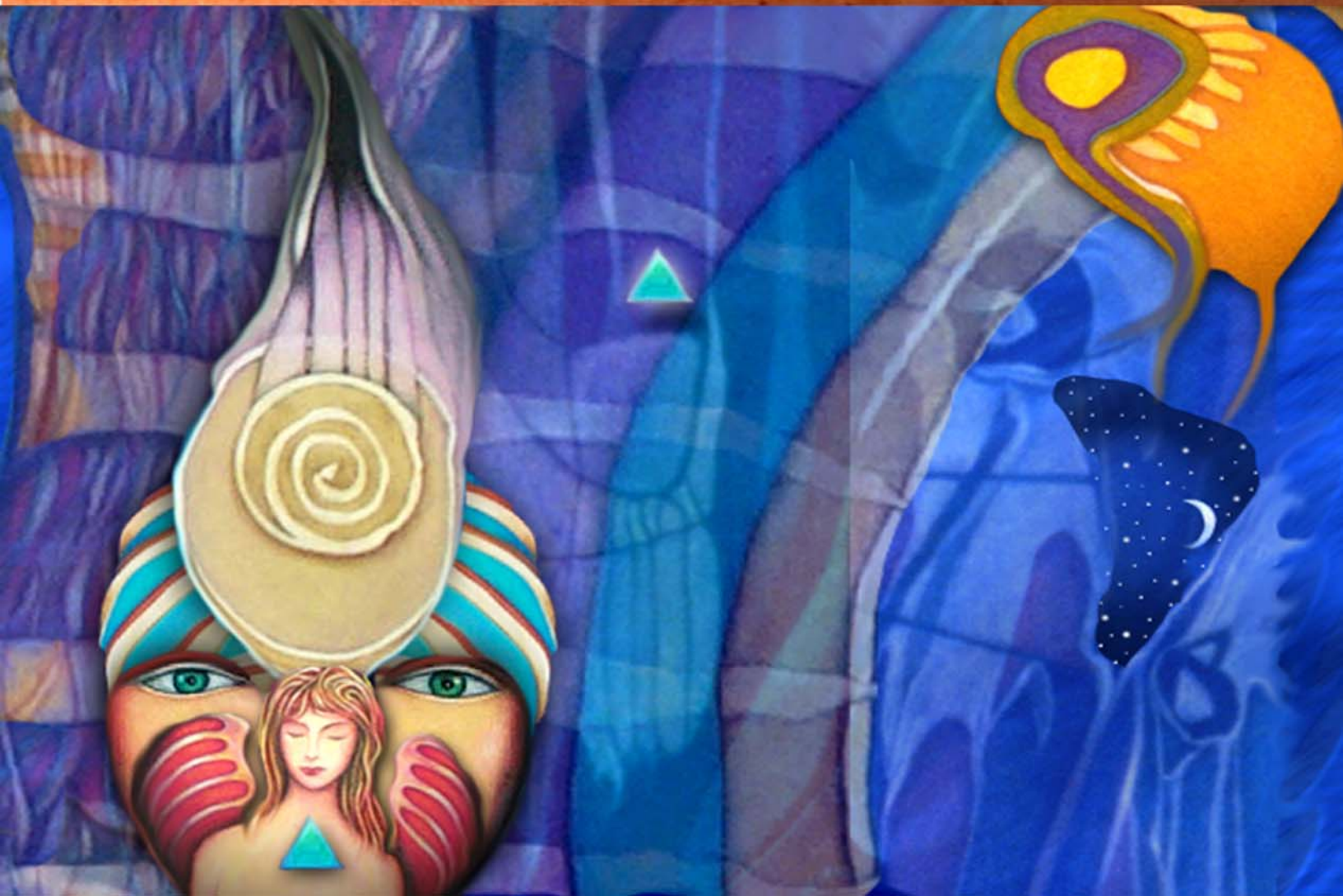


WINGMAKERS



Ancient Arrow Project





Prologue

CRUCIBLE 826 A.D.



Traveler of the Sky entered the steep canyon in a dreamlike fog, drawn by a towering rock structure that seemed to clutch the sky. Never had anyone from her tribe ventured so far into the mountains. She was from the Chakobsa tribe, whose genetic origins were Mayan and whose progeny would later become known as the Anasazi Indians of Northern New Mexico. Her lean, bronze-skinned body bore the ritual tattoos signifying her as leader of the Self-Knowers.

The Self-Knowers focused on the spiritual development of the Chakobsa tribe. They created the various rituals, rites of passage, meditation chambers or kivas, and were responsible for the tribe's record keeping with regard to its origins, history, and belief system.

Traveler of the Sky was thirty-four years old, dressed in tanned deer hide cut just below her knees, with turquoise beads adorning her neckline and hemline. Over her heart was an ink print of her right hand in blue-violet ink with tiny white beads attached, signifying a starlit sky—a reference to her name. Her straight, black hair fell below her shoulders to the small of her back, held in place by a headband made of rabbit fur. Her youthful face framed the eyes of an elder of great wisdom.

She continued her deliberate descent into the canyon where, from the deep shadows, a towering, needle-like rock structure twisted into the pale blue sky like an impertinent finger dipped in red paint, pointing to the unseen stars. It had drawn her attention the day before.

As she walked toward the red tower of sandstone, a flash of light alarmed her. The sun had just crested the ridge of the canyon and it had sparked a luring reflection from an object only twenty feet from her side. She suddenly felt like a trespasser. Her body froze, eyes glued to the shining object, no larger than a human head, half buried in pine needles between

two, gnarled pinion trees that stood like steadfast guardians.

At first she thought it might be a stone of silver, but as she neared the object, she noticed it was covered in unusual markings, like thin snakes twisting over its surface, frozen, embedded into its surface as if they were claw marks from a bear. As she squatted to get closer she noticed its color was both gold and silver, something she had never seen before. She edged nearer to its lustrous surface. It was an unnatural object. She was certain of that. It was not from nature, and it was not from her tribe.

Intrigued and entranced by its unusual color, she stared at it for several minutes trying to decide how, or whether, to approach it. If it was supernatural, it was her task to make it sensible to her people. If it was a threat, it was her task to discharge it from their land. As a shaman in her ancestral homeland, it was her duty to be inquisitive, even forceful.

Traveler of the Sky raised her hand over the object as if blessing it. Her thin lips recited an ancient verse of her people, "You are known to me in the great mystery. I am honored in your presence." Her hand began to tremble, and then her body shuddered as a

current of electricity flowed through her like a tidal wave. Her hand was drawn to the object and involuntarily clasped it as if it were a powerful magnet. Her fingers, clenching in an irrepressible reflex, grasped the object and pulled it to her chest, cradling it as though it were a baby. Her entire body vibrated uncontrollably as she held the object.

Everything she knew—every experience she had to draw from—was purged. Her mind emptied like a sack of butterflies released to the wind, and she felt completely free of her past and future. There was only the fleeting vastness of the now. Minutes passed as she held the object to her chest, completely unaware of her actions. She gradually became aware of the weight she held. It was heavy, about the weight of a young child, despite its small size.

With some effort, she placed it back on the ground. As she did, it began to vibrate almost imperceptibly. The distinct lines on the surface of the object began to blur. Traveler of the Sky rubbed her eyes in distrust of what she saw. Her face bore a mixture of confusion and foreboding fear, but she couldn't move. Everything became dreamlike and she felt that she

had been cast into a haze—into the Great Mystery of her ancestors.

The canyon's light shimmered and pulsed in the unmistakable rhythm of a hypnotic dancer. Before her were three, tall, odd-looking, but handsome men. Their eyes, variegated in blue, green, and violet, were serene yet radiant. Long beards of pure white hair touched their chests. They were dressed in emerald-colored robes that were strangely transparent, and they were standing in front of her like majestic trees. She felt no fear because she knew she had only one course of action: surrender.

"We are your future, not only your past as you now believe," one of the beings in the middle spoke. She nodded, trying to acknowledge that she understood them, but her body was somewhere else—in some other world that she was rapidly forgetting.

She noticed that although she heard his words, his lips did not move. He was speaking directly into her mind. And he spoke perfect Chakobsan, something unknown for an outsider.

"You have been chosen. The time has come to lift your gaze from the fire's brightness and cast shadows of your own. You are our messenger into your world.

As you are the Traveler of the Sky, we are the Makers of Your Wings. Together we redefine what has been taught. We recast what has become truth. We defend what has always been, and will always be, ours.”

She could only observe. Reverence towards these Makers of Wings filled her heart without effort. The beings before her drew it from her by their mere presence. It poured from her as though an infinite, secret reservoir had been tapped.

“There is no thing more divine than another,” the being said. “There is no pathway to First Source or the Great Mystery. All beings are intimate with First Source at this very moment!”

Somewhere from far away she felt her will to speak return. “Who are you?” the phrase formed in her mind.

“I am from the Tribe of Light, as are you. Only our bodies are different. All else remains in the clear light of permanence. You have come to this planet forgetful of who you are and why you are here. Now you will remember. Now you will assist us as you agreed. Now you will awaken to the reason for your being.”

A whirring sound above her head sounded like the beating of a thousand pairs of shapeless wings, and a

spiral of light descended from the sky. Within the light, shapes similar to those she had seen on the object twisted, merged and separated. Intelligent lines—a language of light. The light slowly entered her and she could feel the surge of energy, tremorous yet deep, unsheathe her like a sculptor’s chisel. There was no struggle. No obstruction to overcome. And then she saw it.

A cacophony of images released within her and revealed her future. She was one of them—the makers of this object. She was not Chakobsan, it was a mask she wore, but her true lineage was from the stars. From a place so far away that its light would never truly touch Earth.

When she came to, her vision quickly began to evaporate, as if her mind were a sieve and could not hold the images of her future. She picked up the object, caressing it with her hand, knowing that she was its keeper; aware that it would lead her to something that was not yet ready to be discovered. But she knew her time would come. A time when she would wear a different mask—the mask of a woman with red hair



and curiously white skin. It was the final image that passed away.



INTRODUCTION

In 1940, several recoveries of crashed UFOs justified a special government budget to establish a new organization within its top-secret, Government Services Special Projects Laboratory responsible for securing, protecting, and analyzing technologies recovered from extraterrestrial spacecraft. It had the dubious honor of being the most secret of all the research labs within the U.S. government.

Based in the high desert near Palm Springs, California, this heavily fortified and secretive compound housed top scientists from government laboratories with pre-existing, security clearances.

The ET Imperative, as it was called in the 1950s, was considered to be of vast importance to the national security of the United States and, indeed, the entire planet. The Advanced Contact Intelligence Organization (ACIO) was charged with analyzing recovered alien technology—in whatever form it was found—and discovering ways to apply it to missile technology,

guidance systems, radar, warplanes, surveillance, and communications in order to dominate the arenas of war and espionage.

In the mid 1950s, several alien spacecraft were recovered with aliens inside, still alive. These incidents occurred not only in the United States but also in the Soviet Union and South America. In one such incident in Bolivia, a brilliant electronics expert, Paulo Neruda, removed some navigational equipment from a crashed UFO and bargained successfully to join the ACIO in exchange for its return and the use of his services.

Paulo Neruda and his four-year old son, Jamisson, became United States citizens in 1955. The elder Neruda became a high-level director of the ACIO before he died in 1977. His son, Jamisson, joined the ACIO shortly after his father's death and became its primary expert in linguistics, encryption, and decoding technologies.

Young Neruda was a genius at languages—computer, alien, human, it didn't matter. His gift was considered essential to the ACIO in its interaction with extraterrestrial intelligence.

The recoveries of live aliens in the 1950s had created a new agenda for the ACIO. A Technology Transfer

Program (TTP) grew out of the recovery of extraterrestrials from two distinct alien races known as the Zeta Reticuli and the Corteum. Selected technologies from these races were provided to the ACIO in exchange for various services and privileges extended by the U.S. and other governments.

The ACIO was the repository and clearinghouse for the technologies that grew out of the TTP with the Zetas and Corteum. The ACIO's agenda was broadened to develop these technologies into useful, non-military technologies that were seeded into both the private and public sector. Before-their-time technologies such as integrated circuits and lasers were among the progeny of the ACIO's TTP with the Zetas and Corteum.





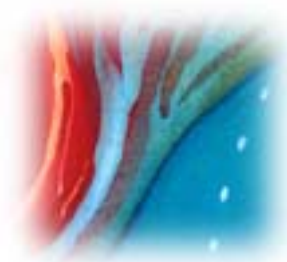
Chapter One

DISCOVERY IN THE DESERT

Your theories of evolution are simply layered upon an existing paradigm of a mechanical universe that consists of molecular machines operating in an objective reality that is knowable with the right instruments. We tell you a truth of the universe when we say that reality is unknowable with any instrument save your own sense of unity and wholeness. Your perception of wholeness is unfolding because the culture of the multidimensional universe is rooted in unity. As your wholeness navigator reveals itself in the coming shift, you will dismantle and restructure your perceptions of who you are, and in this process humanity will emerge like a river of light from what was once an impenetrable fog.

An Excerpt from *The Wholeness Navigator*, Decoded from Chamber 12

WingMakers



There were times when Jamisson Neruda marveled at his job. Beneath the cone of light from his desk lamp lay a certified mystery. It had been found a week earlier in the high desert

near Chaco Canyon in northern New Mexico and now, after three, exhaustive days of research, he was convinced the artifact was unearthly.

