CIVILIZATION

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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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.

This story is dedicated to Mazelle, my first wife, my guiding light from the realms of dreams and other real worlds.

This story is dedicated to my muse Καλλιόπη (Calliope), discarnate and incarnate, the mystery from which all creativity flows.

I'd like to offer a special thanks to John Paine and Rich Kiln, my editors.

Dustcover

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 Berkely Professor Dylan Smith is about to learn. 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.

After decades of thankless toil, Dylan has finally discovered the proof he's been seeking, 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.

About the Author

I started life as a scientist, e-car inventor, AI software architect, and software and electrical engineer. I founded a successful AI software company and then, for my second act, became a full-time novelist. I was widowed at a young age after my first wife tragically died from pancreatic cancer. A few years later, 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 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 Smith 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 were the snowcapped 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 not 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 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 sank 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 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 an item that could have been on sale in a modern jewelry store.

He slipped the relic back onto his finger. Everyone thought it was a custom ring that he'd had engraved with some of the script found on the artifact, the *Many Voices Tablet*, that he'd been laboring to translate for years. Like the tablet, the translated Maya script from the ring had resulted in gibberish instead of a readable translation. As if that was not enough of a mystery, the inside of the band bore an inscription in a completely unknown language.

Any archeologist worth his Ph.D. would have considered the ring an enigma, or worse, a fraud constructed in the time of the Spaniards. As a leading authority in ancient languages, Dylan had immediately realized the ring was a key to the Many Voices Tablet 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 anyone alive. Decades ago, the small two-foot stone Many Voices Tablet had been 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 translations 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'd allegedly deciphered an even greater mystery that had ultimately led him to the mountains of Peru. No one believed his fragmented translation was accurate except a few close friends and colleagues. He did not have enough proof and could not reveal the ring. 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 literal, not a myth. 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 partially helped him to unlock the tablet and reveal the location of the archeological site he and his team would soon enter.

The perfectly square slab, which was about the size of a double-wide doorway, had sealed the entrance for millennia. It was three feet thick, lay flat on the ground like a massive gravesite ledger, and was covered with inscriptions. Its estimated weight was eleven tons. It was a mystery how the ancients opened and closed that lid to enter the site for their rituals.

Despite the cold, Dylan remained at the cliff as late afternoon blended 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, hoping to find answers there. He slowly rotated the Mayan ring on his finger. He'd started doing that often, as if to 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 a lighter. Fighting off 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 but was doing it anyway. So far no one knew about this new 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 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 stepfather, which meant a lot to Dylan.

He ground out the cigarette beside him on the rock ledge. Wind swept the burning embers off into the abyss. The void 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 clifftop plateau 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 descended into a shallow ravine large enough to contain a village. Sheltered within it was the expe-

dition'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 in their evening rituals. It was a scene he had relived countless times since his archeological work had begun here six months ago.

At the outskirts, he walked past an array of solar panels and a heavy battery bank that powered the camp. Electricity was in short supply. A gust of wind buffeted him. He thought, not for the first time, that some kind of windmill would have been a better option.

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 outside 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'd looked up with the dust from his work settling around him and seen a beautiful vision 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," said Jenny. "I can smell it."

"The Ministry of Culture is screwing with me again."

"Don't change the subject. Besides, I thought all that was settled. Carlos gave them everything they wanted."

"Obviously, it was not enough. They're shutting me out. They want Carlos to take over the site and are graciously allowing me to continue under his supervision."

"What!" said Jenny. "That's outrageous. There must be something you can do."

"I guess I can always quit."

2

Precisely two hours after breakfast, the archeological team gathered for a briefing. Everyone was seated or standing beneath a small cabin-sized tarp shelter that they ironically referred to as the command center. There were no walls, only a canvas tarp supported by tent poles. 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.

Lost in thought, he gazed out from the command center. The limestone slab and its archeological scaffolding was about fifty feet away. The drone team was setting up their equipment next to it. 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 dishes the size of pizza boxes. The system provided a reliable high-speed connection to the outside world. He glanced at his phone, knowing before he looked that the text was from Alan Porter, the expedition's largest donor. Alan was as nervous as an expectant father. He and a few others would be joining the meeting remotely.

Carlos met Dylan's eyes from across the table. Carlos was sixty-eight years old, short, slab-chested, and proud. He wore a friendship bracelet from his granddaughter 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 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. Dylan felt his entire life had been leading up to this morning. All those years of starving while on one meager football scholarship after another were 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 an extraordinary discovery, something 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 him 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. 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 take hold. Sublingual Ativan tended to kick in quickly for him. Fifteen minutes later, his anger had started to slowly mellow.

