



Handwriting in Water

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

Techno-Thriller

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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.*

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 Dylan Smith is about to learn. As a Berkeley professor of archeology and over-the-hill college football player, Dylan is about to receive his own personalized fifteen minutes of infamy. Since graduate school, he has been following clues and obsessed with unearthing a mysterious find that could change the timeline of history as we know it. He should have been far more careful about that wish.

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

After decades of work and ridicule, Dylan has finally located the impossibly ancient archeological site for which he has been searching, but this

discovery is also something for which he has no more comprehension than an ant has for the sole of a boot. Holding onto this discovery may cost him everything and everyone he loves.

PREFACE

Handwriting in Water marks a return to my techno-thriller writer's roots and the roots of my two prior bestsellers. It is a contemporary techno-thriller. The themes are transhumanism, ancient technology, conspiracy, and the power of opposites when they come together to form a whole. This is not a story of Atlantis or some other wondrous mythological place. This is a realistic story about human evolution, cycles of global destruction, and science instead of magic.

ANCIENT TECHNOLOGY

“Sufficiently advanced technologies are the seeds of future religions.”

It was as magnificent as the Grand Canyon, thought the lone bull of a man as he stood near the edge of the chasm. He squinted as rays of morning sun poured onto his broad face. Even his prized antique air force bomber jacket was not enough to shield him from the savage winds. Immersed in isolation and wonder, he felt resurrected by the soul of this place, these mountains, the Andes. Drawing a deep breath, he filled his lungs with the newborn world that surrounded him. What poured into his senses was almost enough for him to forsake his scientific training and begin to believe in the unseen, the mystic.

He caught himself and thought, it’s awesome, true, but only large rocks and sunlight, no magic, only an image projected onto the retinas of my eyes.

As if in defiance, the wind screamed harder against him. Dylan sunk his hands deeper into the pockets of his jacket, wrapping it tighter around him. His heavy muscles strained reassuringly against the jacket’s weatherworn leather. He felt guilty for dissecting the world into mere forms of rocks and light, but then scientific truth was such a demanding master.

He turned and began making his way back to camp across the boulder-strewn ridge. The massive cliff top on which the ridge sat had been carved

erratically out of the heart-stone of the mountain as if some god of old had swung an axe into its slope.

Dylan negotiated the rugged terrain with athletic ease, though he was sometimes forced to clamber down over a huge boulder or squeeze through a tight crevice. The sacred native footpath he soon reached and began retracing seemed as ancient as the mountains it scarred. Along its length were trail markers unmistakably left behind by some long forgotten Andean tribe.

The path eventually turned down into a shallow ravine large enough to contain a village. Sheltered within it was the expedition's campsite. Funnels of smoke from cooking fires spiraled into the air before being erased by the ever-present crosswinds. Dozens of people were milling about, absorbed by their morning rituals. It was a scene that had been relived countless times since his Archeological work had begun here six months ago.

For Dylan, everything had been leading up to this morning. All those early years of starving while on one meager football scholarship after another, was about to pay off. Today was the reason for working harder than anyone else to earn his advanced degrees as an athlete scholar. Today was the reason for his subsequent long years of work as a professor of Archeology at Berkeley. Now, while still just barely in his thirties, this remote place in the mountains of Peru would be his first chance to experience something that was truly snatched out of time. In a few hours, he would enter a shrine that was intact, unsoiled, and incredibly ancient.

An endless mosaic of linguistic clues and more than a few morsels of good fortune had led him to this site. He knew what had been partially unearthed a week ago was an incredible find. He felt a chill, knowing it was a sacred place. He knew his acts of investigation would be sacrilege but did not care. The glory of the find awaited him. He had to be the first to see and touch the ancient vault. He imagined scenes from long ago: high priests in ceremonial dress, child sacrifices, neophytes being instructed in the secrets of death and life.

As he wound his way through the camp, breathing in the smoke laced air invoked a primal sense of home. Walking past a row of cabin tents, he saw Jenny and stopped. She was sitting beside their fire, huddled under a thick red blanket. Engrossed in her reading and coffee, she had not sensed his

presence. Her long blonde hair was lazily tied into a morning ponytail. He was close enough to call to her but kept his silence. She fascinated him. Even the simple things she did, like sipping coffee, were captivating. She was intensely attractive. Even in worn jeans, flannel shirt, and a blanket, he found her seductive. Her soft features, her warmth, pulled at his heart and his desires.

His thoughts drifted back to the day not long ago when she'd arrived at camp along with a resupply team. His expedition 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 phantom walking down the trail. 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. He had left their tent before she was awake. He settled down beside her and wrapped her blanket around both their shoulders. The wool was thick and prickly. Jenny handed him her cup to share. The rim was chipped, and brown stains streaked its sides. The coffee was still hot and soothed his throat. Jenny always seemed to sense his mood as well as he sensed hers. They talked for a while about everything except what was happening today. Soon they were just leaning close together in silence, watching the orange-yellow flames crackle.

As moments passed, Dylan's eyes became lifeless glass orbs filled with firelight. His face began to feel stiff and tortured. It was as if his flesh was

stone carved and weathered on a gaunt mountain peak. His mind drifted far away from Jenny and the soothing fire, and again he became consumed by thoughts of what lay waiting in that dig. Beyond the stone structure itself and any priceless artifacts he might find, one thing was clear. What he wanted was to indisputably lay claim to discovering the raw scientific truth of that ruin, a truth that could transform legend into reality and rewrite history. He sighed, realizing that if he was honest with himself, he would acknowledge that his need for this discovery had overpowered all his objectivity.



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

Dylan's inner circle was gathered around a large metal folding table, studying its contents 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.

Seated next to Dylan were Bob and Karen Riverman. Dylan watched as Karen fiddled with a professional video camera. He was waiting for her to begin filming before he began speaking to the team. Karen was a professor of Archeology at Berkeley as well as the team's official recordkeeper and unofficial filmmaker. Her husband, Bob, was the crew chief as well as narrator in most of Karen's videos.

Karen began filming the people around the table. Dylan's eyes wandered from Karen to an older man seated directly across from him. Dylan admired Carlos and valued him more than anyone else on the expedition. They had worked together on and off for close to twenty years. Carlos had been the leader of the first field expedition Dylan had ever gone on. Back then, he'd been an embarrassingly wet behind the ears grad student. In time, Carlos had become like a substitute father, which meant a lot since Dylan had never known his true biological father.

Carlos met Dylan's eyes from across the table. Dylan noticed how his

mentor was getting older. His skin was furrowed with deep wrinkles after far too many decades of hard work in the field, but his sixty-eight-year-old body and brain still clearly burned with the fires of youth. Short, slab-chested, and proud, he was nearly as wide as he was tall. He was the most respected Archeologist on the team and a high-ranking member of the Ministerio de Cultura del Perú. As such, he was also the legal custodian of everything that was discovered at this dig.

Jenny walked up behind Dylan and rested her hands on his shoulders. He jumped at her touch. Her fingers began to squeeze and massage his knotted muscles. He was far too jittery. The anxiety of the moment had left his mind crackling with random thoughts. He'd decided to take a risk that no one knew about, and that secret had been eating away at his stomach.