Neruda had already compiled notes about the unusual artifact. The main characteristic, according to the students who found it, was that it induced hallucinogenic images when held or touched. But, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't induce anything resembling a hallucination. Maybe, he speculated, the two students had been under the influence of drugs. That would explain the hallucinogenic property. Nevertheless, no one could dispute that the artifact projected an exotic, otherworldly presence.

It was two o'clock in the morning and Neruda's dark eyes were gritty with sleep deprivation. After comparing the hieroglyphic markings on the Chaco Canyon object to similar markings from ancient Sumerian and Linear B script, nothing really matched. After three days of comparative analysis, he could only conclude one thing: they were not of this earth.

His report bore the same words on the title page.

Neruda rubbed his eyes and looked through his microscope again, examining the metallic surface of the textured silver casing and copper-colored markings. The

artifact contained thousands of ridges, tiny spinal cords that coalesced, like nerve ganglia, every 8 to 10 centimeters into one of the 23 distinct glyphs on the object.

Though it was the size of a toddler's shoebox, the artifact weighed more than a blue-ribbon watermelon and had a density similar to lead. But, unlike lead, the surface was completely impenetrable to every probe Neruda or his colleagues employed.

Maybe it was the sculptured quality of the glyphs that fascinated him. Or maybe it was the subtle variations in the lines. He had never seen such sophisticated depictions of a cryptographic alphabet before. Somehow it only compounded the irony that the artifact remained silent.

"I think we found something."

Emily Dawson poked her head into Neruda's office, cradling a cup of coffee as if to keep her hands from freezing. Her long, brown hair, normally in a tidy bun, fell to her shoulders, looking more tired than her sad, soulful eyes.

"Doesn't anybody ever sleep in this place?" Neruda shot back with a boyish grin.

“Of course, if you’re not interested in what we found...”
Her voice trailed off to a whisper.

Neruda smiled knowingly. He liked Emily’s quiet manner; it was almost irresistible. He loved the way she was so unobtrusive.

“Okay, what exactly did you find?”

“You’ll need to follow me. Andrews is still checking his computations, but my instincts are certain that he’ll confirm our original findings.”

“And they are?”

“Andrews told me not to tell you until you were in the lab—”

“Andrews forgets I’m his supervisor. He also forgets it’s two in the morning and I’m unusually irritable when I’m tired and hungry.”

“It’ll only take a few minutes. Come on.” She casually took another sip of coffee. “I’ll get you a fresh cup of coffee and a cinnamon bagel.” She let her irresistible offer dangle in the quiet of his office.

Neruda could only push back from his cluttered desk and smile.

“Oh, and bring the artifact,” she added. “Andrews needs it.”

Neruda's hair, tussled from his restless hands, covered his right eye almost entirely as he bent down and carefully tucked the object under his arm like a football. He staggered just a bit while the weight of the object found a point of balance.

Neruda was Bolivian and had the great fortune to own one of the most distinguished-looking faces ever to grace the human body. Everything about him was intense. His hair was as straight as it was black. His eyes resembled mysterious wells in moonlight, dodging the question of how deep or how full they were. Nose and lips were formed from Michelangelo's chisel.

As he walked by her in the doorway, Emily swept his hair to the side. "I'll bring the coffee to the lab."

"I'll take cream cheese on my bagel," Neruda said, walking begrudgingly to the lab to confer with Andrews, one of his most demanding but brilliant assistants.



The hallways of the ACIO were quiet and antiseptically clean at this late hour. White stucco walls and white marble floors gleamed beneath the overhead halogen lights. The odor of various cleaning formulas sterilized the air. Neruda heard his stomach growl in the deep silence of the

hallway. It, too, was sterile. He'd forgotten dinner. Again.

"Finally!" Andrews said as Neruda entered. He had the unnerving habit of never leveling his eyes with his human counterpart. Neruda sort of liked it; it made him feel comfortable in a strange sort of way. "This shit is unbelievable."

"And what are you referring to, exactly?" Neruda asked.

Andrews kept his eyes on the charts in front of him. "I mean the way the surface analytics show how precisely this thing's been designed. What looks like chaos is actually a precisely executed pattern. You see these subtle variations? They aren't arbitrary. We screwed up; we didn't build our plot diagrams with enough granularity to see the pattern before."

"And what pattern is that, exactly?" Neruda's voice betrayed a growing degree of impatience.

Andrews positioned a large chart on the table before him. It looked like a topographical map of a mountain range.

Neruda instantly saw the pattern. "Is this the complete surface of the object?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I've double-checked everything and my replication data is an exact match."

Neruda set the artifact on the table beside Andrews' chart with a thud.

"There's no way this could be an anomaly?"

"No way."

"And what's the plot granularity?"

".0025 microns."

"Is it visible at any other granularity?"

"I'm not sure. That's why I asked you to bring the little monster here. I'll do some more tests and we'll see what else shows up."

"Any idea what it means?"

"Yeah, it's not from around here," Andrews laughed and struggled with the artifact to move it onto a metal platform for testing.

The measurement device was called a Surface Mapping Topographer (SMT) and it made an extremely detailed topographical map of the surface of objects. Similar to that of fingerprint analysis, the ACIO's version was three-dimensional and could be utilized microscopically.

Neruda leaned closer to the poster-sized chart while Andrews positioned the artifact exactly to his requirements.

“It’s definitely not Zeta or Corteum.”

“And it’s definitely not human—past or present accounted for,” Andrews said.

“But this pattern... it’s unmistakable. It’s... it’s got to be a topographical map. It might even represent the discovery site.”

“Okay, let’s say it’s ET, but not the friendly ETs we send Christmas cards to,” Andrews flashed a smile, “and these ETs visited us in our distant past. They happened to be cartographer freaks and decided to make a map of their settlement on Earth. Then they got bored with New Mexico—an easy thing to do, I might add—and had no need of the map anymore so they left it behind.”

“This artifact was found above ground,” Neruda reminded him. “Someone or something placed it there and did so recently, or else our little monster would’ve been buried.”

“Maybe it unburied itself.” Andrews’ voice was nearly a whisper.

Neruda backed away, feeling a sudden wave of exhaustion for the first time. He slumped into a nearby

chair, ran his hands through his hair, and then stretched his body with a long sigh. Rubbing his neck, he laughed low in his throat. "You know, maybe they just have a sense of humor."

"Or they like to torture their victims with misdirects," Andrews offered. "You do remember our experience with the Zetas?"

"This is entirely different. The language structure of this race is so dimensional that it must lack telepathic abilities. Why else would they construct such a complex language?"

"Maybe it's not a language or a map. Maybe it's just an artistic expression of some kind."

"Not likely. It's more probable that they've created a multi-dimensional language that integrates their mathematics with their alphabet as a way of communicating a deeper meaning. It's not misdirection. I can feel misdirection in my bones."



"Yeah, but we're too shit-faced stupid to figure it out."

"We've only had three days."

"Okay, but we're almost as clueless as we were on the first day."

The door of the lab swung open and Emily walked in with a tray of coffee cups and bagels. "Anything else you gentlemen need before I retire?"

"A million thanks," Neruda replied.

"You're very welcome. So what do you think about our little picture?"

"Everything just got a lot more complicated."

"So you're happy," Emily quipped.

"Either they have a mathematical structure encoded within their alphabet or this object portrays a very detailed topographical map."

Emily set the tray next to the artifact, careful to avoid touching it. "I prefer the map hypothesis. I was never very good with math." She flashed her most innocent smile. For an instant Neruda saw her as a young girl, complete with braids, braces, and training bra.

Emily was relatively new to the ACIO. She had come to the attention of Neruda after he read her seminal book on the Sumerian culture, which she had written as an Associate Professor at Cambridge University.

Forced to leave her post at Cambridge, due to an illness rumored as some form of cancer, she had fallen into a deep depression during her convalescence that had left her body and spirit ravaged. Two years ago, the

ACIO recruited her, at Neruda's urging, and he had taken her under his wing as her mentor.

"You *are* happy about this aren't you?" Emily asked, half-serious.

"Come on, boss," Andrews chimed, "burning the midnight oil, drinking coffee and eating donuts every meal, never having to wear sunglasses... what could be better?"

Andrews was the prototypical nerd engineer. Appearances last, mental acuity first. Not that he was a bad looking man. He just preferred to analyze complex problems and solve them, instead of laboring with time-consuming tasks like brushing his teeth or combing his hair.

Neruda sipped his coffee and stared at the chart without response. Something bothered him about the pattern. It was too perfect. If someone wanted to encode a language within a language, they would make it less obvious. Otherwise, what's the purpose of encoding?

"I think we should take granularity plots at .001 variance down to .0005 microns. Also, ask Henderson if he'd get us a set of twenty topographical maps of the

discovery site up to a hundred kilometers radius at increments of five kilometers. Okay with you, Andrews?"

"No problem, but at least tell me what you're hoping to find."

"I don't know," he replied, looking suspiciously at the chart. "I don't know, but maybe it's not a language so much as a map."

"This *can* wait until the morning, can't it?"

"What, and waste a good cup of coffee?" With that, Neruda smiled broadly and told them to get a good night's rest. He was closing up shop, too.

On his way out, Neruda noticed a thin blade of light beneath Fifteen's office door. The Executive Director of the ACIO was known as both a night owl and workaholic, but 3 A.M. was late, even by his standards.

Neruda knocked softly and opened the door a crack. Fifteen was at his computer terminal, lost in thought. Absentmindedly, his hand motioned Neruda in, but in a halting gesture, motioned him to wait a moment before speaking. A few more keystrokes and Fifteen turned around to face Neruda.

In his early sixties, Fifteen had been the reclusive and revered leader of the ACIO for more than 30 years. The

scientists privileged to work at the ACIO considered him the most brilliant mind on or off the planet.

Fifteen got his name by virtue of his security clearance. The ACIO had 15 distinct levels of information distribution and he was at the top of the information chain.

The ACIO had developed the most powerful knowledge management and information systems on the planet. And because of its unique access to the world's most powerful technologies, its information databases were more carefully secured than the gold in Fort Knox. Fifteen was the only person in the world who had a Level 15 security clearance, which gave him unfettered access to all the sectors of the ACIO data warehouse.

Neruda sat in a leather chair opposite Fifteen, waiting for some sign to speak. Fifteen took a sip of tea, closed his eyes for a moment as if to clear his mind, and brought his dark eyes squarely on Neruda's face. "You want to go to New Mexico, don't you?"

"Yes, but I want to tell you why—"

"Don't you think I already know?"

"Perhaps, but I want to tell you in my own words."

Fifteen shifted in his comfortable chair, as if his back gave him problems. Spanish by descent, Fifteen often

reminded Neruda of Pablo Picasso, with long silver hair. He had the same stout body style as Picasso but was probably a bit taller.

“So tell me.”

“This artifact is more sophisticated than either the Zeta or Corteum. It can’t be probed. It’s entirely seamless. And tonight we’ve confirmed that it has a multi-tiered alphabet that migrates from a two-dimensional cryptographic code to a three-dimensional fractal pattern that looks a lot like a topographical map.

“Combine these factors with the report from the kids who discovered it, that the artifact projects some form of a hallucination when held, and I think there’s probable evidence that this thing isn’t an isolated artifact.”

Fifteen breathed a long, weary sigh. “You’re well aware that I’ve already dispatched a team to the area where the artifact was found. We used our best people in search and rescue and they found no additional debris—”

“But that’s just it! It’s not from a crash site. The artifact is perfectly intact. Nothing but microscopic scratches—”

"Then explain how this most sophisticated alien technology was found by two kids *above* the ground. We both read the report from Collin that estimated an object of that weight and size would become at least partially buried in that environment within six to eight months."

"It's possible it was left behind recently."

"You're suggesting an alien race left it behind as their calling card?"

"Perhaps."

"Speculate. Why?" Fifteen asked.

"What if they had left behind something important in that area and wanted to be sure they could return to the exact same location years later."

"A homing beacon?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware that there's been absolutely no anomalous radar activity in that area in the past twelve months?"

"No."

Fifteen swiveled in his chair, hit a few keys on his keyboard, and began to read: "ZONE NM1257 HAD THREE INCIDENTS OF ZETA FLY-OVERS DURING THE REQUESTED ANALYSIS PERIOD. THEY WERE: 0311 HOURS, MAY 7; 0445 HOURS, MAY 10; AND 0332 HOURS, MAY 21. FLIGHT PATHS WERE ESTIMATED

AT SPEEDS IN EXCESS OF 1,800 KPH – NO SIGNIFICANT SPEED VARIATIONS.”

The implacable expression on Fifteen’s face softened slightly as he turned to face Neruda. “You see? This object wasn’t left behind, it unburied itself.”

Goose bumps stippled Neruda’s neck at the recognition that he’d heard this twice in the last hour. “Or it was left behind by time travelers,” Neruda said.

Fifteen paused to reflect on the conversation. He took a quick sip of tea and shifted in his chair, this time with a grimace. “You mentioned a three-dimensional fractal pattern that looked like a map?”

“Yes,” Neruda said, his voice gaining in intensity. “And the precision is at least .0025 in the granularity plots. It could be even higher. We’ll find out tomorrow.”

In a drawn out, somewhat irritable voice, Fifteen asked, “So what do you propose?”

“I’d like to assemble a small team tomorrow afternoon and take the artifact with us. The artifact may be a



compass or a map of some kind that’s only operational in the local environment it was found. It’s worth a test before we put this thing into storage.”

“And you really think it’s more sophisticated than Cor-teum?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind.”