After he returned to the command center, all the chairs were filled, and the conference call was connected. Dylan started the meeting with an update on his partial translation of the megalithic slab's inscriptions. The stone doorway was inscribed with both Maya script and the same completely unknown language as his Mayan ring. He caught himself rotating the ring on his finger and stopped.

"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. It is believed that Proto-Sinaitic script was derived from ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs almost four thousand years ago. Carlos and I, as co-discoverers of this new script, have decided to name it Smith-Aguilar Andean Script.

"I've spent more time on the translation of the slab's Maya glyphs than any other task. It's still producing mostly gibberish. Using the Many Voices Tablet as a Rosetta Stone, I've been able to translate a small percentage. This shared dialect proves there is a connection between the Many Voices Tablet and this site. The most important thing that I've learned so far is that this is the entrance to a temple and initiation chamber named Twin-Moon-Gate, the supposedly imaginary Mayan-Andean shrine described by the Many Voices Tablet."

"So your origin of civilization theory, she is still holding up?" asked Carlos, discreetly prompting Dylan to explain more to those all-important people on the speakerphone who controlled the purse strings.

"Yes," said Dylan. He could not suppress a small prideful smile. "We've already made history and are about to make even more. Unlike Mesoamerica, no written language has ever been discovered in pre-

Columbian South America. Even if nothing else of consequence is found, the discovery of this slab will radically change all 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 drone. He glanced over to where the slab had been raised twenty-four inches for insertion of the drone. Since its discovery, the slab had been raised twice before and reclosed, but never this much. The drone operator, Ricardo and his two helpers, were prepping the flight by lowering an antenna into the opening.

The next time Dylan glanced at the slab, Ricardo was walking toward the command center. He gave Dylan a thumbs-up. By now everyone at the meeting had stopped talking and was staring. This was it. Ricardo stepped into the command center.

"We good?" asked Dylan.

"Yes, all set. Sorry about taking so long. We had to replace one of the motors, then double-check everything."

Ricardo settled in behind his control console, and the drone's video feed came to life. The custom quadcopter lifted off and flew into the opening. The view on the screen was limited to what was revealed by the drone's 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 of clarity was a medieval-looking corridor that vanished into utter the darkness that lay ahead.

The walls and floor were constructed from large naturally shaped stone blocks, while the ceiling was made of stone slabs that spanned the width of the corridor. All of it appeared to be fitted without mortar. The workman-

ship 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 death traps."

"Death traps?" said Jenny with alarm.

"Death traps are nothing but Hollywood tropes," said Dylan.

"Por favor, forgive an old man for his gallows 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's camera feed went dead. No one said a word for several seconds.

"Que mierda!" said Ricardo. "The drone's radio connection is gone."

"Did it hit something?" asked Dylan.

"No," said Ricardo.

"I saw nothing bad," 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.

"All right, 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 be dangerous."

"The dust probably clogged up one of its motors and it overheated," said 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'll take the radio relays and leave a breadcrumb trail of them. That'll give us a reliable link," said Dylan. "We're going to be fine."

He put his hands on Jenny's shoulders as he stared into her eyes. His smile felt false for some reason he could not articulate. Jenny's face was stormy with defiance.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Okay, fine," said Jenny. "But if anything happens, I'll never forgive you."

3

Several long hours had passed since the drone crash. The videographer, Karen, had just started recording what would be the most important video of Dylan's life. As Carlos and he pulled on the orange protective coveralls designed for caving, he was painfully aware that, if successful, every move he made would be saved forever. The clothing was difficult to slip into because of its abrasion and 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 video camera to his Petzl caving helmet, then set the rig down to check his comms gear. The batteries were weak. His anger flared. He almost lashed out but held it in check as he gazed at Karen and her camera with a forced 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 fierce passion. He tried to stop hugging, but Jenny wouldn't let go. When he finally had to pry her away, he saw fear in her eyes. Such a strong reaction was so unlike her that he suddenly felt unnerved. Was she experiencing some kind of intuition? He didn't believe in intuition. The ruins were old, but they'd 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 tiny liquid jewel. All she said was, "You better."

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

He walked over to the fully exposed opening, 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, stirring clouds of fine soot-colored dust from within. 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 seemed to reach into the very soul of the Earth. Something, some treasure 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 and then switched on the cellphone-sized comms package that was attached to his utility belt. A bleep indi-

cated the gear was working. The earbuds blended amplified ambient sound with the comms feed. He adjusted the ambient volume until everything sounded normal.