It was time to start the meeting. Dylan began with a review of the ingress and egress plan. A limestone lid the size of a double-wide doorway had sealed the entrance for millennia. This lid, which the team had previously painstakingly lifted nine inches then reclosed, would be fully opened. The lid was three feet thick, lay flat on the ground like a megalithic gravesite ledger, and was covered with inscriptions. Its estimated weight was eleven tons. It was a mystery how the ancients opened and closed the lid to enter the site for their rituals.

As an authority in ancient languages, Dylan spoke to his team about the lid with almost religious reverence. He had been a child prodigy with languages and was now fluent in hundreds of them, including more dead languages than possibly anyone alive. The lid was inscribed with a mix of languages rendered in mysterious glyphs as well as recognizable Maya glyphs. Unlike Mesoamerica, no written language had ever been discovered in pre-Columbian South America. This ancient lid changed everything.

Decades ago, a small two-foot diameter Mayan sun disk made of stone had been unearthed in Mexico by a construction company. The badly damaged disk was an indecipherable mystery that had fascinated only academics. It 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 ending the mystery.

Instead, years later, he had allegedly deciphered an even greater mystery that led him to the mountains of Peru. No one had believed the legend

about child sacrifice and rebirth that he'd partially gleaned from the sun disk had been about a real place, no one that is except Dylan. The "*Legend of the Doors and Gates and Paths*" had been real, and this lid, this colossal tablet, proved that and so much more. It proved the Mayan empire had extended far beyond what anyone had imagined all the way to Peru, and along the way, its culture had inexplicably morphed into a mixing pot of written tongues and religious practices.

The lid, with its remarkable mishmash of different passages inscribed in different languages, held its secrets well. Translation of the only known language, Maya glyphs, produced gibberish, almost as if it were encrypted. All that Dylan was able to glean was that this was in fact the entrance to a temple and initiation chamber named Twin-Moon-Gate, the supposedly imaginary Mayan-Andean shrine he had single-handedly sought for so long.

After the meeting had been proceeding smoothly for some time, Dylan decided the moment had come to disclose the part of his plan that he had been keeping secret. It was a betrayal of sorts, something he'd decided the moment he'd first set eyes on that partially unearthed limestone lid. He felt his throat dry up as he prepared to speak.

"I'm going in alone," he announced.

He glanced from face to face. The expressions ranged from surprise to disappointment to alarm.

"There aren't enough of us to safely do it any other way," he hastily continued. "We don't know what to expect. If something goes wrong like a structural collapse, I'll need all of you topside to handle a rescue, and I cannot in good conscience put any of you at risk."

All of his talk of risk was a smokescreen. Dylan believed any danger was negligible. As he spoke, he chose his words carefully to conceal his true motives. Was it simply his desire to see the temple alone and unsoiled, a right he had earned, or did he have other reasons that he denied even from himself? Jenny squeezed his shoulders as if intentionally trying to hurt him. Dylan winced.

"Sorry," she murmured.

She did not sound sorry as her hands withdrew from him. Dylan regretted scaring her needlessly. No one knew exactly what was waiting beneath that limestone lid, but he had realistic ideas and scientific deduc-

tions based on his prior research and the data they'd collected. A fiber-optic probe inserted through the partially open lid had revealed a long central passageway to the extent the probe could see, which was not a long way.

They had then dropped a small video quadcopter drone into the passageway. The drone had stirred up a lot of soot-like dust as it flew. The remote controlled exploration had been cut short by equipment failure. Radio waves propagated poorly in stone tunnels, but in a straight line, at approximately three hundred feet, where the failure occurred, those laws of physics had not been the cause. After twenty-eight minutes, the drone had suddenly malfunctioned with a complete loss of video. Since it had not automatically returned, the consensus was that it had crashed. It was their only drone.

As a result of the remote scouting expedition, they knew the walls and floor were constructed from various naturally shaped stone blocks while the ceiling was stone slabs. All of it apparently fitted without mortar. There was an unusually large number of side passageways, suggesting the ruin could have been used for some kind of initiation ritual that involved stages. The workmanship rivaled the best ancient structures of South America and it was in an exceptionally well-preserved state.

The copious amount of fine black dust would necessitate respirators, so bad air was a minor risk. Injury from collapse was also an ever-present, though remote risk. Deathtraps, on the other hand, were nothing but Hollywood tropes. There were always dark rumors of poisons, pit traps, and pools of liquid mercury, but it was all nonsense.

"I'll leave a breadcrumb trail of radio relays so we can remain in voice contact," said Dylan. "If I get in trouble, you will all know it as soon as it happens."

Dylan was pleased by how rational his plans and half-truths sounded. He'd expected to feel relieved after finally making this announcement, but instead, he felt more anxious. He glanced down at his hands. They were moist from perspiration and seemed all too human, frail, and vulnerable. He was grateful no one else appeared to notice that his nerves were cracking. He'd never done anything like this before.

Soon the briefing was nearing its end, and Dylan was going over the last items in his list. If he experienced any trouble, he wanted Carlos to take

command. Dylan implicitly trusted him, and if the impossible happened, no matter how bad it might be, he knew Carlos would never give up trying to rescue him. From the way the old man was fidgeting and the uncharacteristic scowl on his face, Dylan knew what was coming. He'd been watching Carlos struggle to hold back his obvious displeasure for some time now. Finally, it came in an outburst.

"Dylan, this is not what we agreed," said Carlos in heavily accented English. "This is unprofessional and reckless. It is much safer if we go in as a team and much better science."

The old man's face was stormy with defiance. Dylan had anticipated this argument since he'd formulated his plan. He'd long ago decided his best course of action was to not engage. In earlier discussions, Dylan had said that he, Carlos, and one other person would go in as a team, but he'd never planned on keeping that promise. A calloused fist thumped down onto the table, rattling it like rusty old bones.

"You're not acting like a proper scientist!" complained Carlos. "You stubborn bastard. I can see your mind is made up."

"It is, and I'm in charge," said Dylan.

"You are a fool," said Carlos.

Dylan just stared and didn't say another word. There was no need. He knew his stony defiant look said it all. After a silence that seemed endless, Carlos signaled resignation with a characteristic unhappy nod then got up to leave. The man suddenly appeared far older than Dylan had ever noticed.



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

Dylan attached a tiny wireless GoPro video camera to his Petzl caving

helmet, then set the rig down to check his coms gear. The batteries were weak. He felt angry and almost lashed out but held in the storm as he gazed at Karen and her camera with a smile. It was no one's fault but his own that the gear had not been fully checked.

After replacing all batteries and stowing spares in his pack, Dylan walked away from Karen's camera and the team. He needed to be alone with his thoughts. He roved along the jagged cliff line for minutes that felt like hours. The stiff coverall material rubbed and chafed against itself as he moved. He came to a ridge and gazed into the valley a mile and a half below. Though gusts howled up the cliff wall, a natural windbreak left the immediate area calmer.

He seated himself and glanced about to be sure no one was in sight. A short distance in front of him, the world fell away in a precipitous drop. He reached into one of the two cargo pockets in the legs of the coveralls for a pack of cigarettes and waterproof box of matches. It was a bad habit. He'd almost quit again but now was not the time. Lighting up, he inhaled deeply, feeling the welcomed smoke curl down into his lungs. It filled his chest and then his head with a mild tranquility.

