carlos. After a moment, Dylan peeled off his nitrile gloves. The jar now belonged to Carlos.

"There is decomposed fabric!" blurted Carlos. "This is wonderful. Minerals and metal cannot be carbon dated, but cloth. Oh yes, we can carbon date cloth."

Carlos stared at the open jar for a long time, muttering to himself. He asked one of the grad students to fetch a sample container. After the young woman returned, Carlos carefully poured the fabric into the container. He then turned to Dylan with a confused expression.

"Doesn't it feel like something is missing?" said Carlos.

Dylan could feel the artifact in his jacket pocket. It had gone from

coveralls to jacket without a thought to the unprofessional behavior that entailed. He'd planned to reveal the artifact next, but now that the time had come, he found he simply could not do it. He thought about the Mayan ring on his finger. His stomach felt empty, and his palms damp. There was a mild dizziness that reminded him of what it had been like to be trapped alive inside that chamber. His hands felt like they were shaking but were not. It reminded him of his old panic attacks. It had been decades since he'd been cured. He wondered if he was suffering from a mild relapse.

Maybe it was better to wait just a little longer before revealing the artifact? Maybe even hold off until tomorrow? No, that was a lie. He realized that for quite some time, he'd had no intention of turning the artifact over to Carlos. At best, the Peruvian government would lock it away in a museum along with the quartz jar. At worst, something this weirdly technological with its radioactive metallic pit would make the entire expedition suspect. There was also the huge question about his remote perceptions and whether they were caused by the chamber or was he cracking up. He subconsciously toyed with the stolen Mayan ring that was on his finger by obsessively slowly rotating it one way and then the other.

He refused to accept the possibility that the artifact might be what charitable scientists called an *object out of place* and experts called a hoax. He knew that if it was opened up to scientific scrutiny without supporting evidence, it could become one more kooky unearthed thing that science would never rightly or wrongly accept, like two-thousand-year-old Bagdad batteries, the hundred-million-year-old London hammer, or the sixteen-hundred-year-old iron pillar of Delhi. The effect this kind of controversy would have on continued funding for the expedition could be catastrophic.

He told himself that for the sake of the expedition and for the sake of his reputation, he would have to keep the glowing artifact a secret until he could scientifically explain it. When he completed his investigation, maybe he could find a way to covertly return it to Twin-Moon-Gate to be rediscovered? He glanced at the Mayan ring on his finger and stopped rotating it. He needed to stop lying to himself. He knew he was going to keep the artifact because it felt like it belonged to him, just like that ring.

Late that night, the camp was silent except for the wind. While Jenny slept, Dylan quietly unzipped their tent and crept out. A full moon cast deep shadows among the tents and broken ground. Feeling like a ghost, he stole through the camp and then down the ancient trail indigenous people had used for thousands of years.

He soon reached the precipice that never failed to feel like the end of the world. Above him was a womb of vast emptiness filled with stars and endless space. Below him was the void of an immense chasm into which he could easily fall to his doom with only a few more steps. He saw delicate wisps of clouds cast in phosphoric moonlight sweeping across the valley thousands of feet below. It was all as surreal as a dream.

He thought of the ceremonial chamber, corridors, and stairs somewhere deep inside the very mountain on which he stood. He thought of the chamber's eternal night sky that once a year might match the one now above him except for its enigmatic second moon.

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a small drawstring velvet pouch that cradled the artifact. The pouch had previously held an accessory for an expensive FLIR camera. He opened the pouch carefully, almost expecting the artifact to have disappeared back into the mists from which it had been undoubtedly forged.

Within the pouch, bathed in moonlight, the gemstone inside its gilded cage was so translucent that it seemed almost invisible and immaterial. Dylan cupped the pouch to one eye, trying to make it dark enough to see the ultraviolet glow, but whatever the artifact emitted was too weak for his eyes to see in this moderate darkness.

He took out the Geiger counter radiation detector he'd borrowed from the expedition supply tent. The cellphone-sized instrument beeped as he switched it on. Passing it over the stone, it showed nothing except normal background radiation levels. This was not what he'd expected. He was convinced what he'd seen in the chamber was radioluminescence. What other explanation was there? He reluctantly closed the pouch and tucked it away in a pocket. He wasn't going to solve this mystery tonight. He knew

he would not have answers until the artifact had been exhaustively tested in the best labs, and that was exactly what he intended to do.

As a fully tenured professor in the archeology department at Berkeley, he had access to the finest scientific facilities. If the mystery of the artifact could not be cracked there, it would never be cracked.

His mind felt clouded with unstable thoughts and memories. The remote perceptions of his rescue had seemed so real. What else could they have been? He refused to believe he was losing his mind, but it worried him. There had to be a scientific explanation for everything. The world functioned on hardcoded principles. There was no such thing as magic, just things science had yet to explain.