He then fitted a Bluetooth tactical throat microphone around his neck. The mic pressing against his larynx was mildly uncomfortable, but it was the best option when wearing a respirator. He seated a pair of clear tactical goggles over his eyes. His prized Petzl caving helmet fit like a glove. The helmet, scarred from long years of use, had saved him more than once. He clicked on the helmet-mounted headlamp and video camera, checking both for operation.

He glanced at Jenny once more 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 whispering 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 hefted a canvas shoulder bag that contained radio relays designed specifically for caving. Each one was equipped with a small tripod and a battery that could last for days. Carlos had an identical bag.

Without hesitating for a moment, Dylan 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 on 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 descended.

The stonework brought up thoughts of a medieval citadel. He brushed the soot-colored dust from a small area. 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'd 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 poking and checking the ceiling with their walking sticks, looking for anything loose, as well as probing the floor ahead. The layer of black dust could easily hide unstable footing or a more dangerous pitfall.

They soon reached the first intersection, 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 sticks lightly 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.

The drone showed no obvious sign of damage or malfunction. They went on. A short distance from 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 too much signal strength.

The relay rested on top of its low tripod base with its green status light blinking. Carlos headed down the new corridor. Instead of following, Dylan took a few steps back up the corridor they'd come by and gazed 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 that doorway to the surface, he was in a world of smooth blackness that possessed a thickness he could almost feel 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 some presence 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 prowess over the spirits of this nocturnal realm. He looked down at their footprints left in the virgin dust. Something touched his back, almost giving him a heart attack. It was Carlos. He had come back for him. Silently, they went on. A short time later, the right-angle passage came to an end at a descending flight of stairs. Carlos looked stunned as he turned to face Dylan.

"Impossible," said Carlos. "Our temple has more than one level."

"Stairs like that should not even exist in this dynasty. What the hell have we found?"

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

They set up another relay. The previous one was too far away to see with their lights. The flashing green light on the new relay indicated it had found and linked up with its unseen cousin.

"After you," said Carlos.

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 had it taken just to

create those corridors and these stairs? This temple complex was beginning to feel like an engineering feat equal to the pyramids.

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 couldn't help but think about his cyclic timeline theory but said nothing. He'd never told anyone about it, and for good reason. His origin of civilization theory and many of his other published papers were already fringe enough. His timeline theory was that modestly advanced civilizations had repeatedly arisen and fallen in approximately thirty-thousand-year cycles throughout the three hundred thousand years of human prehistory. The technological inventions of these theoretical civilizations were basic breakthroughs like the wheel, oil lamps, concrete, sextants, and compasses, nothing comparable to the industrial age or information age. Only the current civilization had gotten that far.

Dylan had uncovered dozens of hints of repeated reinvention of these kinds of simple breakthroughs in various ancient texts, and every year cataloged more. All it took were slightly different translations of those texts with some corrections in the names of objects, places, and periods. He was, after all, an accepted authority in ancient languages.

Carlos stopped on a landing. Dylan misunderstood and thought the old guy was finally running out of steam.

"The signal, she is getting too weak," said Carlos. "We need to set up another relay."

It took longer to get the relay operating, but finally, its green light was blinking. They divided up the remaining relays between them, then 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 lower level. Carlos set up a relay at the bottom of the stairwell. Once the operation of the relay was confirmed,

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 logic or any theory dictated. The farther they cautiously ventured into this part 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 find and then climb those stairs in total darkness?

Exploring this deep beneath a mountain, Dylan was soon fighting to deny growing irrational fears that stemmed from being so far underground. He knew from past experience inside the larger pyramids in Egypt that millions of tons of crumbling ancient stone being above someone had side effects. Under that type of psychological pressure, the human brain started behaving illogically. He knew if his headlamp failed, plunging him into darkness, the addition of sensory deprivation would cause his brain to release chemicals that induced anxiety, panic, and even hallucinations. He suspected smaller amounts of those chemicals were trickling into his bloodstream at that very moment, even with his headlamp working just fine.

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 straining. The movement of shadows cast by Carlos's headlamp kept tricking his eyes into seeing threats. At any moment, Dylan irrationally expected both their headlamps to fail and the mountain to cave in all around them.

The fear was becoming so disproportionate that he began wondering about unnatural causes, such as ethylene or methane vapor from geological cracks. There was a long history of cave gases causing hallucinations.

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.

After a blind ninety-degree turn, Dylan came to a dead stop along with Carlos. Both men were spellbound. His deep unease from moments ago vanished as his eyes drank in the enigma before him.

The corridor ended at a spectacular gateway cut into a wall fashioned from a single block of smooth stone. The gateway opening was the size and shape of an arched doorway. Its threshold was raised about a foot from the floor. A symbol was engraved above the arch. It was one of the Andean Script letters from both the stone slab and his stolen Mayan ring.