Halfway through the smoke, he began to relax. His mind, as it often did at life-changing moments, drifted back to his childhood and his bottomless anger at a father he'd never known. What was the point? His mother had repeatedly told him what an attractive man his father had been as if that were an excuse for his deserting them. There were no photos, cards, or anything to prove the man had ever existed. It was like a matching bookend to the void of any biological roots on his mother's side of Dylan's stunted family tree. She had been orphaned at birth and knew nothing about her biological parents.

It was not until his sixteenth birthday that Dylan had learned the whole sordid truth. His mother had been only eighteen, while his father was thirty-two. He had been her first lover, tall, dark, wealthy. The affair had been so romantic, mysterious, and doomed.

Dylan remembered the raw hatred he'd felt when he'd learned his father had left his mother sitting in a restaurant with an expensive engagement ring and two months pregnant. That was the last she had seen of the bastard. She had grown to despise him and changed her name to Smith to

make sure he never found her or his child. Smith was a name that disappeared among millions. Dylan's *true* last name from his mother was Green, though that was not a real name either. Just something someone had made up for a birth certificate. He wondered bitterly if other orphans had been named Red or Blue.

Dylan ground out his cigarette on a rock. Wind swept the burning embers off into the incomprehensible chasm before him. He wondered if his father was still alive. He wondered if the man would read about a great archeological discovery in Peru and never know this was his son's accomplishment.

A short time later, Dylan was back at the archeological site and ready. He 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. He then picked up a canvas shoulder bag that contained radio relays designed specifically for caving. Each one was equipped with a large battery that could last for days.

Carlos came up and embraced him in a rough bear hug. It seemed like their disagreement was over for now. "Best of luck, my friend," he said. "You have earned it. This discovery belongs to you."

Dylan found Jenny sitting alone by their tent. She rose and threw her arms around him and held on with such fierce passion. He tried to stop hugging, but Jenny wouldn't let go. When he finally had to pry her away, he saw real fear in her eyes. Such a strong reaction was so unlike her that he suddenly felt unnerved. Was this some kind of intuition? He didn't believe in intuition. The ruins were old, but they had remained intact for thousands of years. Entering a site always entailed some risks, but it was more dangerous to get on a plane or cross a street. He gazed back into her eyes with an assurance he did not really feel.

"Don't worry," he said. "Nothing's going to happen to me. I'll be careful. I promise."

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

. . .

One side of the limestone lid was slowly raised like a hatch using a complex arrangement of cable winches, a wooden frame, and scaffolding. The attachment of cables to the lid had been a complicated painstaking process. The revealed opening in the ground was a perfect rectangle cut into the roof of the passage that ran beneath it. The underground hallway was twelve feet high by eight wide and ran precisely west to east toward the side of the mountain.

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

Dylan inserted a pair of earbuds then switched on the cellphone-sized coms package that was attached to his utility belt. A bleep indicated the gear was working. The earbuds blended amplified ambient sound with the coms feed. He adjusted the ambient volume until things sounded normal. Next, he fitted a Bluetooth tactical throat microphone around his neck. The mic pressing against his larynx was mildly uncomfortable, but there was nothing to be done about it. He seated a pair of clear tactical goggles over his eyes. His prized Petzl caving helmet fit like a glove. The helmet was scarred from long years of use and had saved him more than once. He clicked on the helmet-mounted headlamp and GoPro video camera, checking both for operation.

He glanced over at Jenny and smiled. She smiled awkwardly back at him as he cinched up a half-face respirator that fit snugly over his nose and mouth. He performed a communications test, keying the coms button and speaking into the throat microphone. The other end of the coms 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 coms 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. Without hesitating a moment, he unceremoniously stepped down over the ledge onto a rope ladder that extended

twelve feet to the floor. Pausing on the last rung, he probed the passageway's footing with a walking stick before putting his weight onto the ground. The end of the stick repeatedly struck stone that felt like a sidewalk.

The first thing he noticed after orienting himself was that the stonework of the passageway resembled that of a medieval citadel. After clearing the soot-colored dust from a section of wall, he noted the light gray stonework had an unusual coarseness that was similar to concrete. The origin of the soot-colored dust that coated everything was a minor mystery all its own. When disturbed, it floated off into the air like poisonous black smoke. It was technically not soot but just as fine and dark as real soot, which was coal dust caused by a fire. Chemical analysis had shown this carbon-based "soot" was not the result of burning anything.

Dylan advanced carefully, constantly checking above for anything loose and probing the floor ahead of him with the walking stick. The layer of black dust could easily hide unstable footing or something more dangerous.

He soon reached the first intersection. It was a side passageway that ran off to the left. As he 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.

With each step, he felt he was moving deeper into the past. His headlamp was swallowed by an oil-thick night that loomed before him. He sensed from the lack of sound that the hallway was impossibly deep. Noises from his walking stick tapping the ground were muffled. Odder still, there was not a single echo from any sound he made. The air through the respirator was so 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 but again stayed the course.

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

A short distance past the drone, the main corridor turned ninety degrees to the right. Dylan set up and tested the first of his radio relays. The coms

package used radio frequencies that were optimized for caves, but the waves were still significantly absorbed by thick stone construction and soil instead of reflected or scattered. So, without relays, turns like this one would eventually sap far too much signal strength.

Before continuing, Dylan gazed back toward the entrance. Nothing but darkness appeared beyond his headlamp. He extinguished it and black emptiness folded in around him. For a moment he saw nothing, then slowly, like a moon emerging on a cloudy night, something grew brighter. Soon a tiny square of light from the entrance was floating like a portal in the depths of empty black space.

Turning away from the doorway home, he gazed down the passageway leading to the right. It was a world of smooth blackness that possessed a texture, a thickness he could almost touch and breathe. His skin began to crawl. Without his eyes to guide him, he felt exposed and vulnerable. He was unable to dismiss a growing sense that something was stalking toward him. He fumbled with the headlamp. A beam of light washed out like a laser, slashing apart his fears. He felt childish yet satisfied with his technological power over the spirits of this nocturnal realm. He began walking again while carefully probing the ground ahead of him and glancing back at his footsteps left in the virgin dust.

After a short time, the passage came to an end at a descending flight of stairs. He set up another relay, reported his findings, and continued. As he descended, he experienced an odd sensation of being drawn downward as if gravity were increasing. The ceiling was no longer made from slabs but raw stone. This stairwell had been excavated out of the mountain itself. How many generations might it have taken just to create those hallways and these stairs? This complex was beginning to feel like an engineering feat equal to the pyramids in Mesoamerica and Egypt.

The stairway unexpectedly switched back on a landing that connected to a second flight of stairs that led ever deeper into the mountain. This stairwell was starting to seem all wrong. It felt both too modern and too ancient even for his radical theories about the development of prehistoric civilization. The overly ancient aspects of it were something he could accept and find explanations for, but the seemingly modern aspects were troubling. He set up one more relay, reported nothing, and continued down.

Just as he was growing worried the stairs would go on forever and he would run out of relays, he abruptly reached the bottom of the stairwell. He had misgivings as his boots sank into the remarkably deeper river of soot that filled this new lower level. He set up his second to the last relay at the bottom of the stairwell. Once satisfied the relay was working, he shuffled on, stirring up billowing clouds of black smoke in his wake. He wondered about the source of so much ultrafine carbon dust. Had these ruins been cut through veins of coal? The entire place felt like it was far older than any logic or theory dictated, which began to awaken childhood fears of things that went bump in the night.