“You have my approval, but if the artifact goes with you, so do Evans and anyone else he thinks is pertinent. Understood?”

“Yes, but this is my mission and I presume I’ll be leading all operations.” He hoped his words sounded more like a statement than a question.

“And the plot charts from the object,” Fifteen wondered aloud, “did they have any markings as to a strategic position?”

“That’s just it, when the twenty-three glyphs are laid out in the SMT analogue, with a little imagination one can define at least two or three strategic positions. I’m ordering topographical maps of the entire region within a hundred kilometers of the point of discovery. We’ll see if there’s any correlation when we do an overlay analysis.”

Fifteen stood up and glanced at his wristwatch.

“Before you leave tomorrow, I’d like a mission briefing for the directors. I’ll schedule it at fourteen hundred hours in my office. I assume you’ll come prepared to show the SMT results, the topographical map

correlations—assuming they exist—and any other relevant findings pertaining to the glyphs.”

Neruda rose to his feet and nodded affirmatively. Thanking Fifteen for his time, he left the sprawling, Zen-like office with a peculiar sense of apprehension. Why would Evans need to come along? Fifteen must sense something peculiar here.

James Evans, Director of Security for the ACIO, had been a Navy Seal commander for six years before his training methods became a little too extreme, even for the Navy Seal program. He was removed from his post through a conspiratorial set of circumstances that ended in an Honorable Discharge.

Afterwards, the NSA secretly recruited him. He worked there for three years until he came to the attention of Fifteen through a collaborative project between the NSA and the ACIO, code-named AdamSon. To scientists within the ACIO, Evans and his security department were a necessary evil, but evil nonetheless. Their tactics introduced to the scientific core, a sense of paranoia which Fifteen seemed oblivious to.

Evans was a likable person. His position was one of high prestige: Director of ACIO Security and Admissions. In his role, he enjoyed a Level 14 security clearance,

along with six other Directors. These seven people were the most elite team surrounding Fifteen, and were consulted by Fifteen on every major initiative.

To Neruda, Evans was a well-trained thug. His intellect was superior to the average person only because of mind-enhancement technology that the ACIO had obtained from the Corteum. Without the aid of the Minyaur Technology, as it was called, Neruda often thought Evans would make a fine State Representative for Wyoming, or perhaps an NRA lobbyist.

Since his arrival 12 years ago, and his rapid rise through the ranks of the ACIO, Evans had implemented many new security technologies, such as the subcutaneous tracking beacon all ACIO staff had implanted in their neck. To Evans' credit, there had been no security leaks or defections during his tenure, but Neruda hated the very existence of internal security and Evans was an easy target for his disdain.

Neruda entered the elevator, paying particular attention to the Status and Forecast reports displayed on the embedded monitor just above the doors. It was 0317 hours, 7°C, no wind, moon at 12% luminosity, 120 kilometer visibility, barometric pressure steady at 29.98, and humidity 16.4%.

The elevator doors swung open before he could catch the forecast but he knew he'd be underground all day tomorrow. Besides, the weather wasn't exactly volatile in southern California.

ACIO "Topside" was 45 meters, or 12 stories above the executive offices and laboratories of the ACIO. Topside was also a completely different facade: long, one-story, stucco building with antenna-like protrusions and satellite dishes on the roof. At its gated entrance, a simple sign said, UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT EXPERIMENTAL WEATHER CENTER. RESTRICTED ACCESS.

The ACIO was, to anyone who might wander by, a government weather center responsible for developing sophisticated, weather instruments to help the U.S. military and intelligence communities to better predict, and even control, weather conditions across the globe. This was part of the ACIO's mission. But only a fraction of its budget and project plan went to these endeavors.

Of its 226 scientists, eleven were deployed in the development of weather-related technologies. The majority were involved in the development of complex technologies devoted to financial market manipulation and encryption technologies that enabled the algorithms to operate without detection.

The ACIO had a long history of working with the secretive powers behind the throne. The highest powers within the intelligence community and private industry revered the ACIO's brainpower and innovations. It was widely rumored within the intelligence community that such an organization existed to reverse-engineer extraterrestrial technologies, but only a handful of the most elite actually knew of the ACIO.

Neruda reached Topside with a queasy stomach stoked from too much caffeine. He thought a warm glass of milk and a banana before bed would soothe him. Sleep and little else drew him home. He had never married and now, at 46, the prospects seemed remote. His entire adult life was absorbed by the ACIO. Since the age of sixteen when he began to work as an intern with his father, the ACIO was his shelter and sanctuary, workplace, and social venue.

Starlight always caught him by surprise when he left the compound. The velvet night air was indeed clear; 120 kilometers visibility seemed understated. He drove the six kilometers to his home in a new subdivision of mostly ACIO personnel.

His head hit the pillow before the warm milk found his stomach. The unpeeled banana slept beside him on the

night table. As tired as he was, his mind's eye kept looking at the strange markings that encircled the artifact's exterior casing. In thirty years of studying ancient scripts he had never seen such intricately carved glyphs.

Suddenly he noticed a soft, diffuse light penetrate his eyelids. His eyes flew open as if hinged on high-tension springs. The room was silent and dark. He closed his eyes again, figuring that he must have slipped into a lucid dream of some kind. Turning on his side he adjusted the covers tightly around his neck and let out a long, tired sigh.

In a moment the light returned. This time he kept his eyes closed, watching in amazement as the light began to form into the same glyphs he had seen on the artifact. They wavered over his head like a mirage of shimmering gold light: serpentine, sculptural. He looked at them with all his intensity, and to his surprise they began to move, not the glyphs, but something *inside* the glyphs. Something was circulating within them like blood coursing inside an artery.

Whatever it was, it began to speed up. Faster and faster, and then Neruda noticed a whirring sound, similar to the hum of electricity but infinitely smoother.

It began as a low humming sound and then started to rise in pitch to a near-inaudible state, and just when Neruda thought he would lose it, it began to oscillate. At first, the sound was a wavering of electrical rhythms pulsing like a massive heartbeat a million miles away, but then something changed and he could hear words forming. Nothing intelligible, he told himself, but it was definitely a language pattern. His whole body and mind leaned towards the sound, trying desperately to make out the words.

Then it happened. English. Words he could understand. "You are among friends. Feel no fear. Relax and simply listen to our words." The words were spoken with perfect diction, articulated like a Shakespearean actor. "What we will impart to you, will be stored inside your mind for later recollection. Upon awakening you will have no recall of our meeting. We regret this, but it is necessary at this time."



Neruda could feel his mind forming a protestation but it dissolved before it could be given voice.

"What you desire is to activate our technology," the voice intoned. "But you do not yet understand the

context in which our technology is placed upon your planet. This insight will come, but it will take time. Rest assured that we are watching, waiting, and ever vigilant to protect your interests and those of our mission.”

Neruda could feel his body, but was unable to move his limbs or even open his eyelids. He was completely entranced by the voice. He swallowed hard and tried to speak—whether with his mind or vocal chords he wasn’t sure. “Who are you?”

“We are what you will become. You are what we have been. Together, we are what define the human soul. Our name, translated to your language, is WingMakers. We are interpenetrated in the light of First Source. You live in the weaker light that has been stepped down to receive you. We bring the Language of Unity into this weaker light so you may see how you will become unified to a new cosmological structure the architecture and grandeur of which you cannot even imagine.”

Neruda’s mind flashed to his father’s voice: “...the new spirituality will have as its foundation a cosmological substrate so profound that the mind will not contain it.”

He smiled inwardly at the recollection of his father’s voice. “Why? Why can’t we imagine it?”

“You have not been able to understand the Language of Unity because you do not understand wholeness. You do not understand the grand universe in which you live and breathe.

“Your plants have root systems that penetrate Earth and drink of her substance. In this way, all plants are linked. Now, imagine that each plant had a secret root that was invisible but was nonetheless connected to the very center of the planet. At this point of convergence, every plant was indeed unified and aware that its real identity was this core system of interconnected roots and that this secret root was the lifeline through which individual expression was brought to the surface of earth and its unified consciousness released. In this same way, humanity has a secret root that spirals into the uncharted realm of the Central Universe of First Source. It is like an umbilical cord that connects the human entity with the nurturing essence of its creator. The secret root is the carrier of the Language of Unity. And it is this language that we have come to teach.

“All life is embedded with what we will term a Wholeness Navigator. This is your core wisdom. It draws you to perceive fragmentary existence as a passageway into wholeness and unity. It is eternal and knows that

the secret root exists even though it may seem intangible to your human senses. The Wholeness Navigator is the tireless engine that drives fragmentary, life experience into unified life expression. It is the immutable bridge over which all life will surely pass.

“The Age of Enlightenment is the age of living in the multidimensional universe and appreciating its wholeness, structure, and perfection and then expressing this appreciation through your mind and body into the world of time and space. This is the seed vision of the Wholeness Navigator. The imprint of its purpose. We are here to assist beings like yourself to first conceptualize and then experience the multidimensional universe as it truly is—not only through the language of your world, but through the Language of Unity; as you see it in these glyphs. As this experience flows through you, you will transform. The Wholeness Navigator will be able to deposit a new perception of your Self that is aligned with the image of First Source. It is this new image, emerging through your Wholeness Navigator, that will change the course of this planetary system. We are here to accelerate the formation of this image in the mind of humanity.”

Neruda continued to listen even as the sound of the voice subsided back into the pulsing of the glyphs. A part of him lurched forward, trying to explain what was happening as a mental construction—a dream and nothing more. But somewhere deep inside himself, beneath all the layers of his education, a faint remembrance was re-kindled. A sense that reality was upon him with the intensity of a jaguar capturing its prey. A sense that everything in his universe was focused on this event. All eyes were watching.

He felt a question bubble to the surface. “Why do you care if this experience is achieved by humans—myself, or anyone else? What’s so important that this new image, as you call it, is accelerated in humanity?”

“If humanity understands that this secret root exists and that it is the carrier of the Language of Unity, then humanity can become responsible stewards of more than the earth, its solar system, its galaxy and its universe. Humanity can be stewards of the human soul and transform into what we are. We are all, regardless of our position on the evolutionary timeline, encoded to re-ascend the stairs of the universe. It is our migratory path. Some start and end sooner than others, but all will make the journey.”

“So, now what?” Neruda managed to ask.

“Follow what you have found. It will lead you to us.”

The voice faded back into the pulsing sound of the glyphs. The low humming returned and his mind relaxed into a deep, forgetful sleep.





Chapter Two

RECONNAISSANCE

There is no supplication that stirs me. No prayer that invites me further into your world unless it is attended with the feeling of unity and wholeness. There is no temple or sacred object that touches me. They do not, nor have they ever brought you closer to my outstretched hand. My presence in your world is unalterable for I am the sanctuary of both the cosmos and the one soul inside you.

An Excerpt from *First Source*, Decoded from Chamber 23

WingMakers



Neruda was always a little nervous when he had to make a presentation to the Directors, especially when he was late. The lab results had taken longer than he had expected, as usual. Damn replication data, he thought. Nevertheless, he was pleased with the results and could hardly wait to present their findings. Andrews was right: this shit was unbelievable.

His stomach was both hungry and queasy. He grabbed a drink of water from the hallway fountain outside the lab and made his way to Fifteen's office. He reminded himself that he was a member of the Labyrinth Group, just as they were. They were no more intelligent than he was; in fact, on the subject of language, he was the world's authority—even if no one outside of the ACIO knew it.

The Labyrinth Group was a secret subgroup of the ACIO. When Fifteen took over control of the ACIO in 1967, he felt the National Security Agency (NSA) was trivializing the agenda of the ACIO. He wanted to harness the technologies that resulted from the TTP with the Zetas and Corteum and apply them to the development of Blank Slate Technology (BST), an elaborate technology for altering time-based events without detection. Fifteen wanted to develop the ultimate defensive weapon, or *Freedom Key* as he called it, in the event of a long-prophesied extraterrestrial invasion. He was convinced that the ACIO should focus on this scientific pursuit.

Partly to achieve this mission and partly as an outgrowth of new ACIO technologies, Fifteen established a secret organization within the ACIO composed of only

his innermost circle of loyal associates. Established in 1969, this elite group called itself the Labyrinth Group. All personnel with a security clearance of 12 or higher were automatically inducted into this small but powerful organization.

With a membership of only 66, everyone had undergone a variety of enhancements that amplified their natural intelligence and innate abilities—including psychic abilities—and that was exactly what made Neruda’s stomach queasy.

“Good afternoon,” Neruda recited to the assembled group of Directors. “I apologize for being a little late, but the replication data and the correlation analysis took longer than we thought.” He smiled charmingly, brushed his hair back, sat down, and looked at Fifteen, who stood at the end of the long rosewood conference table; since back spasms had begun to assail him several months earlier, he rarely sat for too long.

Around the conference table were Fifteen’s direct reports: Li-Ching, Director of Communications and Protocol; James Loudon, Director of Operations; William Branson, Director of Information Systems; Leonard Ortman, Director of Research and Development; Lee Whitman, who managed all TTP relationships, both to

and from the ACIO; and James Evans, who managed security. Jeremy Sauthers, Neruda's supervisor and Director of Special Projects, was on holiday and absent from the meeting.

With this group, it was impossible to go through a meeting, no matter how short, and not make a mistake. The only question was how large the mistake would be. Neruda knew this better than most and fidgeted in his chair, wondering what he'd overlooked. He found himself wishing he had asked to leave later in the week so he'd have had more time to prepare. His stomach grew wings.