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

Dylan stared in silent awe. While common elsewhere in the world, no architectural keystone had ever been found in the Americas. Unlike the rest of the temple, the gateway wall was largely free of soot. Dylan ran a finger across its surface. Its slight dusting of soot fell away as if the wall was Teflon. Its surface was blacker than black, blacker even than the soot. The wall seemed to 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. What kind of material was this?

On closer inspection, he saw 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 found 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 soot."

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

After a stairwell that seemed far too modern, other unusual things had not been entirely unexpected by Dylan. Shining their lights through the gateway revealed a continuation of the passage. The dimness of the beam on all the surfaces suggested that the entire corridor was sheathed in the same black tiles.

Dylan began carefully examining the inside of the gateway opening. He wanted to make sure there would be no surprises stepping through it. He'd never know anyone who'd encountered an archeological trap, but there was always a first time.

The tiled opening absorbed light so effectively that when he initially reached inside the three-dimensional blackness, his arm seemed to be swallowed by it. Without any reflected light, aiming his headlamp directly at his arm was the only way to see it. The genius behind the effect was unsettling. He dug out a handheld wall scanner that was a combination penetrating radar and metal detector. It was used to check for fractures, seams, and buried objects. He found nothing.

The gateway appeared safe but there was only one way to find out. Dylan stepped through it with nothing happening. 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 voices of people in the command center were gone from his 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.

Again, 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 returned.

"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 look and mouthed, "We have to tell them." Dylan shook his head no and switched off his open mic. He motioned for Carlos to do the same. 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."

"Agreed under protest," said Carlos. "For now."

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

"What the hell?" he muttered.

"Is it out again?" asked Carlos.

"Damn it!"

Dylan stepped out again, and his comms returned. 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's 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 fifty feet apart, or they will not sync."

"Got it."

Dylan paced off fifty feet down the corridor. It was like walking into a void. He encountered a ninety-degree turn that he had not seen until almost right on top of it. The tile's effect on light was unnerving. 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 disorienting effect of the light-absorbing pigment all around him was growing worse. He accidentally banged his hand against a wall. It was difficult to judge distance. The experience reminded him of a sensory isolation tank he'd once tried.

He felt a swaying motion that seemed imaginary but left him with an afterglow of seasickness. Carlos was saying something, but Dylan could not concentrate. It felt like the ground was moving in a gentle rocking motion, like being 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 ran 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 an unseen wall and then the equally unseen 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 lash 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, unable to believe his eyes. It felt like all the blood was draining from him.

A section of the gateway and ceiling had collapsed. Countless feet of rubble stood between him and escape. There was also no way of knowing what else had collapsed on the far side of the gateway. He was stranded and maybe as good as dead. Terrifying 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. No surprise there.

"Carlos!" he bellowed.

There was no answer.

"Carlos!" he bellowed again, shouting so hard that his head started to throb.

He had no idea how bad the cave-in might be. Was Carlos still alive? While the passageway remained largely intact, half the tiles on the gateway were reduced to shards and the radio remained dead, not that it proved anything. All the relays were probably lying on their sides, or worse, smashed.

Taking painful breaths, he started shifting the rubble. He was soon sweating, but had not made a dent in the wreckage. Instead of causing 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. He would not go easily.

He stopped digging and eyed the wreckage, wondering how long it would be before rescue workers arrived. It was pointless to waste another ounce of energy trying to clear that rubble himself. He needed to conserve his water and food. He then became aware of his breathing. It had not occurred to him until that moment that he was in a sealed chamber and could die of carbon dioxide poisoning.

Turning, he wondered about what lay beyond that invisible ninety-degree turn in the corridor. It was blind ambition 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's 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? He realized the message was for Jenny. 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 devised 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 turned and began to walk deeper into the complex. It felt like he was walking toward his doom.

Dylan did not realize that he had reached the end of the passageway until he found himself standing just inside the very ceremonial chamber he'd imagined a thousand times before. 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 open and far larger, as if he was standing outside on an empty plateau.

All his senses struggled to gauge the scale of the place. Scattered particles embedded in the walls and ceiling glistened like tiny stars when his headlamp reflected off them. He was awestruck. The chamber was round, and the ceiling was a dome. A sacrificial altar rested in the center of the floor. Seven rectangular blocks that looked like pedestals or hassocks were arranged around the perimeter of the room like the markings on a clock. He had found what all those dogmatic experts believed was a myth.