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

Walking deeper beneath the mountain, he was soon fighting to deny growing irrational fears that stemmed from being so far underground. His fingers were wrapped tight around the coms button. It was security, a beacon to the world above. Mindlessly his thumb keyed the switch. A soft bleep that indicated the coms was transmitting startled him.

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

Here in this manmade abyss, the immense weight of rock and dirt piled high above his head was a tangible presence, a claustrophobic monster pressing down upon his body and mind. He was in an unnatural state of isolation and risk. Millions of years of evolution had honed human instincts for survival. Being buried alive was a grievous violation of that hard-wired cellular imperative.

He soon felt an electrical current driven by those millions of years of

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

He wanted nothing more than to turn around but instead held firm by anchoring himself with logic as he fought to quench the brewing panic attack. It was embarrassing that someone as formidable as him was prone to something so irrational. A long time ago, a therapist had come up with a plausible theory for the cause of his panic attacks, but knowing had never helped.

Dylan had come to a dead stop and was spellbound. The panic from moments ago was gone as his eyes drank in what was before him. The enigma had come into view after a ninety-degree turn. The hallway ended at a gateway set into a wall that looked like it was a single block of smooth stone. The gateway opening itself was the size of a small door. Its threshold was raised about a foot up from the floor. An unrecognizable symbol was engraved above it. The symbol looked like a single script letter from a completely unknown language.

Unlike the rest of the temple, the gateway wall was largely free of soot. He ran his finger across it. What little soot was there just fell away as if the wall was Teflon coated. He then noticed the odd way light from his headlamp was absorbed by the wall where the soot had fallen from it. As he brushed away more soot, a chill worked its way through him. The gateway was not made 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. He decided they were too perfect to be blocks and had to be tiles. They were blacker than black, blacker than even the soot. The wall seemed to swallow light from his headlamp. The effect was disturbing. It was difficult to spot where one block ended and the next began.

“This is amazing,” reported Dylan over the coms. “I wish you could see

this. The stonework is unlike anything previously found anywhere. It's so precise it looks manufactured, and it's painted or glazed with some kind of black pigment that absorbs light more effectively than the soot."

Something like this was not exactly unexpected by Dylan, but it still felt surreal to have at last discovered a clue that supported his radical timeline theory. He had told no one about that theory. Some of his other published theories were already fringe enough.

The interior of the gateway opening absorbed light so effectively that when he reached inside the three-dimensional blackness, it was as if his arm was swallowed by it. The genius behind the effect was unsettling. Dylan ran his fingers along the inside surface and found it too was largely free of dust. Along the bottom of the gateway was a shallow dusting of pitch-black soot. Even the dirt in this place absorbed light.

The gateway was sealed a few feet in by a metal cover plate that had been masterfully fitted into the stonework. The metal looked like dull gold. Since there was no tarnish, it could not have been copper or arsenic bronze, which along with silver and platinum, were the only materials known to have been used in South American metallurgy. The cover plate had two handgrips, one on each side. Dylan just stood and stared for a long time before more closely examining the cover plate and then reporting in.

"Solid gold?" asked Carlos for the second time.

"I've tapped on it with my knuckles," said Dylan. "It sounds solid, but no way to be sure. It could be wood sheathed in gold. The cover plate is fitted into a gold frame so perfectly that there are no gaps."

"Have you tried opening it?"

"Not yet."

"Good, don't try anything," said Carlos. "After you come back, we'll go over all the video and then come up with a new plan."

Dylan had no intention of doing that. Except for the soot, it looked like the cover plate had been set in place yesterday, which was remarkable for many reasons. He took off one of his boots and positioned it as a pad on the floor beneath the cover plate. He pulled on the handles, and it slid out as if on lubricated bearings. Grunting from the strain, he painstakingly inched the cover plate out of the gateway using his shoe as a moving pad to prevent

any damage to the floor. He set the cover plate down just outside of the opening.

“Remarkable,” said Dylan.

“What?” asked Carlos.

“The cover plate is an inch thick but can’t weigh more than a couple hundred pounds. It doesn’t sound hollow but must be.”

“You opened the gateway,” accused Carlos.

“I’m going inside.”

The passage on the other side of the gateway was lined floor, ceiling, and walls with the same black light absorbing tiles. There was also far less soot. If the source of the soot was the depths of this ruin, it should have been getting thicker. A dozen feet in, he hit another ninety-degree turn. He had run out of relays. Carlos was arguing with him to stop and return, but the thrill of the unknown had Dylan firmly hooked. He was now more convinced than ever that the ceremonial chamber was at hand. He could almost hear destiny whispering to him.

“I’m going to see what’s up ahead,” said Dylan

“You have an obligation to record the site before altering anything,” said Carlos.

“I’m doing just that,” said Dylan.

“No, you are not. When you opened that gateway, who knows what could have been disturbed.”

“Nothing was disturbed,” argued Dylan.

The earbuds fell silent as he switched off the power for his coms. He felt like a different man in an alternate reality as conflicts between guilt and excitement warred inside him. The effect of the light absorbing pigment was disorienting. It was difficult to judge what was only a short distance ahead of him. It was like walking in a nonmaterial void.

He did not realize until he was standing in it that he had reached the end of the passageway. He suddenly found himself a few steps inside a huge chamber. It felt like he had reached the end of the world. The same light-absorbing tiles found in the passageways covered the chamber’s walls. The same sound deadening effect as the passageways made everything seem far larger as if he was standing outside on an empty plane.

All his senses struggled to gauge the scale of it. Something embedded in

the walls and ceiling glistened like tiny stars when his headlamp reflected off them. He was awestruck. The chamber was spherical, and the ceiling was a dome. A sacrificial altar sat in the center of the floor. Large rectangular blocks that looked like pedestals or hassocks were arranged in a circle around the perimeter of the room. He had done it! He had reached the Twin-Moon-Gate ceremonial chamber.

He powered on the coms and started talking as if he'd been speaking to them all along and had no idea the radio had *stopped* working.

"...about fifty yards from the gateway the passage ends at the ceremonial chamber. It's magnificent, hard to describe. We did it!"

Dylan released the coms button. There was no reception. He looked at the coms device clipped to his utility belt and saw the red light, which meant he was out of range.

"Damn it," he muttered.

Keeping an eye on the indicator light, he started to backtrack. As soon as he stepped outside of the chamber, the light went green. What were the odds? He stepped back into the chamber, and it turned red. It looked like he was just at the limits of the coms, but that made little sense. The loss of reception should be more gradual. There was something strange about this chamber that scrambled the radio waves.

Just outside in the hallway, he pressed the coms button.

"Can you hear me?"

"Are you okay?" came an immediate reply from Carlos.

"I'm fine. The radio reception in here is a little weird."

"One more reason to return immediately," said Carlos.

"I found the ceremonial chamber."

"What! That's wonderful. This proves you were right and..."

Dylan stopped listening. It felt like the ground was moving in a gentle rocking motion as if he was standing in a rowboat in a placid lake. In a second, the sensation was gone, and with its passing came absolute stillness. Dylan realized what it was as he started running for the stairwell. Living in California for so long made recognition of the sensation almost instinctive. It was an earth tremor, and what might follow could be far worse.

The earthquake struck, and it was vicious. Dylan was knocked from his feet into a wall and then the floor. The brutal thrashing seemed to go on

forever as if he was in a mad runaway freight train. He began yelling at the earthquake to stop. A primal anger raged inside him.