"I asked Jamisson to present his findings," Fifteen began, "because it seems we have a technology in our presence that our best personnel, using our best technology, cannot probe. We have an alloy that is undoubtedly extraterrestrial or possibly time-shifted, we're not sure." He turned to look directly at Neruda. "Are we?"

"Probability is that it's off-planetary but because we're not able to probe it, no, we're not sure."

"Neruda came to me last night, or, I guess it was this morning, and asked me if he could lead an exploratory team to New Mexico with the artifact in tow. He gave a

reasonable rationale and I simply want each of you to be updated.”

Fifteen narrowed his eyes, as if squinting at a window of light. “We know the object was above ground when it was discovered. We also know it was not left behind in the last twelve months by an ET source. According to Jamisson, the object is quite possibly a map or homing device of some kind. He’s here to explain his hypothesis. I’ve already given him permission to go to the site, but I wanted you to have an opportunity to ask questions and formulate your own opinions.”

Fifteen nodded to Neruda and sat down gingerly.

Neruda stood and walked over to the large whiteboard adjacent to the conference table. Grabbing a red marker, he wrote the word, MAP. He shuffled a few short paces and wrote, HOMING DEVICE. He then drew a vertical line between the two words. Above the words, in the middle, he wrote EVIDENCE in capital letters.

He turned around and faced the austere group, all of whom were watching with interest. They knew Neruda wasn’t prone to rash pronouncements or wasteful rhetoric.

“We’re convinced that the object is one, or possibly both, of these,” he said, pointing with his thumb behind

him. "Which means it's probably not an isolated artifact. It's also clear that this is a technology, not an inert art form or organic object. The technology is superior to anything we've investigated to date. It's completely concealed. Buttoned-up, seamless, and silent in all respects."

He walked back to his chair and distributed copies of a poster-sized scan document. "Except one," he said. "In this SMT analysis you'll notice the obvious similarity to a topographical map of something resembling a mountainous environment. These lines are invisible to the human eye, but with a .0025 granularity plot, the lines become visible and, more importantly, reveal a pattern.

"We also downloaded satellite pictures of the discovery site and reduced them to simple, three-dimensional topographical maps. We conducted a correlation analysis this morning and concluded that the object's surface is indeed a map."

Neruda distributed another large document to each of the directors. "Once our computers matched scale and orientation, we found a 96.5 percent correlation. Clearly, a map is embedded in the surface of the object—"

"And this map is of the discovery site?" Evans asked.

“Actually, the discovery site is on the periphery of the map.”

“Tell them about the reference point”, Fifteen urged.

“As you can see, twenty-three glyphs surround the periphery of the map area. These glyphs may be pointing to a central area right here.” Neruda held his marker at the position that was approximately equidistant from the 23 glyphs.

“How large an area does this map reference?”
Ortmann asked.

“It’s about twenty square kilometers.”

“Why would an alien race leave behind such an object and include a map if not to identify a point of clear, specific reference? Seems improbable, doesn’t it?”
Ortmann folded his arms and leaned back further in his chair as if to emphasize his frustration at having to waste his time speculating.

“Not if the object were both a homing device and a map,” Fifteen answered. “Perhaps the map is designed to lead you to the general area that activates the homing device. From there, the homing device supplants the map’s function.”

“If we can’t probe the object, what evidence do we have that it’s a homing device?” Ortmann pointed to the

whiteboard where the word EVIDENCE seemed to stand alone as an island.

“We don’t really have any hard evidence,” Neruda replied, “However, the students who discovered this—”

“If you’re going to mention the hallucinatory state of these students as evidence that this object is a homing device,” Ortmann said, “then you may be a bit naïve about college students and their penchant for altered states and drug experimentation.”



“I personally subjected these students to a full de-brief,” Evans said.

“They weren’t, in my opinion, lying about the hallucinations. They were clean kids; they weren’t druggies.”

Evans was rarely so outspoken with Fifteen present unless he was certain of his convictions. Everyone knew this about him. It was enough for Ortmann to stop his line of inquiry.

“Let’s allow Neruda some latitude here,” Fifteen interjected. “I happen to have my own hypothesis, based on informed intuition mostly. I’m sure we all do. But no one’s better informed about this particular set of

issues than Neruda is. So let's give him an opportunity to show us his working hypothesis."

The directors nodded support for Fifteen's suggestion and turned with robotic precision to Neruda. He preferred to let others talk and wished that Fifteen would explain his hypothesis.

"I wrote the words on the whiteboard because I wanted you to know the facts about this finding," Neruda began. "There's very little in the way of physical evidence in support of my hypothesis."

He walked back to the white board and wrote underneath the word MAP: SMT FINDINGS (.0025) TOPOGRAPHICAL CORRELATIONS 96%.

Under HOMING DEVICE, he wrote, SITE-SPECIFIC HALLUCINATIONS REPORTED BY RELIABLE SOURCES.

"This is the extent of the evidence, as we know it today, that explains the probable purpose of this artifact. Moreover, we know from our language analysis that the glyphs are not referenced in our Cyrus database. They are, for the most part, unique and significantly more intricate than anything we've ever seen before.

"What's particularly unsettling is the fact that the object was found above ground, as if someone or

something had placed it there to be found. There was no attempt to conceal it, other than the fact that it was in a very remote section of northern New Mexico.

“Our hypothesis is that the object’s primary purpose is a homing device. The map holds a secondary purpose that could be used by someone should the artifact be dislocated from its intended drop site. The object is site sensitive and when held within a certain proximity—what we presume to be the area depicted on this map—it somehow projects an image in the mind of the holder as to its home base—”

“And you’re suggesting its home base is a location within the center of this map?” Evans asked.

“Yes.”

“And that this home base,” Evans continued, “is either an ancient, abandoned ET settlement or an active site?”

“More likely the former than the latter.”

“Why?” Branson asked.

“Even though we’ve been unable to carbon date the object or use the Geon Probe, we’ve analyzed the map correlations. The tiny variations in the correlations consistently pointed to erosion factors and, having done a regression analysis of the probable erosion patterns of the map area, we concluded that the object is at least

six hundred years old. It could be twice as old." Neruda paused, expecting someone to interject. He was met with silence.

"We believe our best course of action is to take the artifact to the central region depicted on the map and test the hypothesis." Again Neruda paused, fishing for questions.

"Let's back up," Li-Ching offered. "We know the object is authentic, right?"

"Yes. There's no hoax here," Neruda said.

"We also know that it's UET."

"Or time-shifted," Neruda added.

"The most vexing issue to me is that the object is some six hundred years old and just showed up one day without a trace. Are we sure it poses no threat?" Li-Ching asked, her forehead slightly crinkled.

"That probability is low, according to ZEMI. Well below ten percent."

"We do have some enemies," Li-Ching reminded the group, "and this type of object would naturally find its way to the ACIO. How can we be sure it's not a weapon of some kind if we can't probe it? Remember the dimensional probes our Remote Viewers found last year,

courtesy of Zeta Rogue Twelve? Our technology couldn't probe those, either."

"Speaking of RVs, has anyone performed an RV on this object yet?" Ortmann asked.

"Yes," Neruda replied, "but again, with no results—other than to confirm the object's incredible resistance to probes."

"Were you planning to include RVs on your exploration team?"

Neruda sighed internally, knowing his oversight had been found. "No. But it's an excellent idea." Neruda couldn't lie to this group. Their bullshit detectors were so sensitive they could spot a lie, no matter how small or benign, in deep sleep.

"By the way, do we have any further reports on Professor Stevens?" Ortmann turned to Evans.

"We've been monitoring the good professor since we secured the artifact. He's sent a few emails to colleagues and had a few phone calls, but he's followed our story to the letter—"

"I wasn't referring to his compliance," Ortmann said. "I was interested in the content of his e-mails or phone calls. Does *he* have a hypothesis?"

Professor Stevens taught archeology at the University of New Mexico. When students from the University stumbled upon the artifact during a hiking trip, they had taken it to Stevens for identification. Stevens immediately considered it an extraterrestrial artifact of some kind and sent several e-mails to colleagues, all of which were flagged by Echelon, a secret intelligence unit of the NSA. Since one of the keywords that caused e-mails to be flagged was "extraterrestrial", the e-mails were forwarded to the ACIO.

When the ACIO arrived in Stevens' office 36 hours after the artifact had been discovered, it delivered a powerful message: The "artifact" was a stolen, highly classified, experimental weapon. It could be very dangerous in the wrong hands. Professor Stevens, under these circumstances, was only a little reluctant, and somewhat relieved, to turn the object over to Evans, who posed as a NSA agent.

Evans punched on an embedded keypad in the conference table and brought up a screen on the overhead projector. He darkened the room slightly and hit a few keys. "We put a Level Five Listening Fence around Stevens," Evans told the group. "Our post-ops analysis is that this guy believed the object was alien.

And he believed it was a weapon. He also believed it was best suited for the NSA to figure out disposition and care.”

“In this file,” Evans clicked open a file object, “are all of his relevant e-mails and phone transcripts since Tuesday, nine hundred hours. If you search on the words, *hypothesis, theory, supposal, or conjecture*, you’ll find only one context.”

Evans finished typing the words and hit the ENTER key. Instantly text from a phone transcript, entitled OUTBOUND 602-355-6217/SINGLE TRANSMISSION/OFFICE/0722/1207/ 12.478 MINUTES popped up. He selected 30% in a window entitled CONTEXT FRAME, clicked the AUDIO AND TEXT button, and hit ENTER again. The room filled with the audio recording of a phone conversation between Stevens and a colleague. As the audio played, the text automatically scrolled synchronized with the audio:

Stevens: I know this thing was hot. For Christ sake, the fucking NSA was all over me.

Jordan: Why would you let this thing get away? They took everything, didn’t they? You know the government can’t just walk in to your office and steal your goddamn rights, let alone your personal property or the property of the University.

Stevens: There was no choice. This thing could be a weapon.

Jordan: Why? Because some agent told you so?

Stevens: Look, I know one of the students who found this thing and they claimed it induced some sort of a hallucinatory experience when they held it, or even came within a close proximity of the thing.

Jordan: And it was just sitting out, in plain view?

Stevens: Yes.

Jordan: What was the NSA's explanation that this top-secret weapon was just laying out in the middle of nowhere?

Stevens: They said one of their operatives had defected and stolen the weapon several months ago and was still missing. They claimed the weapon was a mind control device that was designed to fuck with someone's mind until they went crazy. They assume the defector went crazy and left the weapon behind.

Jordan: Shit. It probably is an experimental weapon. But then why all the strange hieroglyphs? Why wouldn't it say U.S. Government on it?

Stevens: My theory is that this thing was so secretive they wanted it to look alien. Again, I remind you, it was the fucking NSA that came knocking on my door. Not

the local police or FBI. It took them only 24 hours to find me. And it wasn't because the students tipped them off. They knew because this thing, this fucking weapon, had a homing signal that led them right to me.

Jordan: Whoa. If this thing has a homing signal, why didn't they find it before? If it was just sitting out in the middle of Chaco Canyon, it's got to be easier to find there than sitting in your cluttered office.

Stevens: Very funny. Apparently, the students activated the homing signal somehow.

Jordan: So that's it? That's all you can do?

Stevens: All I can do? What else can I do? (shouting)

Jordan: Talk with your Chair or Board. Tell them exactly what happened and ask them to approach the NSA.

Stevens: You're not listening. I signed papers from the fucking government saying I wouldn't do anything that could possibly incite interest in this thing. If I did, they'd haul my ass off to jail for espionage or terrorism.

Jordan: All right, all right. Fuck the government and their weapons. Just cool down. Maybe you're right. I'd hate to have to spend any of my precious time visiting you in jail. (Laughter) Maybe you should take the weekend off; I mean, get out of the office, you idiot, and

go fishing or something. Let's see what happens in the next few days. If nothing happens, maybe you're right. Let the thing go.

Evans hit a few more keystrokes, the lights came up, and the projector screen disappeared into the ceiling. "That's the extent of his theories," Evans said.

Neruda watched with some admiration as Evans settled back into his chair and crossed his legs like an English gentleman. His body was not the stereotypical, muscle-clad, bar-bouncer Navy Seal. Nevertheless, even in his loose-fitting clothes, there was no mistaking his athletic build and imposing, six and a half-foot presence.

Fifteen stood up slowly. His shoulder-length, silver hair was tied back in a meticulously braided ponytail, no doubt the handiwork of Li-Ching. There were persistent rumors that he and Li-Ching were romantically inclined, though no one had absolute proof. If the rumors were true, they were amazingly discrete. No one ever asked and neither Fifteen nor Li-Ching ever said or did anything that would definitely confirm or deny the gossip.

"I think we all support your exploratory trip," Fifteen said, "and we all understand the urgency to test your hypothesis. Perhaps it would be helpful if we spent a few

minutes discussing your mission agenda. Have you had a chance to define it yet?"

Neruda made a conscious decision not to swallow. He wanted his second oversight to be minimized. Taking one direct hit was enough. Now he had to admit gracefully that he hadn't defined his mission agenda. Damn!

"I've been so busy working on the SMT analysis, map correlations, and mission planning," he said, "that I've admittedly overlooked the mission agenda, at least in terms of writing it down in a presentation format—"

"Well, for now, why don't you simply tell us what you plan to do when you arrive at Chaco Canyon. We'll add some of our own ideas if we think of anything. Okay?"

Fifteen was too civil. He was the best psychologist Neruda had ever seen, but usually he lost his gentleness after two mistakes.