The floor had far less black dust than any other area 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. It was a little tricky to get each measurement. He had to aim the laser precisely at one of the tiny reflective stars. The black areas of the tiles returned a reading of infinity.

The first six to ten feet of the curved walls were decorated with 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 mural was a single wraparound scene 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 a large area 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 moon that Dylan knew so well, while the smaller tobacco brownish-orange moon 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 that he was gazing into the depths of space. The moons appeared to be rendered almost stereoscopically. His eyes were sore. Closing them for a moment, he imagined the ghosts of priests carrying out the old rituals here. Child sacrifice, the end of precious life, the emotions. The rites 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 by imagining the inhuman acts. 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 narrower setting. He began walking the perimeter of the chamber, looking for inscriptions that could be clues to dating this temple of moons, starlight, and darkness.

The seven backless hassocks or pedestals were fashioned from polished limestone, utterly identical, and all but glowed with craftsmanship. The adult-length sacrificial altar was made from the same polished stone as the hassocks. However, 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 stone pedestal that was at least two feet in diameter.

A collection of roughly two-inch diameter holes bored through the altar's headrest formed a partial circle around the spot where a victim's head would rest. Each of the seven holes was lined with a thick gold sleeve. The 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 an inch-wide square impression. The purpose of the impressions was even less clear than the holes.

Dylan set his Petzl helmet and headlamp down on the altar and once again widened the beam so that it faintly illuminated almost the entire dome. He then retreated 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 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. Yet 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 the handheld scanner along the glass-like walls while also peering closely at the surface with his headlamp. He checked every inch within reach and found nothing. Dispirited, he cleared 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 air current back to a concealed exit port that was a narrow slit at the junction of the floor and the wall. The foot-long opening was no more than a quarter-inch high and all but invisible. 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 ventilation was ingenious. It had to be non-mechanical to still be working. Maybe it used natural convection currents in some way. More importantly, where was the air supply coming from this deep under a mountain? There had to be vents up in the ceiling somewhere, and the walls could be riddled with ducts, maybe even ones large enough for a man to wriggle through.

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 gone. His stomach grumbled, and with that sensation, reality came crashing back like a steel door slammed in his face.

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 ersatz stars now 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 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 smaller, anemic moon surrounded by stars.

His eyes fell on his trail of footprints that crisscrossed the chamber. The same as 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 caught his eye 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. Dropping to all fours, Dylan brushed 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 respirator and goggles back on. With his arm shoveling in large arcs, he laboriously cleared several sections of the floor from the altar to the wall in a radial pattern. What was revealed was stunning.

4

It took forever for the airborne dust to settle enough so that Dylan could 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 gold disk 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. This treasure alone was worth an incomprehensible amount of money.

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. The outermost ring was dull yellow. Advancing toward its center, each new ring was formed from 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.

Dylan jotted down the final set of measurements on his iPad. He was deeply intrigued by the dimensions of the sun disk and chamber. 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.

The sun disk was exactly nine cubits in diameter. The width of each ring was exactly half a cubit. On the right side of the altar near its pedestal was what appeared to be a cover plate that was recessed flush with the floor. The plate was about a foot and a half in diameter, exactly 24 fingers, and fashioned from the same shade of gold as the surrounding material. At its edge, the plate had a pair of recesses that appeared to be hand-sized grips. It reminded Dylan of a tiny manhole cover. He jammed his fingers into the recesses 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 of solid gold was three inches thick, or rather, four fingers thick, and had to weigh over a hundred pounds. Careful not to crush his fingers or

damage anything, he rested the gold cover plate on an unadorned area of the stone floor.

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

He returned to the opening in the floor, shining his light inside it. The top of what looked like a gold cylinder filled the cavity. He reached in and carefully lifted it out. It was almost a foot long and wide, fashioned from what looked like rock quartz with solid gold endcaps. He set the relic down and collected some of his inspection tools.

Feverishly jotting down detailed notes on his iPad, Dylan was soon in his element examining the relic. The cylinder measured exactly a half cubit in diameter and height. It reminded him of a tall cookie tin. The gold endcaps were flawless without the tiniest scratch or blemish. It did not look handmade. A pocket electronic gem tester quickly verified the cylinder was quartz and not glass or diamond, not that he'd had any real doubt.

The mechanical precision of everything 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 examined the perfectly honed cylinder of polished rock quartz. It had an unnatural heft that reminded him of lead. Inscribed around its curved surface were circular bands of text written in the same mysterious ancient lexicon of Andean Script.

The letters were delicately engraved, then filled with gold to such a level of perfection that it rivaled 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.

In the spaces between the Andean Script 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 fastened 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 that 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 anything else found in Twin-Moon-Gate.