He smoked a cigarette in the hopes of stimulating any last thoughts, as well as to serve as an excuse for his absence. Soon he was trekking back to the tent. In a way, he was returning with less than he'd departed with. Jenny stirred as he came in. She lifted her head, revealing eyes clouded by sleep. Her long blonde hair was a tangled sexy mess.

“Are you okay, honey?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” whispered Dylan. “Go back to sleep.”

“Ummm, okay. You’ve been smoking.”

“Go back to sleep.”

In the chill air, he stripped off his outer clothing and crawled into the joined pair of sleeping bags. With his arms curled around her from behind, spooned into the warmth of her body, he quickly found a troubled sleep.

6

Dylan awoke at noon and slowly dressed. It was a sunny day, and he had made the discovery of a lifetime. Other than the Ministry of Culture, everything was perfect except for one small marble-sized problem, which he recovered from underneath his side of the air mattress and slipped into a pocket. He suspected Jenny had been up for hours.

He found her sitting on a large boulder near the opening to the temple complex. She was drawing. The wind was mercilessly blowing at her and

her sketchbook. She had the pages battened down with spring-loaded metal clips. She was so intent on her work that she was ignoring Dylan, and he was content to just watch. Her eyes were a little clearer than usual, almost translucent. To Dylan, it seemed as though he could see her thoughts as little scenes floating in those crystalline doorways to her soul.

He walked around behind her to see what she was drawing. It was her idea of what this place would have looked like when it was under construction. She had drawn men and women in somewhat Egyptian looking robes directing the construction. She was drawing the theory he'd discussed yesterday.

“Do you really think they could have built it?” asked Jenny.

“The evidence is only circumstantial, but there's a lot of it. So yeah, as crazy as it sounds, I think so.”

“There were some aftershocks this morning. Did you feel them?”

“No, I was out cold. Have you seen Carlos?”

“He's down in the complex with two helpers. He said he has to see the chamber with his own eyes. I think some of your crazy has rubbed off on him.”

Even though this kind of risky stunt was completely out of character for Carlos, Dylan wasn't surprised by the news. It was as if he had somehow already known.

“I've been listening to Carlos on the comms,” said Jenny. “There was a strong aftershock about ten minutes after he started down. He said that even a super-quake wasn't going to stop him. He's been at it for over an hour.”

The stolen artifact in Dylan's coat pocket felt like it was made of lead. His jaw tightened. Guilt was burning a hole in his stomach more effectively than acid. He had a strong reaction that he wanted Carlos out of the ruins now. It was true he was worried about his friend, but there was another reason. What if Carlos found some evidence that Dylan had stolen the artifact? As he walked toward the command center to raise Carlos on the comms, he spotted figures in coveralls clambering up out of the entrance to the corridor. Carlos pulled off his respirator, goggles, and spelunking helmet.

“What did you think of the chamber?” asked Dylan.

Carlos, looking utterly defeated, replied with a sad voice.

“The lower level is flooding. I tried to make it to the chamber, but it was no use.”

“Flooding? What do you mean flooding?”

“Something must have been breached by the earthquake. Maybe a subterranean river? I don’t know. Many large rivers come from our mountains. It looks like the lower level has been filling with water all night. It’s a miracle the flooding did not start sooner. If we had not gotten you out, and you were still down there...”

His voice trailed off. He glanced at Jenny, who was out of earshot, then shook his head. His coveralls were caked with soot and black mud. Dylan was both conflicted and relieved that the chamber was unreachable. A lot of additional funding would now be needed to study what was hidden deep below their feet. To get that kind of money required a trip back to the states. With the tantalizing discovery of Twin-Moon-Gate, far larger grants should now be as easy as low lying fruit.

“How bad is it, really?” asked Dylan.

Carlos stopped pulling off his boots, which was necessary to remove the coveralls. He looked up and sighed.

“My friend, it is bad. The water and black mud are rising. The lowest level of the stairwell could be underwater by nightfall, and there is more collapse from the aftershocks. There is no way to know how much of the stairwell could end up submerged. It could soon be too deep and hazardous even for cave divers. Maybe remote submersibles? I don’t know. For you and me, the water will have to be drained before we can get back in, and who knows if that can even be done. Once dry, every corridor will need to be reinforced against more earthquakes. It could take years, and if there’s another strong earthquake, well,” Carlos just shrugged. “At least there is still the upper floor to study, but the big prize, she is gone for now.”

It was an arduous three-day journey from the expedition's base camp to Lima. Dylan and Jenny had checked into a small suite at the Miraflores Park Hotel. Their flight back to the states was in a few days. Until then they wanted to pamper themselves, and this hotel was a perfect place to accomplish that goal. Tonight would be a celebration.

Jenny had been anxious to leave that frigid mountaintop, and Dylan had felt there was nothing holding him there a day longer and every reason to quickly return to Berkeley. The city of Lima had greeted them with the enticing aromas of civilization.

For far too long, they had missed the simple pleasures of a warm shower, good food, and a real bed. Jenny soaked in the tub for over an hour and then clothed herself in a slinky long black dress. Dylan thought she looked amazing. Whatever had possessed her to bring a dress like that on a field expedition, he would never know, but he was grateful. With images of her in that dress that he could not get out of his head, he went down to a nearby shop to purchase some respectable clothing for himself.