"Yes. That's fine," Neruda said with a nervous smile. "We've selected six sites to test and we've ranked these sites in priority order based on our map correlations and best estimates of where we believe the glyphs indicate site preference—as said earlier, mostly in this center section of the map.

“At each site, we’ll have RVs initially test the artifact’s hallucinogenic effects and determine its home base. Assuming we’re successful in activating the homing device, we’ll follow its signal to home base. At home base, we’ll secure the area first, assess supply and manpower requirements, and then return for supplies and mission planning.”

He looked briefly at his wristwatch, hoping to send the not-so-subtle message that he was finished and hurried for time.

“Comments?” Fifteen asked.

“Who’s on the exploratory team?”

“Dawson, Collin, Andrews, Evans, and myself.”

“And who’s the RV, then?” Ortmann asked.



“Yes, well, I haven’t had a chance to review that as yet. Does anyone have a recommendation?”

Remote Viewers were very specialized personnel within the ACIO who were trained to be able to remotely view an environment across distance, and even time. But unlike other intelligence organizations that used RV, the ACIO also used a technology to enhance their natural psychic

abilities. The technology, called RePlay, enabled RVs to capture their observations more accurately.

RVs were often attached to ACIO reconnaissance missions with the purpose of locating an object, person, or specific space/time coordinate. Their accuracy was startling. They could “see” the place where a subject was and if there were landmarks, they could pinpoint the exact location.

Branson cleared his throat. “Given the nature of your mission, I’d recommend Samantha Folten. She’s relatively new but her focus is the best we’ve ever seen in external, unpredictable environments. Walt Andersen is also a good bet but I’d take Samantha because of her unusual focus. If these hallucinations proved to be powerful, her concentration could be a real asset.”

“What’s Samantha’s clearance?” Evans asked.

“She’s SL-Five as of last June.”

“I think we should limit personnel on this mission to SL-Nine,” Neruda said. “We don’t know yet what we’ll find and the memory restructure with RVs is seldom effective.”

“Walt, then, is your man. He’s SL-Ten.”

“I agree with Evans,” Fifteen asserted. “Take Andersen and let him know that he needs to be ready to leave at

eighteen hundred hours. Speaking of having to leave, I'll bid you all *adieu*, as I have another meeting awaiting me. Thanks to Neruda and his team for their breakthrough on the map correlations. It's the first thing we've found that might unlock this mystery. Good luck to your team."

Neruda and the Directors all stood up in unison and, with an anxious movement to the door, filed out of Fifteen's office. Li-Ching remained behind, presumably the waiting "meeting" Fifteen had referred to.

Neruda had exactly three hours before the birds would fly. The Q-11 choppers were the preferred transport system for the ACIO, particularly for classified missions.

He and his team would be sleeping in New Mexico tonight. He couldn't wait to see the stars. Working underground for so many years made this particular mission all the more exciting. His appetite for fieldwork had never been that strong, but right now the grass looked much greener in Chaco Canyon.





Chapter Three

THE ARTIFACT

All beliefs have energy systems that act like birthing rooms for the manifestation of the belief. Within these energy systems are currents that direct your life experience. You are aware of these currents either consciously or subconsciously, and you allow them to carry you into the realm of experience that best exemplifies your true belief system. When you believe "I am a fragment of First Source imbued with ITS capabilities," you are engaging the energy inherent within the feeling of connectedness. You are pulling into your reality a sense of connection to your Source and all of the attributes therein. The belief is inseparable from you because its energy system is assimilated within your own energy system and is woven into your spirit like a thread of light.

An Excerpt from *Beliefs and Their Energy Systems*, Decoded from Chamber Four

WingMakers



The desert at night was a magical world steeped in silence and clarity. Neruda was reminded of this as he and Andrews set up their tent.

Neruda needed a good night's sleep. During the two-hour, chopper ride he had stolen a few minutes of shuteye, but most of his time was spent reviewing the mission agenda with Evans; selecting a site to make camp; and bringing Samantha Folten up to speed on the mission objectives and the artifact.

Walt Andersen hadn't been available for the trip on three-hour notice due to an illness in his family. Evans relented, allowing Samantha to join the exploration team despite her relatively low security clearance. Neruda was secretly pleased, partly because Samantha was new and enthusiastic, and partly because she was so highly recommended by Branson.

"You know tomorrow's gonna be one kick-ass day, boss."

Neruda smiled at Andrews' unconventional choice of words. Among the scientific core, Andrews was the only one who spoke with such guttural spontaneity. Over the years, it had become a comfort to Neruda. Oddly enough, it was even a source of admiration. Neruda often wished he could recite these same words with Andrews' natural ease.

“As long as you’re around to provide colorful commentary, I’m sure it will be.” When Neruda was alone with Andrews, sarcasm was an involuntary reflex.

Emily poked her head inside the sloping tent. “You boys still playing with your tent?” she lightly prodded.

Neruda and Andrews answered in unison. “Get out!”

“A little sensitive, aren’t we?” Even in the dim light of the lantern, her smile was contagious.

“Samantha and I finished our set-up, brewed some decaf, and we’re just about ready for a little walk before bed. We thought we’d see if you *gentlemen* wanted to join us.” She put just enough of an English accent on the word “gentlemen” to remind them both of her Cambridge education.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, go ahead and brag all you want about your quick set-up, but you didn’t have to listen to the bossman explain, in tedious detail, all about our contingency plans.”

Neruda could only grunt in disagreement, as he focused on tying the final rope and taking out any slack.

“Is Samantha with you?” he asked.

“She’s a little shy around you SL-Twelvers,” Emily quipped.

"She's probably heard how you read minds and pick apart alibis. All the RVs are wary of you guys. Everyone else thinks you're just a bunch of pussycats." Andrews said half-seriously.

"Did I hear correctly? You have coffee made, or are you just trying to make us old *gentlemen* feel bad?" Neruda asked.

"Yep."

"Yep to which question?"

"Both actually."

"And were you planning to share some of that coffee?"

"Let me confer with my new roommate." Emily stuck her head outside the tent for a moment. Whispered voices exchanged a few words.

"Yep, but we have one condition."

"And that would be?"

"Samantha wants to see the artifact."

Neruda paused, trying to feel his reaction rather than think about it. "Okay," was his instinctual reply. "I know it's hard to believe, but we're almost done here. We'll meet you at your tent in a few minutes. I'll bring the artifact along and make the proper introductions.

"Will you two busybodies have enough time to bake some cookies before we arrive?" Neruda smiled as he

spoke, darting his mischievous eyes between Emily and the silhouette of Samantha outside the tent.

“Probably will, I reckon.” Emily turned and left her fake southern accent floating behind.

“You know, boss, I’m not sure it’s such a good idea to let Samantha look at this thing,” Andrews said, pointing to the aluminum carrying case, custom designed for the artifact.

“Why not?”

“She’s an RV.” “I realize you don’t trust RVs, but try to be a little less paranoid if you can.”

“Look’it, I’m paranoid because we have Evans and an RV on our mission. The combination’s shit. You know that. Anything that happens out of the ordinary will immediately fall out of your hands.” Andrews was whispering again.

“Well then, let’s make sure we keep everything as ordinary as possible,” Neruda replied. “And we could start by getting our damn tent set up.”

“Relax, boss. We’re all done. Ta da.” With that he stood up and put his arms out the way a magician does after completing an extraordinary feat of illusion.

* * * *

“Is your tent still standing?” Emily asked with a smile. She was tending the coffee on the fuel cell heater and organizing some shortbread cookies she had brought for the trip.

“It was when I left it.”

“Luckily there’s no wind tonight.”

“Luckily there’s coffee.” Neruda’s love of coffee was bested only by his zeal for discovery.

“Is Andrews going to join us?”

“I think he wanted to stay away from the combination of RV and artifact,” Neruda whispered, leaning towards Emily’s ear. “When you strip away his macho façade, he’s basically a scared little puppy underneath.”

Emily laughed and called Samantha out of the tent.

Samantha was young by ACIO standards. Mid-thirties, slightly overweight with a shy smile and strikingly beautiful emerald-colored eyes that dominated her face. She looked Celtic with wavy red hair that was nearly waist-length. She was the kind of person who looked half enchantress, half wistful introvert.



Neruda gave her his most relaxed smile. He placed the case on the ground. "I think you'll find this fascinating," he began. "As I told you on the chopper, the object was found about nine kilometers from here. I want to wait until tomorrow morning before we proceed with full-blown RV and RePlay, but you can take a quick look at it now."

As he flicked open the latches and raised the top of the aluminum case, the artifact, half-buried in foam rubber, immediately began to hum in an eerie, pulsing manner. Samantha peered over the edge of the case. The light from the fire and nearby lantern seemed to pool in her face.

A look of worry replaced her excitement. Her eyes narrowed to focus exclusively on the object, and her lips tightened as if they'd been forbidden to speak.

Sensing something was wrong, Neruda hurriedly closed the lid over the artifact. Samantha crumpled to the ground, her head falling directly on top of the case. Emily shrieked. Neruda grabbed Samantha and held her head up lightly patting her cheeks with his hand.

"Samantha. Samantha. It's okay. It's okay."

Samantha opened her eyes almost instantly. She looked at Neruda who was holding her head in his lap.

"It's alive," she whispered as if in fear of being overheard by the object. "It's an intelligence... not a technology."

"Let's get you up," Neruda said as he helped her to her feet slowly.

"Are you okay?" Emily implored.

"Yes. I'm okay, just a little shocked by this—"

"What the hell happened?" asked Evans as he burst on the scene, followed by Collin a few paces behind.

For an instant Neruda wasn't sure what to say.

"What happened?" Evans asked again, this time more insistently.

"Everyone just calm down," Neruda replied softly. "Is there enough coffee for everyone, Emily?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Let's sit down then, have a cup of coffee, and we'll tell you what we know. I'm as interested to hear from Samantha as anyone."

Samantha was visibly shaken, and Neruda helped her ease into one of the folding chairs gathered around the fire. Evans and Collin joined the circle of chairs loosely configured around the campfire.

Emily quickly began to pour coffee. Neruda gave the first cup to Samantha. The night air was starting to get

cool, and the warm cup reminded Neruda that the desert's stored heat was giving way to the frigid darkness.

"You're sure you're okay?" Neruda asked again, crouching before Samantha. She took a long sip of coffee.

"Yes, I'm fine. Thank you."

"What did you experience? Can you tell us?" Neruda stood up only to sit down opposite Samantha in a folding chair that Evans had set up.

"I heard this humming... it... it immediately entrained my mind. It was an incredibly powerful hypnotic effect. It suggested an image—"

"And what was the image?" blurted Evans.

"It was of a cave or dark structure of some kind."

"On earth?"

"I don't know... maybe. It was designed... not a natural cave... more like an anteroom. Yes, the cave was constructed but disguised as a natural structure."

"By who?" Neruda and Evans asked in harmony.

"I don't know."

"Samantha, you said earlier that the artifact was alive. That it wasn't a technology, but rather an intelligence. What did you mean exactly?"

"I could be wrong, but the object seemed to project itself." Her voice was quivering and her breath was short. She swallowed, looking dazed. "It was reading my mind. I could feel it scan me. It was a little like being eaten alive—only it was my thoughts that it was eating."

"It could still be a technology that did this, couldn't it?" Evans looked briefly at Neruda and then Collin.

"I can't imagine how this object could have organic intelligence," Collin stated. "It's just not practical that something made of metal alloys—"

"I think we should assume this thing is dangerous." Evans stood up and remained silent. He was clearly thinking of alternatives.

"Let's not assume we know anything about this object," Neruda said. "This image you saw, Samantha, was it an entrance?"

"Yes, I think so."

"And all you saw was a dark structure of some kind?"

"Yes."

"Did you get a feel for distance or direction from our camp?"

"No. Not really. Though, just when you asked that now, it seems that it was nearby. I don't know for sure. It all happened in a



few seconds. I was overwhelmed. It was a feeling of... of mental rape." She began to cry, her eyes dropping tears at every blink.

Emily squeezed her hand in support, and Evans, pacing around the fire pit assembling chairs, suddenly stopped. "You know this could be a probe. I don't know why you didn't consider this before. Homing device, compass, map. You thought of everything but a probe. Why?"

"Before we conclude our investigation, let's begin it," Neruda said with a hint of sarcasm. "With all due respect to Samantha, she could be misinterpreting the true intentions of the artifact."

"How so?" Evans demanded.

"It's possible the device was activated by her psychic abilities. Perhaps my own. I don't know. But the device was activated somehow, and it could be that its primary action is to try and connect with whatever activated it and deliver a message or image."

Neruda turned to Samantha again. "Did you hear what I just said?"

She nodded.

"Is it possible that the device was simply trying to connect with you? That it wasn't trying to hurt you?"

Samantha didn't move her head. Her face was withdrawn. Her eyes closed like ponderous doors, and everyone waited.

"Samantha, did you hear me?"

She remained unmoving as if she were sleeping.

Neruda intuited that the artifact was again probing her, or trying to connect in some way.

"I think she's communicating right now with the object."

"Shouldn't we snap her out of it?" Evans demanded. "She could be in some danger."

"She looks composed. Even peaceful." Neruda whispered. "Let's just observe for a while." He unlatched the aluminum case and slowly opened the top. The object was emitting an unmistakable vibration. It wasn't the hum from an electrical device. This hum was very subtle, almost unnoticeable, even in the silence of the desert. It was felt more than heard.