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 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 camera 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 greatest discovery of his life and his last.

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 a needle probe, he resumed his hunt for a 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 a clue that was in plain sight. He'd previously noted ruler-like hash marks along the edges of both endcaps. The marks were various lengths and randomly arranged, or so it appeared. The random arrangement of hash marks looked to be the same on both endcaps, but they were not aligned.

Could the trick be that simple? Could the hash marks be directions? He gripped both endcaps and tried to twist them in opposite directions to align the marks. The caps resisted, then moved freely, and the whole thing came apart in his hands. 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 cylinder's walls were about two inches thick and as smooth as if bored in a machine shop. Inside the cavity rested an artifact fashioned from a cube of preternaturally clear gemstone mounted in a thin unadorned gold setting. Embedded in the exact center of the cube was a metallic-looking sphere the size of a pea. The gemstone was so clear that, at first glance, it looked like the artifact was an empty gold box with open opposite ends and a metallic pea levitating inside it.

Dylan closed his eyes to think. The flawless gemstone was most likely quartz. What the hell was this thing? It looked vaguely technological, which was ridiculous. Grudgingly, 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 than the artifact. Cluttering the cavity was a small amount of what looked like crumbled mummified green textile. Dylan jotted down every 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, using locking forceps, he gingerly reached inside the cavity and gripped the artifact. He then lifted it from the cylinder as if he were holding the most fragile objet d'art imaginable. The clear crystal cube inside its gold setting seemed to exist outside of time and space, radiating

a presence like a living thing. It felt sacrilegious to touch it as he placed it in his palm.

The cylindrical quartz jar and cube were such remarkable works of craftsmanship that neither seemed handmade and instead felt more like modern replicas of ancient objects. Discounting the gold setting, the quartz cube was a perfect 1.11 inch square. In ancient Egyptian units of measurements that was exactly one and half fingers. On closer inspection with his loupe, he saw the gold setting was engraved with a single unbroken line of impossibly minuscule Andean Script that ran around all four sides.

Examining every aspect of the artifact with his loupe and pocket gem tester, he confirmed the flawless cube of shimmering petrified ice was rock quartz. So what was that mysterious pea-sized sphere of metal doing inside it? How could it have possibly gotten there?

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 like a prism, 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 cube 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. Add in the presence of Andean Script, with its undeniable similarities to ancient Egyptian scripts, and the results were mind-boggling. He was surrounded by 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. 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 small quartz cube. 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.

5

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 treasure 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 froze in confusion. A weak ultraviolet fluorescence was seeping out around the flap. He opened the pocket. Inside it, the cube was surrounded by faintly glowing cloth. The quartz itself was also radiating a barely visible deep violet light. This was the first time he'd seen the relic 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 cube. It was like a dying star encased in ice. The wane ultraviolet fluorescence illuminated little more than his hands. Had the glow increased slightly 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 exposed surfaces of the quartz cube like sublimation from dry ice. He fixedly stared at it 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 theory about the glow was that the metallic pit was a naturally occurring radioactive element that was exciting photoluminescent impurities in the quartz. 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 artifact. Gold was denser than lead. What better way to store something sacred that was radioactive? This hinted at ancient scientific understanding that was completely unsettling.

As he stared at the seed of light trapped inside the cube, it irresistibly pulled at the flow of his consciousness. The hand cradling the artifact slowly relaxed in his lap. Suffused in the wan blue 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 water. Dylan saw utter darkness, a deep pool of

nothingness. Slowly, out of the void came a sound and then another, and then a sensation, and then a spark of light. Soon, there were flowing half-formed shapes that morphed and changed as his mind tried to create order out of chaos.

Mercifully, all his senses sharpened, as if they had been picking up a poorly tuned radio broadcast that had just been fine-tuned to perfection. He saw the top of the stairwell leading down to the level where he was trapped. He heard 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 as if his hands were gripping a pole that might have been the handle of a shovel. The visual part of the experience kept randomly jumping around as if Dylan was looking through someone else's eyes as they took in detail after detail as well as repeatedly glanced up at the ceiling as if out of concern.

Without warning, everything changed. It was as if he'd been watching a television that had been switched to a new channel. He was in a totally different place. It was a mansion with twenty-foot ceilings. Big-game animal trophies were 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 eyes that were bloodshot and twitching with the malice of a savage hungry predator. Dylan somehow empathically felt that he was in the presence of an all-consuming human black hole that could devour all that was good and drive any man to evil. The psychotic's expression changed. Dylan had a gnawing sense that the predator had somehow spotted him hiding behind the eyes of its 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 at any moment. His nerves were frayed to the point of breaking as he struggled to convince himself 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 something solid that was trickling directly into his eyes, and then through them into his mind, where 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. 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 lower level of the complex near the gateway. He gleaned from fragments of conversations that they were concerned about aftershocks and had about ten more feet of rubble to clear. The cave-in had apparently been far less serious than Dylan thought. Only the gateway had been blocked.