As if God were listening, the thrashing suddenly stopped. Bruised, he got up and started running again. He reached the stairwell out of breath. It had caved in and was filled with rubble. He was trapped. Terrifyingly morbid images flooded his mind.

“Shit!” he muttered. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

He checked his coms and saw the red light. The relays were probably trashed. Taking painful breaths, he started shifting some of the rubble. He was soon sweating and had not made a dent in the wreckage. He stopped.

“Goddamn it!” he yelled.

Instead of bringing mindless panic, the pressure of the moment sharpened his thinking. His mind became a razor dissecting the crisis into logical pieces. He’d probably die inside this damn mountain, but it would have to take him, and he would not go easily.

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

Turning, he stared at the gateway and what lay beyond. It was his ambition that had led him into this trap. How many times had Carlos asked him to turn around? He looked again at the red coms light. He keyed the transmit button, knowing it was likely futile.

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

He paused, feeling that the light absorbing gateway now led to an even deeper more permanent darkness. He did not really expect to find another way out. Why had he voiced that false hope into a seemingly dead radio? The message was for Jenny. His finger was still on the coms button.

“Jenny, I know I’ve been difficult—”

His voice failed him. He released the coms button. 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 curse him. He suddenly felt like all of this was a test by some vengeful god... And exactly what god would that be, he thought.

He stripped off the tactical throat microphone and earbuds and stuffed them into his backpack, then switched the coms to its built-in speaker. With cold resolve, he went back through the gateway, feeling like he was walking to his own end.



Dylan glanced about the chamber as vails of black dust stirred up by his passage slowly settled. Though the floor was covered with the fine black soot, the air was clear. He removed his respirator and goggles. His dried lips were cracked. He was oddly elated. He'd succeeded. He'd finally discovered an undisturbed ceremonial site of amazing significance, though the world might never know of his achievement.

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

The subject matter of the mural was a single wrap-around image of the same Andes Mountains that encircled this chamber in the outside world. The black dome was covered with the small sparkling pockmarks. Following a hunch, Dylan removed his Petzl helmet, aimed the headlamp up, and widened the beam so that it dimly illuminated much of the dome. The lower half of the room fell into darkness as the vista of a star-filled night sky greeted him. Amazingly, 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 many stars and planets by both position and color. The

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

As Dylan continued to stare, he felt as if he were gazing into the depths of real space. The moons appeared to be rendered almost stereoscopically. His eyes were sore. Closing them, he felt the ghosts of priests carrying out the old rituals here. Child sacrifice, the end of precious life, the emotions, it must have been unimaginably grotesque and yet also religiously inspiring for the superstitious people of that time.

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

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

The full-adult-length sacrificial altar was made from the same polished stone as the hassocks. Though the altar was far more ornate, decorated with inlaid gold of various hues, from silvery-white to coppery-pink. The bed was unusually low for an altar, supported only a couple of feet above the floor on a single gold inlaid pedestal that was at least two feet in diameter. There were seven large two-and-half-inch diameter holes bored through the altar forming a partial three-foot-wide circle around the area where a victim's head would rest. The odd holes were steeply angled inward, pointing toward the victim's head, and seemed like they might be used to guide short lances or some other gruesome means of execution. Next to each hole was a half-inch wide dimple. The purpose of the dimples was even less clear than the holes.

In addition to the polished stone furnishings, around the perimeter of the chamber were seven equidistantly spaced mounds of material that marked spots where some kind of artifact had once stood. Each mound looked similar and contained decayed wood fibers, gold leaf, a twelve-inch diameter quartz bowl, and more.

Dylan crouched to closely examine one of the seven mounds. The clear quartz bowl was a remarkable piece of art. The perfectly formed half-sphere had a beautiful finely etched pattern that refracted light in a similar way as a Fresnel lens. Mixed in with the decayed wood, he found hundreds of pea-sized quartz pellets. The unusual combination of materials made it impossible to even guess at the original object's appearance or function.

Dylan set his Petzl helmet and headlamp down on the altar at the center of the room and once again widened the beam so that it faintly illuminated the entire dome. He then retreated back to sit on one of the stone hassocks. He was captivated by the engineering and artistry incorporated into this place frozen in time but even more so by the deepening mystery in the sky. It was hard to take his eyes off those moons. Both were rendered in slightly reflective pigments, which he suspected included rough ground quartz. The result was a near-perfect re-creation of the shimmer, texture, and three-dimensional shape of actual celestial objects. Why was the smaller anemic moon so disturbing? It seemed even more alien than at first, almost angry, but something about it pulled at him with feelings akin to *déjà vu*. It haunted him like an old memory of a dream from some long-forgotten time. It made his flesh crawl.

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

He searched the chamber for hidden seams, sliding his fingers along the glasslike walls while peering closely using his headlamp. He checked every inch and found nothing. Puzzled, he slumped to the floor, stirring up some of the sooty dust. In the beam of his headlamp, he saw the fine black smoke

circulating off in a lazy swirl of air that hung near the floor. He followed the smoky current back to an exit point at the base of the wall. Kneeling, he peered closely at a slit-like opening between the junction of floor and wall. The opening was maybe a quarter of an inch high and over a foot in length. Searching along the baseboard, he found another slit, then another and another. The entire wall was ringed with vents pulling air out of the chamber. He looked up at the dome and realized cool air had to be flowing from the ceiling through openings too small to see.

Dylan scientifically pondered the implications. The flow was clearly caused by something non-mechanical and ingenious; natural convection currents would not be enough, and where was the air supply coming from this deep within a mountain? Logically, part of the solution was that an entire system of ducts had to service this chamber. In addition to the blocked passageway he'd come through, there had to be at least one inlet and one outlet duct for the air. He got out his iPad, snapped a few photos, and added some notes. It was his scientific duty to document his find for whoever came next. He tossed a small handful of soot and watched it float in the air like the veils of a dancer, but the previous euphoria was missing. His stomach grumbled, and with that sensation, reality came back like a steel door slammed in his face.

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

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

His eyes fell on his trail of footprints that crisscrossed the chamber. As if on a lunar surface, those tracks recorded 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 watery prints flashed in his eyes as his light slid across it. Investigating the glint, he brushed away some of the soot with the toe of his boot. Part of a gold inlaid floor was revealed.

Like a skydiver's thrill from free-fall, the discovery brought a rush of adrenaline. Soon on all fours, Dylan was brushing away the fine powder, using the side of his arm as a plow. More and more inlaid gold was exposed as the soot rose into a thickening black storm. He was soon coughing and had to put his respirator and goggles back on. With his arm shoveling in large arcs, he laboriously shifted much of the soot to one side of the chamber.

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

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

the human eye irresistibly toward the heart of the sun. The core was a solid 41.2 inch diameter disk composed of dazzling gold like nothing he'd seen before.