Samantha continued to look withdrawn, trance-like, in total rapport with the artifact. Neruda leaned closer to her and touched her forehead with the back of his hand as if he were trying to determine if she had a fever. He checked her pulse. He was satisfied that Samantha was okay.

As he sat back down, Neruda became a little woozy and disoriented.

“Are you okay?” Emily asked.

Neruda nodded slowly, but there was uncertainty in his eyes.

“I feel like I’m being dragged into unconsciousness,” Neruda said faintly. “It’s not easy to resist this thing—”

Evans stood up and began pacing again. “Does anyone else feel this... this hypnosis?”

Collin and Emily both shook their heads and mumbled “no”.

“Damn it, I thought we agreed to wait until the morning to start this investigation.” Evans’ voice was raised in pitch and intensity.

“I forgot to tell the object we were going to wait until the morning,” Neruda confided, showing his sense of humor was intact. “Don’t worry, I don’t feel any danger. It’s just trying to wire itself to its homebase and to my mind at the same time. It’s as if this thing were making an introduction.” Neruda mouthed the words like he were talking in his sleep. He rubbed the corner of his eyes with his forefinger. Every movement was strained as if gravity were suddenly intensified and time was stretched into the realm of slow motion.

"I understand." Samantha stirred. Her whole body shot out of her chair and she knelt before the artifact. She picked it up with great strain on her face, her arms struggling with the weight. She touched certain glyphs in a specific order with her fingers. The humming ceased.



"It's been designed to ward off intruders," Samantha explained. "It's protecting itself. It probes to determine your intent, and while it's probing, it discombobulates your thoughts. It essentially renders you helpless as it assesses your intentions."

Neruda snapped back to reality when Samantha turned the device off. "Did you see the site?"

"Yes," she said excitedly. "It's nearby. It's well-hidden, but I think we can find it."

"What site? Where?" Evans asked, slightly bewildered.

"I saw something, too," Neruda said. "I think I'd recognize it if I saw it again."

"Fine, but do you know *where* we should begin looking?"

"No," Neruda replied as if distracted by something.

"I think I can locate it by a landmark I saw."

Samantha set the object back into its foam nest within

the case, struggled to her feet a bit, and plopped herself back into her chair with a long sigh.

“You were about to tell us about a landmark,” Evans reminded her.

“It’s a thin, pointed rock formation, like a chimney stack. It’s maybe thirty meters high, ten in circumference at its base, but only about five meters at its top. There can’t be too many of these rock formations around here. Can there?”

“Did you see this, too?” Evans turned to Neruda ignoring Samantha’s question.

Neruda shook his head. “For some reason I didn’t see anything I could identify as a landmark, it was more of an assemblage of images, like a mosaic. And most of these were of a cavern or something subterranean.

“So what is it,” Emily asked, “technology or a living intelligence?”

“Maybe both.” Neruda smiled. “Whatever it is, it knows us a lot better than we know it.”

“I don’t know how it could be a living intelligence,” Samantha began slowly, “but every bone in my body screams that it’s alive. It’s not an inanimate, programmed technology. It’s a vital intelligence that is somehow stored inside or projected through this object.”

Then, in frustration, she added. "Oh, I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm speaking in gibberish tonight. Excuse me."

"Under the circumstances, gibberish may be the only language of choice." Neruda smiled disarmingly and poured himself another cup of coffee. "You know, if it weren't for your coffee, Emily, I might've been dragged into unconsciousness by that thing." He laughed, and pointed with his free hand to the artifact. It looked tranquil like a baby bird asleep in its nest.

"It's decaf," Emily replied with a deadpan expression.

"So you're to blame for my lapse of concentration—"

"I wish you'd take this a bit more seriously," Evans interjected. "We've just seen a technology render you two helpless, mentally rape you, as Samantha put it, and you're joking about the coffee."

Neruda calmly turned to Emily. "Can you bring me the SMT chart... number 2507?" Turning to Samantha. "How long before you could have RePlay set up and operable?"

"Ten minutes," She answered.

"Fine, go ahead and get set up." Neruda turned to Evans with sudden impatience etched on his face. "And what did you want to do?"

“Just observe... for now.” Evans turned his gaze to the fire, detaching from Neruda’s authoritative stare. Evans knew his presence on exploratory missions was always resented. He knew he put his colleagues on edge. He also knew it was his job to do so.

Emily returned from her tent holding a large sheet of paper and a flashlight. She handed both to Neruda, who spread the chart out on the ground about two meters from the fire.

The flashlight illuminated the center of the chart, which was covered in lines of various colors. Evans, Collin, and Emily all moved behind him, standing hunched over with hands on knees. Neruda was

crouched with one knee on the ground.



“Here’s Samantha’s landmark,”

Neruda pointed with both the flashlight beam and his index finger. There was a small point of tightly formed circles, almost concentric, in a rainbow of colors near the center of the topographical map. “It’s isolated, the right proportions, and about thirty meters tall,” he continued. “And it’s about three kilometers due east from our camp.”

Let's wait on RePlay until morning," Evans said. "It's late, we know where we need to go. Let's all get some rest." His voice sounded clipped like a machine gun.

Samantha came out of the tent with her monitor and a headpiece that looked a little like a wire cage for her head. No matter how many times Neruda saw it, he always thought it looked like the silliest technology he'd ever seen. Most of the technologies that the ACIO developed were never mass-produced or designed with a consumer perspective. They were built by hand, one at a time. How they looked was never considered important.

"We're going to wait until morning, Samantha," Neruda said. "I'm sorry I wasted your time getting set up. But I think Jim's right, we should all get a good night's sleep and concentrate our energies on finding the site during the day."

Samantha nodded, somewhat relieved that she wouldn't have to make further contact with the artifact that night. She was feeling drained of energy, and sleep sounded like the perfect prescription.

"By the way," Neruda turned to Samantha, "how'd you know how to turn off the artifact?"

"What do you mean?" Samantha replied.

“Don’t you remember getting up and shutting this thing down?” Neruda asked.

“No...” Samantha’s eyes thinned to a line of fluttering eyelashes. She was concentrating her mind like a laser, and Neruda could see why Branson liked her so much.

“I have absolutely no recollection of getting up and turning anything off. Are you sure?” She looked from Neruda to Emily.

“I saw it, too,” Emily confirmed. “You got up from your chair as quickly as if your pants were on fire. You picked up the artifact and began turning it in your... your left hand while your right hand was touching glyphs, in what at least looked like a specific order. You seemed to know exactly what you were doing.”

“If I did that, I don’t remember.”

“Maybe your mind was a bit traumatized,” Emily offered, “and you’ve got a mild case of amnesia.”

“That doesn’t explain how she knew how to deactivate the artifact.” Neruda glanced at Emily. “The artifact somehow planted this knowledge inside you without you remembering. You acted without knowing your actions.”

“So what’re you saying?” Samantha asked. A nervous smile spread across her face, and her concentration scattered like smoke in the wind.

“I think we should stop speculating,” Neruda closed the case and buckled its latches with a loud, synchronized click. “The only thing I know for sure is that this thing is not an only child. It has brothers and sisters that’re nearby. And I can’t wait to find them.”

“How will you sleep tonight?” Emily asked with her southern accent fully lathered.

Neruda just laughed and picked up the case. “I’ll see you both in the morning. Good night.”

Neruda could hear Samantha’s and Emily’s muffled voices as he walked to his tent about twenty meters away. There was no movement in the desert air. It hung so perfectly still; Neruda felt its presence all the more.

Andrews was asleep. His headphones were still on and a book was draped across his chest, face down, spread out like a wounded bird of prey. From the sound of his breathing, Neruda knew he was in deep sleep. A place he wanted to be also, but he knew too much about the day’s events awaiting them. He couldn’t sleep. At least not yet.





Chapter Four

INITIAL CONTACT

The blueprint of exploration has an overarching intention; you are not the recipients of divine labor and meticulous training only to ensure that you may enjoy endless bliss and eternal ease. There is a purpose of transcendent service concealed beyond the horizon of the present universe age. If I designed you to take you on an eternal excursion into nirvana, I certainly would not construct your entire universe into one vast and intricate training school, requisition a substantial branch of my creation as teachers and instructors, and then spend ages upon ages piloting you, one by one, through this enormous universe school of experiential learning. The furtherance of the system of human progression is cultivated by my will for the explicit purpose to merge the human species with other species from different universes.

An Excerpt from *Tributary Zones*, Decoded from Chamber 22

WingMakers



Though Neruda lacked the infrared equipment, he did have a compass. It was still fairly early by his standards—about 2300 hours. He took a few supplies with him in a small pack, selected a standard

issue ACIO jacket that said *DoD Weather Research Center* in small block letters, and began walking in an easterly direction.

He took a wide berth around the campsite careful to avoid detection by Evans. Neruda coveted his privacy such as it was. He knew very well that Evans or anyone associated with the security team could track his whereabouts. All ACIO personnel had embedded tracking devices that the ACIO satellite network could follow. No one liked it, but the Labyrinth Group conceded that it was necessary when the technology was developed in the mid '60s. It *managed paranoia*, as Fifteen explained.

The implants were only the size of a grain of rice and inserted just below the neckline to the right of the spine. They transmitted an individual's unique body frequency. The ACIO discovered in 1959 that every person emitted a relatively stable and totally unique vibratory pattern. The bodyprint, as it was called within the ACIO, was every bit as reliable as a fingerprint. This discovery led to a technology that isolated a person's bodyprint and transmitted it to a satellite network jointly owned and operated by the NSA and ACIO.

Defections within the ACIO were considered the greatest risk to its ongoing success and future. The

bodyprint implant technology was the primary method through which ACIO employees were restrained from defecting. There were other technologies—both in development and fully deployed—that also minimized the risk. It was the one thing about the ACIO that Neruda had never been able to accept.

A coyote's mournful howl brought Neruda to a full stop to get his bearings.

He had cleared the campsite and was picking his way through the sparse Pinion trees and sagebrush. The moon was a thin, florescent sickle, its light as faint as a tired whisper despite the clear night air. In contrast, the stars almost glared at the desert landscape and managed to reveal enough desert flora and rocks so Neruda could pick his way at a comfortable pace.

He felt more confident as he went out of visual range of the campsite so he turned on his flashlight and picked up his pace. His flashlight seemed uncomfortably powerful against the dark desert, and he felt like he was intruding into a restricted world.

He made it to the top of the ridge he had pointed out to Emily only fifteen minutes earlier. He could see it, even without infrared. It looked just as Samantha said. A lonely, phallic-shaped sandstone formation looming

over its neighborhood of gnarled trees, intricate sagebrush, and stunted rock outcroppings.

When the binoculars came down from his eyes he could tell the site was less than two kilometers away. Neruda assessed his situation. He wasn't particularly tired. Maybe a little winded from the climb, but otherwise his body and mind were wide-awake. The air temperature was cool, but the climb up the ridge left him feeling warm.

Without hesitation, he walked towards the rock structure like it was home.

* * * *

The smell of coffee and bacon woke Andrews even before the morning light seeped through the dark, green skin of the tent. He rolled over in his sleeping bag and heard the book crash as it found the red, rocky floor. It brought his eyes open with a start. No Neruda. His sleeping bag was empty and undisturbed.

"Are you guys awake yet?" It was Emily radiating her cheerful voice outside the tent.

“Yeah, we’re up,” Andrews replied through an unconcealed yawn, “but I haven’t seen anything of Neruda. He must’ve gotten up early.”

“It’s *early* right now. It’s only six,” Emily retorted, her voice less cheerful.

“Well, if you haven’t seen him and he’s not in here, then he’s probably with Collin or Evans.”

“No, they’re eating breakfast, and they never mentioned seeing Neruda.”

Andrews unzipped his sleeping bag and stood up. “Maybe he liked the walk so much last night that he took another this morning. Shit, I don’t know.”

“We never went for a walk last night.”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll turn up soon. For one thing, the smell of coffee should draw him out if anything will. It’s working on me.”

“If you see him, tell’um we have eggs, bacon, and coffee ready.”

Andrews could hear her footsteps fade as she walked away.

Evans was reviewing maps when he looked up, “Any sign of Jamisson yet?” He took a sip of coffee.

None that I’ve seen,” Andrews replied, “but then I’ve hardly been looking for him either.”

“Maybe we should...”

“I can’t believe he’d just leave the camp,” Emily said.
“Did you see him at all last night?”

Andrews was heaping eggs and bacon on his plate. “I don’t know... I don’t remember seeing him at all last night. But when I sleep, I’m out cold.”

“He went to the site,” Evans said with incredulity in his voice. “He broke protocol again. He couldn’t wait until the morning. I’ll bet he went last night after we went to bed.”

Evans pulled out a small black box about the size of a pack of cigarettes. The ACIO only used secure lines when communicating, and the black box was a digital paging device. His large hand, resembling tanned leather, completely smothered the object as his thumb pressed a green button. He turned his back, and in a hushed voiced, spoke into its transmitter, “Immediately perform a bodyprint scan for Neruda. Send exact coordinates. Determine movement boundaries within one meter.” He pushed the *send* button and waited for message confirmation. An amber-colored light blinked and Evans put the pager back into his vest pocket.

The ACIO preferred single-loop, or non-real-time communication. It was much harder to decode because

encryption was changed every time a message was sent; thus the context was nearly impossible to derive. But it frustrated Evans sometimes because it took longer to get an answer.

“Is the artifact still in your tent?” Evans asked turning to Andrews.