The hands of the man he was perceiving through came into view. He was operating a ground-penetrating radar. The man was positively luminous with a complete painter's palette of emotions, but there was 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 more 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 crowbars, 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. His heart broke. Abruptly, his remote perceptions switched channels to someone who kept glancing with concern at Jenny. Dylan guessed he was inside the head of the crew chief, Bob Riverman.

Jenny was sitting at the bottom of the stairwell and silently weeping. She was wearing a borrowed respirator, goggles, and a hard hat. The owner's name, 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 slipped unnoticed from his fingers. There was the sound of glass cracking as crystal and gold impacted a hard unforgiving floor. Dylan snapped out of the trance amid a splintering flash of light.

He fell to his hands and knees, repeatedly mumbling curses as he searched the pitch blackness with hands he could not see. Finally, the dim glow of the artifact swam out of the darkness. Dylan was relieved it seemed to be in one piece. He thought he spotted a hairline crack in the crystal cube. The fracture seemed to be melding before his eyes. In a few seconds it vanished as if it had never existed, and maybe it never had.

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 in his headlamp. White light speared the darkness around him once more.

He retrieved the magnifying loupe from the pile of junk in front of him and closely examined the crystal and its gold setting for damage. Remarkably, he could not find the tiniest abrasion. This small improbability seemed to underscore all the far bigger improbabilities.

Dylan's gut instincts were telling him those remote perceptions were real and that help would soon reach him. He was 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 nagging doubts that were even then 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 looked at the artifact sitting amid the clutter from his backpack and wondered about it too.

Dylan picked up a chocolate energy bar from the pile and ate it with a deep hunger. He washed it down with huge gulps of water, then wolfed 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 picked up the artifact and then switched off the headlamp. As his eyes acclimated, he felt relief. The anemic fluorescence was visible again. The cube 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 destroy so many of the pillars of science that grounded 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 wrapped it in a bandanna and tucked it back into the cargo pocket along with his last cigarette inside its flattened pack, a lighter, 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 checked the contents of his backpack to make sure nothing was left behind. He lingered at the sight of the quartz jar nestled in the padded section normally reserved for his iPad. He was certain he would return to this place, and his 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. He did not have to wait long for the remote perceptions to be proven true. Soon he heard the distant picking of metal tools somewhere on the other side of the wreckage.

Dylan did not call 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 wall of debris as shards of black tile and dirt spilled to the floor. Carlos poked his head into the chamber, sending a second, smaller trickle of debris down the wall to join the growing pile. For Dylan, it was almost like watching the birth of some hard-shelled hard hat-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 a hard hat, 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 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 headed down the passageway. 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 on the ground around the open entrance. 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 camera from his helmet and handed it to Carlos.

"Video?" said Carlos.

"What do you think?" said Dylan. "I ran out of memory, but not before the good stuff. 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. Dylan plugged his iPad into a USB power source. The tablet was frozen and needed a hard reboot. Carlos removed the memory card from the camera and inserted it into a reader. Once he got everything working, he turned toward Dylan.

"This is your show," said Carlo.

"You're not going to believe it," said Dylan. "Prepare to be blown away."

Dylan fast-forwarded the video to just after the earthquake. In minutes there were open mouths and utter silence as the video displayed what Dylan had seen 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 ended with his brushing soot wildly off the solid gold sun disk as if he were a man possessed. The final frame frozen on the screen showed half the sun disk glinting through soot-laden air. The video had ended before his discovery of the quartz jar.

"There's more than this video," 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 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 he burst into an explosion of words.

Dylan was almost embarrassed by his success as Carlos kept praising him and repeatedly pointing out key 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, then handed the two pieces back to Carlos. The jar belonged to Peru, and Carlos was the official representative of his country.

"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 wrapped in the banana in his cargo pocket. He'd planned to reveal it 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 wave of 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. He'd once suffered through a spate of panic attacks. It had been decades since he'd been cured. He wondered if he was about to have a relapse.

Maybe he should wait just a little longer before revealing the artifact. Maybe even hold off until tomorrow? No, that was a lie. He realized that he 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 cast suspicion on the entire expedition. There was also the huge question about his remote perceptions and whether they were caused by the chamber or a temporary mental breakdown. He subconsciously rotated the stolen Mayan ring on his finger 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 airtight supporting evidence, it would 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 that this

kind of controversy would have on continued funding for the expedition could be catastrophic.