As they entered the restaurant, Jenny squeezed his arm with excitement. The dining room was small and intimate. Surrounded by large potted plants, their table felt like it was part of the walled garden that was just outside their windows. The lights were subdued. It was all so romantic. This small foray was far out of Dylan's price range, but they were in the mood to indulge. The food was pungent and spicy. The champagne was fantastic and crisp. After two bottles of the magic liquid, neither of them were feeling even remotely inhibited.

After dinner, Jenny had her arms wrapped tightly around him as they tried and failed to walk a straight line across the hotel lobby with their dignity intact. Inside the elevator, Dylan was amused by his difficulty pushing the right button as Jenny giggled at his antics. Back in their suite, he flopped down onto the bed, sprawled his arms out wide, and yawned. While Jenny was in the bathroom, he fell asleep.

. . .

In the morning, Dylan was awoken rudely when something hit his face. Sunlight from the windows was blinding. He was hungover, and his entire body ached. The offending object was a sightseeing magazine. Confused, he looked up just as Jenny snatched a hotel directory from the desk and threw it. The directory bounced off his arm as he blocked it. Her expression was barely contained rage and streams of tears. Nothing made sense. This was not like her, then he saw the stolen artifact in her hand as she held it out toward him.

"It's not what you think," said Dylan.

"It has tiny inscriptions on it like the limestone slab and quartz jar," shouted Jenny. "They have a really nice lighted magnifying mirror in the bathroom that gave me a good close look. Are you going to fucken tell me this didn't come from Twin-Moon-Gate?"

Dylan's head was throbbing. Jenny picked up a remote control and threw it at him. It hit the wall above his head and exploded. She screamed in frustration, then looked about for something else to throw.

"Alright! Alright! Just stop," he yelled. "It's from Twin-Moon-Gate."

"What if you got caught smuggling it?" shouted Jenny. "I could have been arrested too. Did you think of that? You selfish bastard! Why'd you do it?"

"It's complicated."

Jenny stalked over to a window and stared at the view with her back to him. He didn't think she'd believe any of his reasons, especially any that included a previously stolen ring and how the ring, the artifact, and the *Many Voices* tablet felt like they belonged to him. He needed to get his hands on that tablet again.

The silence was unbearable. In his hungover mind, he thought about the pivotal events that had brought him to this place and time. He experienced a moment of sudden clarity and decided had to somehow make her understand. He needed her on his side.

The best explanation, his best chance at winning her over, was how an object out of place would poison the discovery of Twin-Moon-Gate and his life's work. For no logical reason, his confidence began to grow when it

should have been floundering. Cautiously, he approached Jenny as if trying to calm a wild tiger.

"I wanted to turn it over to Carlos," he said. "I really did, but the artifact has serious problems."

"Try me, and this better be good."

Dylan told her the parts he felt she would believe. He told her about the mysterious glowing metallic pit, the devastating problems an object out of place would cause, and the risks to future funding. He left out the ring, the failed Geiger counter test, and his deeply troubling hallucinations.

His words grew hesitant with genuine confusion thinking about those hallucinations. Jenny appeared to misinterpret his hesitance as contrition. He did not correct her. Instead encouraged her misinterpretation as he gently retrieved the gold and crystal artifact from her fingers and pointed out all the archeological questions of authenticity it would face.

At some deep barely conscious level, he somehow sensed her emotions shifting in his favor as he coldly calculated that he was successfully influencing her. His manipulative thoughts troubled him as he shoved them back down into the reptilian recesses from which they had slithered. At the same time, the almost extrasensory perceptions of her feelings, while fleeting, were undeniable and strange. As creepy evidence of his possible newfound mental skill, Jenny's expression softened as if on cue.

"You're certain handing it over to Carlos would have ruined everything?" she asked.

"One hundred percent certain," said Dylan. "The Ministry of Culture is taking control of the site from me. The only way I can absolutely protect the integrity of Twin-Moon-Gate and my reputation is by analyzing this damn thing in a real lab and coming up with an ironclad explanation for it. I'll come clean when I'm through. I mean it. I didn't take it to sell it. I took it to find answers."

He thought about how he was white lying by omission as he handed the artifact back to her.

"Just think about how modern it looks," he said. "Getting it through customs won't be a problem. There's no record of it anywhere. It doesn't look like an archeological artifact. No one would give it a second glance or

suspect it's anything other than some odd trinket mass-produced in China and sold on Amazon."

Jenny's eyes had dried as Dylan hesitantly moved to hug her. After a moment, he felt her arms tighten.

"It's okay," she whispered. "I know you'll straighten all this out and make it right."

Dylan felt the warmth of her body and her acceptance flooding over him. He kissed her gently on the cheek. Tasting the salt left behind by her tears, he felt a hitch in his chest.

"Thank you," he said.