“Far as I know. The case is there, I assume the artifact is inside.”

Emily jumped to Neruda’s defense, “Are you implying he’d take the artifact and go to the site without us?”

“He’s at the site,” Evans replied. “He probably didn’t take the artifact only because of its weight. But trust me, he’s there.”

“And why would he do that?” Andrews asked, his mouth full of food.

“You don’t know about last night, do you?” Emily asked.

“No... I was sleeping, remember?”

“Samantha and Jamisson were both communicating with the artifact. It somehow activated and sent them images of where its homebase was.

We got a pretty good fix on its location... about three kilometers east of our position.” Evans stood up from



the folding table, and pulled his pager out of his pocket. "What's taking them so damn long?"

"It's very early; maybe they're short-staffed," Emily offered.

"So when will we leave for this site?" Samantha asked.

"As soon as I get verification, I'll call our ride."

Andrews turned to look east for a quick glance. "Looks like a pretty good climb up that ridge. How're we going to carry the artifact?" He shoved more food in his mouth like a parolee's first taste of home cooking.

"We're all being airlifted. Don't worry." Evans' voice revealed that his thoughts were elsewhere. "Damn it, Jenkins! What's taking you so long?"

"So tell me what happened last night with you and the artifact." Andrews stole a quick look at Samantha and then anchored his eyes on the scrambled eggs he was devouring.

Samantha stuttered a bit, unsure of how to describe her experience. "I saw an image of its homebase."

"And we know it's three miles east because... because you saw an image of... of what?" Andrews asked.

"An unusual rock formation." Samantha found herself reluctant to talk. Her psychic abilities had been questioned and ridiculed her entire life, and she had

become expert at sniffing out what she called, trip-up questions. It had taught her the skill of calculated reticence even among her ACIO colleagues.

“She also saw a cavern—”

“Finally!” Evans exclaimed before Emily could finish her thought. He sat down and scanned the small display screen, cupping his hand to shield it from the awakening sun. His lips moved, but surrendered no sound as he read the message:

0527 – 0921: NERUDA BP ID’ED @
NML0237/L0355. 3.27 KILOMETERS ESE FROM
YOUR PRESENT POSITION. MOVEMENT
BOUNDARIES NEGATIVE. VITAL SIGNS INTACT.
EXTREMELY FAINT READINGS. ADVISE.

Evans pursed his lips momentarily and spoke into the pager, “No further actions required. Monitor and update. All is well. End transmission.”

“He’s at the site, and he’s sleeping,” Evans made no effort to conceal his frustration. He glanced at his wristwatch. “Let’s get ready. Bird’ll be here in less than fifteen minutes.”

Evans walked away without another word. Emily looked at Samantha as if to read her eyes for an explanation, but Samantha could only stare to the eastern ridge, her mind squarely on the task ahead.

“Did you notice if he took his sleeping bag?” Emily asked.

“He didn’t take it,” Andrews replied. “It was unused.”

“I can’t imagine Neruda sleeping out in the desert without a sleeping bag,” Emily said, “let alone his morning coffee. Something’s wrong.”

“You think he’s injured?”

“I don’t know, but something’s wrong.” Emily turned to face Samantha. “What do you feel?”

Samantha looked to Emily with a sense of empathy. “He’s okay. That’s what I feel.”

“You don’t feel he’s in any danger?”

“No.”

Emily’s face visibly relaxed. “If we’re going to keep up with Evans, we’d better get in high gear.”

“Shit, if there’s one thing you can count on, Neruda’s too damn smart to put himself in danger.” Andrews’ voice was consoling. He rustled a few paper plates into a plastic garbage bag, and handed it to Emily. “Anyway, I

have to disassemble a tent in five minutes that took us thirty to put up. I better run. See ya in ten.”

* * * *

“Last chance, do you want to walk it or ride?” Evans’ voice was barely audible above the roar of the helicopter. Sand was ripping through her hair and pricking her skin like tiny scythes eager for blood; Emily finally relented to ride.

“I just think we should send someone by foot in case he retraces his steps.” She sat down in the seat beside Evans with a scowl on her face.

“The point is,” Evans began, “is that he’s still sleeping or I would’ve been updated on his change of position.”

“How will we pick up his trail when we land?” Emily asked. “This thing puts out hurricane-force winds.” She waved her hands in the air wildly to emphasize her discontent.

“Look, we’ll land a half kilometer east of his position and double back. Okay?” Evans dropped his head to peer over his bifocals, which he had donned to look at a map. He knew it gave him an authoritative look.

“Okay.” Emily echoed silently with her lips.

It was only seconds later that Collin pointed to the spindly rock tower that loomed ahead. It was an eerie structure. Silhouetted against the rising sun, it looked like a stack of coins ready to fall at a mere breath.

The helicopter reached its position in less than five minutes. Emily kept an eye on the rocky terrain throughout the ride, while Evans was preoccupied with the map. Samantha closed her eyes seemingly troubled by the noisy ride, or perhaps to avoid a conversation with Andrews.

The copilot came back to the passenger chamber and told them that they were going to land directly below, and everyone should get ready to jump out. Samantha held her stomach and grimaced, obviously unsettled by the sudden drop in elevation.

They filed off the chopper quickly, Evans first, assisting everyone else to a safe exit. The copilot handed some backpacks to Evans and Collin, and then the aluminum case was delicately transferred to Evans. "We'll be on standby unless we hear from you, otherwise we'll rendezvous at these coordinates at 1800 hours. Good luck."

Evans acknowledged the copilot with a wave of his hand, and the helicopter sped away like a large beetle.

The ensuing silence swallowed them as only the desert can do.

“So where the hell do we pick up his trail?” Andrews asked, a little uncomfortable with how loud his voice suddenly seemed.

“Before we get started, there’re a few protocols we all need to bear in mind from this point forward,” Evans was pivoting his head to survey the landscape as if he were getting his bearings. “First, base communication is exclusively through me. Second, if we find anything peculiar—like the homebase of this artifact—we operate



in reconnaissance mode only. We secure the site; we don’t explore it. Understood?”

Everyone nodded as Evans swiveled his head to look for a response. “And keep hydrated. We’ll stop periodically to rest and take water. If anyone needs more frequent rests, just say so. Otherwise we’ll press on.”

Evans looked west for a few moments; his nostrils flaring like he was a bloodhound sniffing out its prey. “We have his coordinates, we’ll start there and then walk in a westerly, southwesterly direction until we spot his

trail. In this mixture of sand and stone, it shouldn't be too hard to see his footprints."

"What about Samantha?" Emily asked. "Couldn't she help?"

"Let's try it the old-fashioned way first," Evans answered. "If we don't pick up his trail in the next twenty minutes, we'll look at other alternatives – including RV."

Andrews looked to Evans after taking a long sip of water from his canteen. "If you really want to try the old-fashioned way, how bout yelling at the top of our lungs?"

"Let's find his trail first. Then we can yell." Evans laughed under his breath as he walked towards the coordinates that disclosed Neruda's bodyprint. Andrews adjusted his backpack and became the thing he hated the most: a follower.

Evans picked a path through two rock arroyos that were about 50 meters across. The rocks were the color of light cinnamon, and as the sun was rising in the east, they bore a reddish tint. The air was completely still and the jackets were beginning to feel a little too warm as they walked their way through the sparse desert underbrush.

* * * *

Only ten minutes into their trek, Collin found a footprint.

“Neruda!” Evans immediately yelled with his hands cupped around his mouth. He called several times in the direction of the footprints and waited for a response. A slight echo accompanied his call, but nothing resembling Neruda’s voice. Emily tried as well, but to the same effect.

“Isn’t it reasonable to assume he’s hurt?” Emily asked, turning to Evans. “I mean let’s face it, Neruda’s not prone to sleep in the open desert without a sleeping bag. Something happened to him.” Her voice trailed off to a whisper. “And it can’t be good.”

“We don’t know that for certain,” Evans argued. “His vitals were fine. I’m sure he’s just sleeping.”

“Then why isn’t he answering us?”

“Let’s just follow his trail and find out,” Collin replied like a mediator. “No sense standing around speculating.” Collin was very thin, mid-forties, with reddish-brown hair revealing a hint of silver over both ears, and a single streak on top to match. He seemed uncomfortable

standing in one spot for long, as if his bird-like legs couldn't support his body weight.

"NERUDA!" Evans called one more time, his voice sounding increasingly impatient at the return of silence.

"Let's go wake him up," Evans said.

They followed his tracks easily, until they came to a rock outcropping where his trail became more suspect. They fanned out, scattering themselves like ants in search of food. But his trail had disappeared. No one could find any more footprints.

"He's got to be somewhere in these rocks. Maybe there's a ledge or cave somewhere." It was Evans' voice yelling to the rest of the team. "Look for any signs of a crevice or opening in the rocks."

Emily could sense a growing concern in his voice. She could feel a tension in the air. Everyone was aware that they could be within a few meters of an ET homebase. Perhaps an active site. The disappearance of Neruda compounded the strange sense of impending doom or discovery.

"I found a print," shouted Samantha. "It's the same as the others... I... I think." She was kneeling near the print with a stick in her hand pointing it out as everyone arrived.

“Good,” remarked Evans. “Now we know which direction he was going.” Everyone fan out five meters apart and let’s walk slowly.”

“NERUDA!” Emily shouted again. A stronger echo sounded now that they were in the depths of a canyon wall. They were approaching a massive wall of rock that towered 40 meters in a nearly vertical line. They walked deliberately, their heads pivoting like surveillance cameras.

“I think I found another print,” Samantha said, “but I’m not sure.”

“It’s as if he disappeared into this wall of rock,” Andrews said. “Why would he have come here? Isn’t that the rock you saw in your vision?” He was pointing, like a hitchhiker, to the slender rock structure directly behind them about 100 meters away.

“Looks like a print, but it’s not a clear one. Unfortunately, there’s not much sand or loose rock around here.” Evans closed his eyes momentarily as if he were trying to clear his mind to focus on Neruda’s whereabouts.

“He’s nearby. I can feel him. He’s not sleeping. He’s awake.” Evans’ voice sounded distant, as if he was talking to himself. “I think he’s in there.” His hand was

pointing directly ahead to the sheer rock face of the canyon wall.

“If he’s in there, how’d he get in?” Emily asked.

“There must be an opening somewhere. Let’s examine the rock face carefully. There’s an opening somewhere.”

“Maybe we should use the artifact,” Samantha offered. “If it’s a homing device, and we’re this close—”

“Let’s find Neruda first,” Evans snapped, “and worry about the artifact’s homebase later.”

“But maybe they’re one and the same location,” Samantha said hesitantly.

“I doubt it.” Evans looked away, staring with his gunmetal eyes to the wall in front of them. “How the hell would he find the homebase without the artifact? Especially at night.”

“I don’t know, but then how’d I know how to turn the artifact off last night?” Samantha’s words hung weightless in the crisp morning air, surrounded in deep silence like an archipelago in a turquoise sea.

“Okay, we’ll look for an opening first... and if we don’t find anything in ten minutes, we’ll try the artifact.”



“Why not let Samantha fiddle with the little monster while we look for a doorway into this fucking mountain?”

Evans sighed. He looked to Emily and Collin to see their reaction to Andrews’ suggestion. “Emily, you look over there. Collin, try that side beyond those rocks. Andrews, take that ledge over there, just beyond those small trees. I’ll take the center so I can stay close to Samantha in case anything happens. If you see anything that even vaguely resembles an opening, let me know immediately.”

“I still don’t see why you think he’s in there,” Andrews was looking disdainfully at the massive rock wall in front of the team. “Maybe he was just fucking lost. One footprint shouldn’t—”

“Look,” Evans said, barely checking his anger, “I *feel* that he’s in there. That’s good enough for me. If it’s not good enough for you, look elsewhere, but stop arguing with me.”

Andrews looked down pretending to examine the footprint.

“Let’s go.” Evans started to walk away and then stopped abruptly to look at Samantha. “Are you okay with this?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m sure I’ll be okay.” She smiled weakly, resigned to the fact that she’d be alone with the artifact.

“I’m only seconds away. Call if you need anything.”

“Good luck,” she managed to say under her breath as they dispersed to their assigned search areas. Emily waited while the others walked away.

“Samantha,” Emily said quietly, “are you going to RV Neruda?”

“It doesn’t sound like I need to. Evans knows he’s in there. He’s SL-Fourteen. I’m not going to argue with him.”

“They’re not perfect,” Emily said. “I’ve heard stories about their psychic abilities, too, but I think it’d be a good idea to RV him if for no other reasons than to corroborate Evans’ assumptions.”

“I can do that,” Samantha offered.

“Thanks, you’re a sweetheart.”

“You’re very welcome,” Samantha replied, smiling to the ground.

“Oh, by the way,” Emily asked, “do you remember how to turn off the artifact if it re-activates?”

“I’ve no idea, but then that didn’t stop me before. Besides, I think we’re acquainted now. I have a feeling it

will behave differently with me now.”

“I hope you’re right,” Emily patted her lightly on the shoulder as she walked by in pursuit of Neruda’s whereabouts. She liked Samantha’s shy, sensitive nature. It reminded her of herself some years earlier. Before the cancer.

The wall of rock loomed before them, blocking the sun’s rays and casting a sense of surreal beauty and mystery. In the shadow of the wall the air was cool, but the absolute calm made it tolerable even without a jacket. The rocks that had fallen from the mammoth wall over the millennium were the size of small houses. It was easy to imagine how it might have looked and sounded when they fell like glacial shards.