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

Dylan had determined the sun disk was exactly nine cubits in diameter. The width of each ring was exactly a half cubit. The altar's pedestal was mounted in the center of the two-cubit wide central disk. On the right side of the pedestal was what looked like a half-cubit (10.3 inch) diameter recessed round cover plate. The plate was fashioned from the same shade of gold as the surrounding material. The half-cubit plate had recessed hand-sized grips and appeared as if it could be opened like a tiny manhole cover. Dylan jammed his fingers into the grips and pulled hard, 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. Something moved and released with a clunk. The cover plate rotated a quarter-turn clockwise and came off. The slab was three inches thick, or rather, four fingers thick, solid gold, and had to weigh over a hundred pounds. An almost foot-long cylinder fashioned from what looked like rock quartz and gold was attached to the bottom of it. Dylan grunted while hefting the assembly. Careful not to crush his fingers or damage anything, he rested the gold cover plate face down on an unadorned area of the stone floor. The cylinder, which was facing up, measured a half cubit in diameter and length.

Feverishly jotting down notes in his iPad, Dylan was in his element examining the artifact. An electronic pocket gem tester pen quickly verified the cylinder was quartz and not glass or diamond, not that there had been any real doubt. The gold cover plate had been secured into its floor-receptacle with a quarter-turn fastener arrangement. The simple fastener mecha-

nism was like nothing ever found in ancient America, making it a highly significant discovery.

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

Dylan was a natural-born scientist, objectivity was baked into his genes, but he couldn't help feeling like a child with a new toy as he held the perfectly honed cylinder of polished rock quartz with its smooth gold endcaps and unnatural heft that reminded him of lead. Inscribed around the cylinder's curved surface were circular bands of text written in some mysterious ancient lexicon.

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

The enigmatic inscriptions did not match any of the mishmash of ancient languages he'd found on the limestone lid. Dylan puzzled over this new written language. The language was not glyphs but letters that clearly formed an alphabet. This was unheard of in the ancient Americas, and as a result, especially tantalizing to a linguistic prodigy like himself. Some of the lettering did bear a remarkable similarity to Phoenician and Proto-Sinaitic scripts but was clearly not either language. As its discoverer, he decided to name it Andean-Script.

In the spaces between letters, he could see what looked like a gold cylinder embedded inside the translucent quartz cylinder like a piston inside a sleeve. Peering through the quartz, it appeared as if the gold cylinder and both endcaps were somehow attached together. This suggested that the entire relic could come apart and that the inner gold cylinder might even be hollow. Dylan had a strong hunch the relic was not just hollow, but a container, and had secrets yet to be revealed.

Unable to glean anything of value from the inscriptions, Dylan decided to focus on trying to open 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.

He entered more notes into his iPad, including rudimentary sketches drawn on top of photos. As he completed his notes, he thought about the GoPro video camera attached to his helmet and that he should record his attempt to open the cylinder. The camera was wirelessly remote-controlled by an app on his iPad. He checked the camera and found it had exhausted its memory. He thought he'd turned it off hours ago but apparently had not. The GoPro app did not have a video download function to save recordings onto the iPad, and without an internet connection, he could not save it to any cloud. There was no way he was going to delete the single existing large file that contained the record of his initial discovery, so he and the camera were out of luck.

Some small part of him knew it was unscientific to tamper with any artifact like the cylinder, but he was wired with excitement and couldn't have stopped himself even if he'd wanted. He had no intention of waiting for better tools. He might be trapped in this hole for the next thousand years. All of this could be the first and last significant discovery of his life.

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

Using the loupe and probe, he tediously worked his way around both endcaps. A drop of sweat traced a random path from his hairline down across his forehead. He froze, realizing something that was in plain sight. He previously noted ruler-like hash marks along the edges of both endcaps. The hash marks were of various lengths and randomly arranged, or so it had appeared. The random arrangement of hash marks looked to be the same on both endcaps, but they were not aligned.

Could it be that simple? Dylan had not tried to grip both endcaps and twist. Earlier, when trying each endcap, he had gripped the quartz part of the cylinder and one endcap or the other, which was the natural thing to do. Could the hash marks be instructions? He gripped both endcaps and tried to twist them in opposite directions into alignment. The caps moved freely,

and the whole thing came apart. The gold cylinder and one endcap remained a single piece, with the quartz sleeve sliding free of it.

The gold inner cylinder was hollow, and the cavity was not empty. Its walls were about two inches thick and smooth as if bored in a machine shop. Affixed to the free endcap was a cylindrical gold piston that fit smoothly into the cylinder. The top of the piston had a perfectly spherical cup-shaped impression that was a little over an inch in diameter. Inside the cavity, resting in an opposite cup-shaped impression, was an odd-looking spherical artifact that was about an inch in diameter. The cylinder had been designed to hold the artifact solidly in place like an egg inside two opposing cup-shaped impressions.

The artifact was constructed from a pair of quarter-inch wide gold bands that were the size and shape of large wedding rings. The bands were interlocked together at right angles to form a partial ball-shaped housing or cage. Mounted snugly inside the housing was a clear glasslike sphere the size of a one-inch marble.

Dylan jotted down every initial observation imaginable on his iPad before he dared to even think about disturbing anything inside the cavity. He took dozens of close-up photos with his iPad and scribbled notes all over them.

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 reach inside the cylinder.

Almost holding his breath, he gingerly reached inside the cavity with forceps and gripped the artifact. As he'd suspected, it was not attached to the opposing cup but simply resting in it.

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

It was so odd how the artifact resembled a precision-machined toy gyroscope he'd been given on his tenth birthday. That toy had been modeled on gyroscopes used in inertial guidance systems for jets and missiles.

Dylan closed his eyes for a moment to think. What the hell was this thing? It felt so technological. Slowly, he opened his eyes. He was deter-

mined to focus solely on the science and ignore all the peculiar illogical feelings bubbling up inside him. Scientific truth was, after all, a demanding master.

Cluttering the bottom of the cylinder's cavity was a small amount of what looked like crumbled mummified green textile. He suspected it had been padding for the artifact.

The crystalline orb, given its size, was likely quartz and not diamond, though there was something unmistakably gemlike about it. A peculiar metallic sphere the size of a pea was embedded in the exact center of the crystalline orb. The artifact again felt all wrong and almost technological. The cylinder and artifact were such remarkable works of craftsmanship that neither seemed handmade and instead felt more like modern versions or replicas of something ancient.

On closer inspection with his loupe, he saw the crisscrossed gold bands were inscribed with impossibly minuscule Andean-Script letters and hash marks. The tiny symbols and markings on the bands seemed to designate cardinal points and reminded him of a compass bezel. The inscriptions were not engraved. They were flush and smooth. It was as if they had been imprinted into the metal by injecting a different shade of gold.

The featureless stone smoothly rotated inside the crisscrossed gold bands like a miniature cartographer's globe of the Earth. Examining every aspect of it with his loupe, he confirmed it was a flawless orb of shimmering petrified ice. The pocket gem tester verified it was rock quartz, which begged the question, what was that mysterious pea-sized sphere of metal doing inside it.

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

"What are you?" he mumbled.

It was a religious talisman of great significance. That much was obvious, based on where he'd found it. What confused Dylan was that this cylinder and artifact 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.

This was the kind of archeological discovery that changed history. The hallway, the stairs, the chamber, the relics, they were not remotely like anything that had been unearthed in South America before. These were artifacts of a lost civilization that strongly hinted at a link between the new world and Egypt. He might just have uncovered what he’d half-thought and half-hoped in his wildest imagination that he would find.

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

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



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

“No,” he muttered. “No... No... No!”