For the sake of the expedition, not to mention his reputation, he would have to keep the glowing artifact a secret until he could scientifically explain it. When he completed his investigation, he could find a way to covertly return it to Twin-Moon-Gate to be rediscovered. He became aware of his incessant rotating of the Mayan ring on his finger and stopped. He needed to stop lying to himself. He knew in the end he was going to keep the artifact because he felt that it belonged to him, just like that ring.

6

Late that night, the camp was silent except for the wind. While Jenny slept, Dylan quietly unzipped their tent and crept out. An almost 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. Delicate wisps of low-lying clouds cast in phosphoric moonlight were sweeping across the valley far below. It was all as surreal as a dream.

He thought of the ceremonial chamber, its 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 that enigmatic second moon.

Reaching into his jacket 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 cube inside its

gilded setting 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 fluorescence, but whatever light 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 America had to offer, 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 he'd experienced had seemed so real. What else could they have been? He refused to believe he was losing his mind or that his memories were scrambled, but it worried him. There had to be a scientific explanation for those remote perceptions, just like there had to be an explanation for the glow inside the artifact. The world functioned on hard-coded principles. There was no such thing as magic, just things science had yet to explain.

He smoked a cigarette in the hopes of stimulating new thoughts, as well as to serve as an excuse for his absence. Soon he was trekking back to the tent. In a sense, 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 chilly air he stripped off his outer clothing and crawled into his side of 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.

7

Dylan awoke at noon and slowly dressed. He suspected Jenny had been up for hours.

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 cubic problem, which he recovered from underneath his side of the air mattress and slipped into a pocket. A mild aftershock rolled through the encampment. There had been several since the big quake.

He found Jenny 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 page battened down with spring-loaded metal clips. She was so intent on capturing her subject 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 concept of what this place would have looked like when it was under construction. There was a procession of wooden carts filled with debris heading toward the cliff amid a vast encampment for thousands of workers. An Egyptian scribe with a chisel and wooden mallet was carving the megalithic entrance lid as an Egyptian high priest and priestess oversaw his work. The drawing was done in the distinctive two-dimensional style of ancient Egypt. Jenny was drawing the theory he'd discussed with her yesterday.

"Now that you've had a good night's sleep, do you still think Egyptians 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 do."

A grad student in the command center began trying to check in with Carlos on the comms radio. There was no reply. Dylan looked pointedly at Jenny.

"He went down with some overeager grad students about thirty minutes ago," she said. "He said he had to see the chamber with his own eyes. I think some of your crazy has rubbed off on him."

Even though a risky stunt like this 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 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 make him turn back."

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 any 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?

Dylan was about to head to the command center to raise Carlos on the comms when he spotted figures in coveralls clambering up out of the entrance to Twin-Moon-Gate. Carlos pulled off his respirator, goggles, and spelunking helmet.

"What did you think of the chamber?" asked Dylan with a growing lump in his throat.

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 stream or basin full of runoff? I don't know. Many large rivers begin in 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 more 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 mixed with black mud is rising. The lowest level of the stairwell could be completely underwater by nightfall. There is no way to know how much of the site 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."

8

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 Seaside Hotel. Their flight back to the States was in a few days, and until then they wanted to pamper themselves. 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 freshly laundered clothes. Dylan thought she looked amazing.

As they entered one of the most expensive restaurants in Peru, Jenny squeezed his arm with excitement. The dining room was small and intimate. Surrounded by large potted plants, their table felt like it belonged to the walled garden just outside the windows. The lights were subdued. It was a spot made for romance.

This extravagance would have been far out of Dylan's price range in northern California. In Lima, it was a bargain, and 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 unshaded windows was blinding. He was hungover, and his entire body ached. The offending object that had hit him 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—until 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.

"All right! All right! 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 accept 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 had to somehow make her understand. He needed her on his side. He knew his best chance at winning her over was by explaining what archeologists called objects out of place and how any whiff of something like that could wreck their lives. If things went badly, that relic she was holding could destroy his career.

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 hand 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 and the devastating problems an object out of place would cause, including the risks to future funding. He left out the failed Geiger counter test and his deeply troubling hallucinations.

His words grew hesitant, betraying genuine confusion, thinking about those hallucinations. Jenny appeared to misinterpret his hesitance as contrition. He did not correct her. Instead he 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. The experience reminded him of his hallucinations in Twin-Moon-Gate. As creepy supporting evidence of his possible newfound extrasensory 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 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 around him.

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

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

"Thank you," he said.