He must have left the light on, and the batteries had drained. An irreplaceable resource had been squandered. 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 in front of him on the altar, he

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

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

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

His best scientific guess about the glow was that the metallic pit was a naturally occurring radioactive element that was exciting photoluminescent impurities in a few millimeters of the quartz immediately surrounding it. He was not a physicist or chemist. He'd done well in all the prerequisite hard science courses for his archeology degrees. It was generally 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 the 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 technology and scientific understanding that was completely unsettling.

As he stared at the seed of light trapped inside the orb, it pulled like a tide irresistibly at the depths of his consciousness. His hand cradling the orb slowly relaxed into his lap. Soon his mind was completely silenced, with not a stray thought venturing through. With his hands suffused in the blue wane light, he sat like a mystic surrounded by the vast emptiness of the lightless chamber.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As time passed, Dylan began to hear what might have been distant muffled voices. The sounds were accompanied by faint electrical crackles like radio static as if it were some kind of electronic communication. His five senses began to coalesce, and everything, including the voices, became clearer. To Dylan, this was no figment of his subconscious. For now, he fully unquestionably accepted he was somehow remotely perceiving reality through other people's senses. He had become a disembodied point of awareness inside someone else's head.

He recognized he was in the lowest level of the stairwell as he heard snatches of respirator garbled conversations. There was concern about aftershocks. They had about ten more feet of rubble to clear. The cave-in had apparently been far less serious than Dylan had thought and only blocked part of the bottom stairwell.

The space was cramped with workers. He saw the hands of who he was perceiving through. The hands were operating a ground-penetrating radar. He felt a complete painter's palette of emotions but no hint of what the person was thinking. He saw thick hairy forearms, and then a replica silver Rolex submariner came into view. Dylan instantly recognized the watch. It was Carlos who was operating the ground-penetrating radar! It was Carlos who he was perceiving things through.

It took a few minutes for Dylan to figure out what was going on in the stairwell. Carlos was using the radar to gauge how to safely dig out each subsequent foot of debris. As workers dug with shovels and prybars,

laborers behind them collected the loose rubble in buckets and then handed it off to a bucket brigade of workers that ferried it up the stairwell.

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

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

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

His skull mildly ached as he dumped the contents of his backpack onto the altar. Using the orb as a light, he pawed through his gear, found, and then installed a fresh set of batteries into his headlamp. White light speared the darkness around him once more. He closely examined the artifact with his magnifying loupe. Remarkably, he could not find the tiniest abrasion. This small improbability seemed to underscore all the even bigger improbabilities.

Dylan's gut instincts were clearly telling him those remote perceptions were real and that help would soon reach him. He felt certain what he'd

experienced were not hallucinations. Oddly, more than anything else, it was the mundane nature of the experiences that convinced him.

He glanced about at the chamber and its starry sky. Could the remote perceptions have been aided 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 and blasphemously scientific or technological. He looked at the crystal sitting amid the clutter from his backpack and thought the same was even more true for it.

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

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

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

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

Dylan paused at the exit from the chamber. He wondered if everything that had happened could have been a dream. Checking his backpack, he lingered at the sight of the quartz cylinder nestled in the padded section normally

reserved for his iPad. He reached inside a cargo pocket and felt the artifact beside his almost empty pack of cigarettes. No, it had not been a dream.

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

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

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

“I’m fine,” answered Dylan.

Carlos immediately pulled his head back out and bellowed up the stairwell.

“We found him. The lucky bastard’s okay!”

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

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

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

“Twin-Moon-Gate?” said Jenny.

“It was breathtaking.”

Dylan’s brain froze when he noticed Karen’s name written on the hardhat Jenny was wearing but then recovered quickly, possibly too quickly.

The remote perceptions had been accurate down to the smallest detail. Everyone 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 walked. Soon everyone was moving as fast as possible, stirring up clouds of soot that floated in the stale air as headlamps erratically spotlighted the walls, ceiling, and floor. No one spoke. Soon the rope ladder was in sight.

The sunlight hurt Dylan's eyes. Carlos was the last of the rescue team to emerged safely from the ruins. Everyone was sitting haphazardly in the dirt around the tunnel entrance. It was early 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. Part of him wanted nothing more than to immediately show everyone what he'd brought back, but another part of him wanted to wait until he could orchestrate a more dramatic moment. The latter part won out.



Dylan had rehydrated himself and washed up. He was now wearing jeans and his old bomber jacket. His backpack with the cylinder was slung over one shoulder. As he walked to the command center, he saw a small crowd had seated themselves on the folding chairs and other makeshift accommodations. Snacks and sandwiches had been passed around. He had not yet shown any video or revealed what he'd brought back. He hoped the excitement of seeing and handling the artifacts would blunt any criticism for his unprofessional riffling through the site.

Dylan was pummeled with questions before he could even sit down. He answered every question with patience and an overabundance of detail as he ate real food, gorging himself on sandwich after sandwich. Dylan, the scientist, was back and in control. No one was close to guessing that he had two artifacts in his possession, and that secret made everything taste better.

Soon, Dylan could not stand waiting any longer. He casually opened his backpack. Like an actor creating a dramatic scene, he took his time as he withdrew the cylinder. Gold and polished rock quartz glistened in the

sunlight. After a pregnant silence, questions flooded him from every direction. He handed the coffer to Jenny.

“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 finger along the inscriptions with lips mumbling in awe. Carlos’s face grew flushed, and then, like an over-filled water balloon, he burst into an explosion of words.

“There is no record of such a language!” he sputtered.

Dylan was almost embarrassed by his success as Carlos kept praising the find and repeatedly pointing out things to anyone who would listen. Dylan plugged his iPad and GoPro into a USB power source. The tablet was frozen and needed a reboot. Once he got everything working, including the wireless connection to the camera, he was ready. No one was paying any attention to him as he skipped the video forward to his discovery of the chamber and held it up for all to see.

“That cylinder is nothing compared to this!” announced Dylan.

The faces of his colleagues were glued to him as he began his rehearsed narration by discussing his discovery of the dome with its night sky, the altar, and more. Sometime later, the video abruptly ended with his brushing dust wildly off the solid gold sun disk as if he were a man possessed. With the final frame of video frozen on the screen, Dylan described his discovery of how the cylinder opened and then demonstrated on the real thing. Carlos took the now open cylinder from Dylan.

“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 and look at those cup shaped impressions. This is all very odd. Doesn’t it look like something is missing?”

Dylan felt the artifact in his jacket pocket pressing against him. It had gone from coveralls to jacket without a thought to the unprofessional behavior that entailed. He had planned to reveal the orb next, and now the time had come, but he found he simply could not do it. His full stomach felt empty, and his palms damp. There was a mild dizziness that reminded him

of what it had been like trapped alive inside that chamber. His hands were shaking. He wondered if he was suffering from PTSD.

Maybe it was better to wait just a little longer before revealing the artifact? Maybe even hold off until tomorrow? No, that was a lie. He suddenly realized with surprise that for quite some time, he'd had no intention of turning the artifact over to Carlos or anyone. At best, the Peruvian government would lock it away in a museum along with the cylinder. At worst, something this weirdly technological with its radioactive metallic pit would make the entire expedition suspect. There was also the huge question of his remote perceptions. Dylan knew he was the only one who could unlock that nagging mystery which he was certain was connected to the artifact and the ceremonial chamber.

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

He knew that for the sake of the expedition, for the sake of his reputation, and for the sake of scientifically explaining the orb and his remote perceptions, he would have to keep the artifact a secret for now. It was not like he was borrowing something worth millions of dollars. It was a couple of ounces of gold and a chunk of worthless rock quartz. When he completed his research, maybe he could find a way to secretly return the artifact to the site of Twin-Moon-Gate to be rediscovered?

He knew that if what he was about to do was ever exposed, it would ruin his career. A small part of him registered how illogical, reckless, and illegal carrying out this plan would be, but that part was quickly overruled by dreams of fame and recognition.



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

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

He thought of the ceremonial chamber and maze of tunnels and stairs somewhere deep inside the very mountain he stood upon. He thought of the chamber's eternal night sky that once a year might match the one now above him—except for its enigmatic second moon. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a small drawstring sack that cradled the artifact. The sack had previously held accessories for an expensive FLIR camera. He opened the sack carefully, almost expecting the artifact to have disappeared back into the mists from which it had been undoubtedly forged.

Inside the sack, bathed in moonlight, the crystalline sphere within its housing was so translucent that it seemed almost invisible and immaterial. Dylan cupped the sack to one eye, trying to make it dark enough to see the ultraviolet glow, but whatever the artifact emitted was too weak for his eyes to see in this moderate darkness.

Dylan took out the pocket radiation detector he'd borrowed from Carlos. The instrument beeped as he switched it on. Passing it over the stone, it showed nothing except normal background radiation levels. This was not at all 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 sack 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 was exhaustively tested, and that was exactly what he intended to do.

As the vice-chair of the Archeology department at Berkeley, he had access to the finest scientific facilities, including a photon-counting spectrometer that could register the infinitesimal light emitted by a single subatomic particle. Equipment like that could easily measure the glow of this artifact. His mind felt clouded with unstable thoughts and memories. The remote perceptions of his rescue had seemed so real, what else could it have been? He refused to believe he was losing his mind, but it worried him. There had to be an explanation. The world functioned on scientific principles. There was no such thing as magic, just things science had yet to explain.

He smoked a cigarette in the hopes of stimulating any last thoughts as well as to serve as an excuse for his absence. Soon he was trekking back to the tent, returning with less than he'd left 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. I can smell it."

"Go back to sleep."

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



Dylan awoke at noon. It was a sunny day, and he had made the discovery of a lifetime, except for one small spherical problem which he recovered from underneath his side of the air mattress. He suspected Jenny had been up for hours. He found her sitting on a large boulder near the opening to the ancient hallway. She was drawing the scene in one of her artist's sketchbooks. Jenny was one of those rare people who earned a living from their art. She would never be wealthy, but her watercolors sometimes sold for thousands of dollars.

The wind was mercilessly blowing at Jenny and her sketchbook. She had the pages battened down with spring-loaded metal clips. She was so intent

on her work that she was ignoring Dylan. He was content to just watch. Her eyes were a little clearer than usual, almost translucent. To Dylan, it seemed as though he could see her thoughts as little scenes floating in those crystalline doorways to her soul.

He walked around behind her to see what she was drawing. It was her idea of what this place would have looked like when it was under construction. She knew all his theories and fringe ideas. She had drawn men and women in somewhat Egyptian looking robes directing the construction.

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

“There’s no good evidence for that yet.”

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

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

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

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

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

The stolen artifact in Dylan’s coat pocket felt like it was made of lead. His jaw tightened. Guilt was burning a hole in his stomach more effectively than acid. He had a strong reaction that he wanted Carlos out of the ruins now. It was true he was worried about his friend, but also there was some other reason, some danger he felt but could not articulate. As he walked toward the command center to raise Carlos on the coms, he spotted figures in coveralls clambering up out of the entrance to the hallway. Carlos pulled off his respirator, goggles, and spelunking helmet.

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

Carlos replied with a sad voice, looking utterly defeated.

“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 big was breached by the earthquake. Maybe a subterranean river? I don’t know. Many large rivers come from mountains. It looks like she’s been filling with water all night. It’s a miracle the flooding had not started 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 strangely relieved that the chamber was unreachable. A lot of additional funding would now be needed to study what was hidden deep below their feet. To get the funding required a trip back to the states. With the tantalizing discovery of Twin-Moon-Gate, far larger grants should now be within easy reach.

“How bad is it, really?” asked Dylan.

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

“My friend, it is bad. The water and black mud are rising. The lowest level of the stairwell could be underwater by nightfall, and there is more debris from the aftershocks. There is no way to know how much of the stairwell could end up submerged. It could soon be too deep and hazardous for 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, everything 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.”



Less than a week later, Dylan and Jenny checked into a small suite at the Miraflores Park Hotel in Lima, Peru. Their flight back to the states was in a few days. Until then they wanted to pamper themselves, and this hotel was a perfect place to accomplish that goal. Tonight would be a celebration.

Jenny had been anxious to leave the mountain top camp, and Dylan had felt there was nothing holding him there a day longer and every reason to quickly return to Berkeley. The city of Lima had greeted them with the

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

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

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

Dylan was awoken rudely when something slapped him in the face. Sunlight from the windows was blinding. He was hungover, and his entire body ached. It was a magazine that had landed on him. 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. This didn't make sense then he saw the stolen artifact in her hand as she held it out toward him.

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

"It has tiny inscriptions on it like the cylinder," shouted Jenny. "They have a really nice lighted magnifying mirror in the bathroom that gave me a good close look. Are you going to fucking tell me this didn't come from the ruins?"

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

"Alright! Alright! Just stop," he said. "It's from the ruins."

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

"It's complicated."

Jenny stalked over to a window and stared at the view with her back to him. He didn't think she'd believe any explanation, especially one having to do with a mysterious glow and remote perceptions.

The silence was unbearable. In his hungover mind, he thought about the pivotal events that had brought him to this moment and was surprised by his clarity. If he was honest with himself, he had not fully considered all the risks he'd taken with the artifact, but he had to somehow make her understand he'd meant no harm. For no logical reason, his confidence began to grow when it should have been floundering. Cautiously, he approached Jenny as if trying to calm a wild tiger.

"I wanted to turn it over to Carlos," he said. "I really did, but the artifact has problems, and something happened when I was down in that ruin. Something that's hard to explain."

"Try me, and it better be good."

Dylan told her everything, the mysterious glow, his remote perceptions of being rescued, the problems with objects out of place, funding, and more. His words grew hesitant with genuine confusion over the fact that he found it hard to believe parts of his own story, a story he had not intended to tell. He gently retrieved the crystalline orb from her fingers and pointed out the archeological questions of authenticity it would face.

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

"So, you saw us coming to your rescue?" she said.

“Naturally, I have doubts,” said Dylan. “I’m not crazy. Sometimes, I’m not sure if it all really happened, but I believe it did. Please, sweetheart, you’ve got to understand the only way I’ll ever learn the truth and protect the integrity of Twin-Moon-Gate is by experimenting with this damn thing in a real lab. I’ll give it back when I’m through. I mean it. I didn’t take it to sell it. I took it to study it.”

He handed the orb back to her.

“Just look at how modern and brand new it looks,” he said. “Getting it through customs won’t be a problem. There’s no record of it anywhere. It looks nothing 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.”

The tears had stopped as Dylan moved hesitantly closer. He tentatively hugged her then felt her arms tighten.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “I know you’ll figure this out and make it right.”

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

“Thank you,” he said.