Samantha busied herself with the task of setting up RePlay and preparing for her encounter with the artifact. She always preferred to work alone when she was doing RV work. All she required was a data input, which were usually search coordinates and time frame. It was odd, but if she knew too much about the search parameters, she was less likely to be accurate. Branson called the phenomenon Ghost-Knotting, somehow implying that too much knowledge about the search confounded the free flow of psychic energy.

Samantha had experienced this only once before, and it troubled her now because she was in similar circumstances. She knew the subject, location, and the objectives of the search. Consciously, it would be hard to let go of her knowledge and simply see and hear the images that press upon her during a Remote Viewing session. The images are so delicate and fragile. They require complete absorption. Otherwise, they dissipate before they can be understood and made sensible by RePlay.

As she donned her headgear, affectionately called the Brain Shell, she opened the case. The artifact was quiet. She was a little surprised. Maybe she had turned it off permanently. Or maybe its mission was completed last night.

She looked over the object carefully, touching its casing as if it were a newborn babe. She flipped the switch for RePlay, adjusted the capture sensitivity, settled into a sitting position with legs crossed Indian style, and closed her eyes like heavy doors shutting out the noise of a busy street.

At the last second, she had changed her mission objectives from locating Neruda to identifying the location of the artifact's homebase. She rationalized that

Neruda would be there anyway, and with this strategy, she'd kill two birds with one stone.

Within moments, she began to see an image emerge on the screen of her mind. Her boss referred to this phenomenon as BS Static because the Brain Shell, when it was first turned on, often produced an image of its own in the RV operative. It had something to do with its electrical field and its proximity to the visual cortex. However, this image was unlike anything she'd ever seen before.

Three hazy shapes were forming that looked like green rectangles floating in a gray-brown light. Her mind's eye squinted in reflex to the diffuse shapes, hoping that she could resolve the shape and purpose, but nothing she did made a difference. They looked a little like doorways—though she didn't intuit that that was their purpose.



The rectangles, hovering in space, began to spin—each in different directions. The first remained vertical, spinning counter clockwise; the second rotated forward lengthwise like a windmill; and the third spun clockwise in the vertical plane. Without warning, she became aware that the

artifact was humming and that it was somehow connected to the image—the motion—she saw.

She decided to test the door hypothesis and approached the objects. As she came closer they stopped, and the humming from the artifact became silent. She thought about stopping the session, but there was something about the way these rectangular shapes commanded her attention. There was a presence, a power that they exuded, which she had never before encountered. It seemed natural and unnatural at the same time, and it was this paradox that drew her forward.

Samantha reached out to touch the middle object, and as she did, the shape changed. It began to take on characteristics of a human male, elderly, tall, bearded, looking the part of a wizard with eyes that bore into hers with such intensity she could only turn away. “Do not fear us,” a voice filled her, reverberating inside. It was as if every cell in her body had suddenly grown ears.

“We are what you seek, what you have always sought,” the voice continued. It was authoritative, yet gentle. “You are being led even at this very moment to find what we have left for you. It is already within your grasp, and when you find your fingers reaching for it,

close them securely without hesitation. Without fear. We tell you that it is the only way. The only way.”

The words gave way to silence. Samantha looked again at the being that was before her. It had reverted to the form of a rectangle. Hovering like a green, featureless door.

She spoke from pure instinct. “What is within our grasp?”

“The way into our world,” the voice replied.

“Your world?” She echoed without thinking.

“You will only find our world if you proceed without fear. It is the only barrier into our world that is impenetrable.”

“Why do you want us to find *your* world?” Samantha asked, aware that her voice sounded perplexed.

“We have been within your species since its creation on this planet that you call Earth. We are within your DNA—encoded into the invisible structures that surround and support your DNA. Our world is both within you and more distant than your mind can comprehend. You will find our world because you need our assistance to awaken a part of your nature that is hidden from your view behind the languages of your world.”

“Hidden?” Samantha asked. “In what way?”

An image of Earth, encircled in a latticework of light filaments, filled the surface of the center rectangle. It was as if a three-dimensional movie were being projected on its surface. "Your planet is of interest to an extraterrestrial species that you are not aware of at this time. It is a species more advanced and more dangerous than your average citizen can imagine. If humankind is destined to be the stewards of this genetic library called Earth, which we so carefully cultivated and exported to this galaxy, then it will need to defend itself from this predator race."

The image of Earth enlarged as if a camera were slowly zooming in on the diminutive blue sphere, floating in the vastness of an ink-black space. Samantha began to notice several pulsing lights that seemed to mark strategic locations on the planet. Her eyes locked onto the general area of New Mexico, where she saw a location marker.

"What is hidden from you," the voice continued, "is that your planet is part of an interconnected universe that operates in ordered chaos outside the constructs, instruments, technologies, and formulaic inventions of your scientists. There is something beneath the particle and wave, beneath the subconscious, beneath the

spiritual resonance of Earth's greatest teachers, and this Language of Unity remains hidden from you. It is encoded in your DNA. We did this. And we placed the triggers within your DNA that would awaken your ability to survive a shift in your genetic makeup."

"Why? Why do we need to make a genetic shift?" She couldn't contain her skepticism, but as she spoke the words she could feel her fear begin to rise. Whatever she was interacting with was an unknown, and she knew that to trust anything or anyone in a self-directed RV session was folly.

"You will find out soon enough," the voice replied. "After this encounter, you will feel a new confidence in your powers of inquiry. It is the one element that will sustain you in the face of doubt and fear that will confront you in the weeks ahead.

On a level that you have never seen, you are a holographic entity that is woven throughout all things, and when you touch into this feeling, you awaken a frequency of your consciousness that will guide you into our world. You have no reason to believe us, yet you know our words have no other purpose than to awaken a part of you long dormant. We



are the WingMakers. We leave you in the Light that is One.”

The rectangles blurred into a greenish-gold light that completely filled her vision. The sound of Andrews’ distant voice broke her concentration, and she regained her human composure, faintly aware that she had lost contact with the most amazing force she had ever seen.





Chapter Five

INITIAL CONTACT

As it is my nature to be seven-fold, there are seven universes that comprise my body. Within each of these, a species of a particular DNA template is cast forth and is nurtured by Source Intelligence to explore its material universe. Each of these species is sent forth from the Central Race into the universe that was created to unveil its potential and seed vision. Your species will converge with six other species in a distant future that will reunite my body as the living extension of known creation. While this may seem so distant as to have no relevance to your time, it is vital for you to understand the scope of your purpose. You can think of these seven species as the limbs of my body rejoined to enable me/us total functionality within the grand universe. This is my purpose and therefore your own as well.

An Excerpt from *Tributary Zones*, Decoded from Chamber 22

WingMakers



Very few people in the mysterious world of Fifteen made him uneasy, but Darius McGavin was one of them. McGavin was the director of the NSA's

Special Projects Laboratory. Ostensibly, McGavin masqueraded as Fifteen's supervisor because the ACIO had been established as an unacknowledged department of the Special Projects Laboratory when UFO activity became an imperative in the late 1940s. Technically, Fifteen reported to McGavin.

Fifteen's stealth and intellect were so refined that McGavin was completely unaware of the real scope of the ACIO, its true mission and objectives, or the existence of the Labyrinth Group and its TTP with the Corteum. It was truly a masterful cover-up considering the paranoia and technological prowess of the NSA.

But what really disturbed Fifteen was that McGavin was making an unscheduled, short-notice visit, which could only mean one thing: a serious problem was underfoot. Very often these serious problems were rumors about the ACIO's clandestine initiatives with the military industrial complex, or private sector, industry partners.

Fifteen found these short-notice visits a supreme annoyance. McGavin was arrogant, and splendidly ill informed; a combination that Fifteen could only tolerate in small doses. He had already arranged a series of urgent meetings surrounding his obligatory meeting with

McGavin. If he were lucky, McGavin would be back enroute to Virginia in a mere 30 minutes.

It was 1100 hours when the knock on his door reminded him to look chipper and smile like a party host. His back spasms were attacking him more than usual, but he never used painkillers or any kind of medical aid. He ambled over to the door with his white cane, rehearsing his smile one last time.

“Darius, how good to see you.”

“Good to see you as well.” McGavin replied. “What’s with the cane? You’re not actually getting old are you?” He snickered as he walked by Fifteen to seat himself at his small, desk-side table. McGavin set his briefcase down and gathered himself in the waiting chair, running his hands over his hairless head as if some phantom hair still remained.

“I’m just having a few back spasms the past few weeks. The cane, well, it’s just for sympathy.” He smiled politely, just as he had practiced.

McGavin was a rare combination of technical genius and political astuteness. Graduating from the Air Force Academy in 1975 top in his class, he went on to MIT, graduating with a mechanical engineering degree, and then adding an advanced degree in quantum physics

from Yale. He was the perfect student, blessed with the ability to study the professor's biases, and reflect them like a newly polished mirror. The NSA recruited him when he was only 23 years old and fast-tracked his career into the SPL.

In just eleven years, he became its director. Fifteen had already been the Executive Director of the ACIO for 18 years when McGavin took the reins at the SPL. Fifteen could barely stomach the charade of being a subordinate to the *indolent youngster*, as he often referred to McGavin within the Labyrinth Group.

"So tell me the nature of your visit," Fifteen intoned as he eased himself into his chair. His voice resonated with such absolute confidence that McGavin instantly shifted in his chair like a schoolboy called into the principal's office.

"Actually, I was hoping you could help me understand what these are?" McGavin opened a small, glass vial, which contained a small electronic device about the size and general shape of a thimble. Fifteen instantly recognized it as one of the ACIO's phone tap technologies they used for setting up their Listening Fences.

Fifteen put his bifocals on, picked up the device with his hand and examined it closely. "Looks like a wire tap to me. I could have one of our electronics people take an internal scan—"

"Two curious things have occurred this week that don't add up." McGavin's face took on a serious cast and his voice fell to a whisper.

"First, a Professor from the University of New Mexico has sworn in an affidavit that he was intimidated by the NSA to turn over an unusual artifact discovered only days ago by some student hikers. Secondly, we have evidence that two ACIO missions were launched to New Mexico—only a few miles from the discovery point of this artifact—in the past four days. One as recently as yesterday."

McGavin paused, taking inventory of Fifteen's body language, looking for any clues to embroider his analysis. Fifteen remained motionless in all respects, waiting for McGavin to continue his story.

"And then this morning our agents, in an attempt to corroborate this Professor's claim, did a routine sweep of his home and office. We found seven of these devices. They look similar to our own surveillance devices, but

they're more sophisticated, according to *our* electronics people."

"And you thought the coincidence of an ACIO mission to New Mexico and this Professor's sworn affidavit were irreconcilable. Right?" Fifteen had a pained expression on his face.

McGavin nodded. "Look, just tell me what's going on. You damn well know that you have to report your activities or I'm forced to assume you've gone rogue. You know the protocol under those circumstances. So just tell me straight out, what the fuck is going on?"

Fifteen pushed back his chair and stood up awkwardly. With cane in hand, he shuffled over to his desk and took out a large file folder. He plopped it on the table in front of McGavin. "Here's everything I know."

McGavin opened up the file and began to scan several documents. "You can't probe it?"

"We can't get anything out of the damn thing. It's a sealed technology. So tight we're completely perplexed. We sent two scientific teams to the general area hoping to find something else."

"And...?"

"Nothing so far," Fifteen replied.

McGavin's eyes turned again to the file documents.

"Why didn't you report this?"

"There was nothing noteworthy to report. We're only four days into our investigation—"

"Four days is a long time my friend. In this business, it can be a lifetime." McGavin set the file down. His fingers were nervously fidgeting with the plastic tab that read, ANCIENT ARROW.

"So you have an alien artifact, a project name, you've sent this professor into major panic, you wiretap his office and home, but you don't think you have anything noteworthy to share with me."

Fifteen listened intently. He restored the concerned look on his face, and painfully gathered himself into his chair. "I know you'd prefer more instant communication, but we have nothing to report—"

"You have a fucking alien technology! Now I'm not the expert about these technologies that you are, but if you can't probe this thing, then it's damn sophisticated. For all you know, it's a weapon or probe of some kind. The operating protocol states that any evidence of an alien technology must *immediately* be communicated with SPL. You know this as clearly as I do."

McGavin lowered his voice. "You know I have to set-up an investigation. It smells like a cover-up. I don't want to waste my time and energy investigating the most productive laboratory in the NSA's holdings. It's a fucking waste. But I have no choice."

"I completely understand," Fifteen said. "While it's an inconvenience, we'll cooperate in every way we can."

"You can start by having Evans contact Denise Shorter and arranging to have a shadow agent assigned to the Ancient Arrow Project. We'll keep the communication



loops open if we're involved in the project."

"Of course. He'll contact her tomorrow."

"No, today. I don't want any more delays in communication."

"Evans is on a field assignment until tomorrow. He's without secure communication—"

"Then have Jenkins make the arrangements," McGavin replied. "I don't give a shit who calls Shorter, just get it done immediately."

"Look, I'm well aware of all the rumors surrounding this fiefdom you've built. I know you like to play games, and I know you have powerful allies. But don't fuck with

me. Just communicate through standard channels. If you're too busy, then Li-Ching can do it for you. I don't care who performs the communication. I just want to have confidence that when you put a project name on a file folder that you'll send a duplicate file to my office within minutes. Not hours. Minutes. Understood?"

"Completely."

"And one more thing—"

A knock on the door interrupted McGavin.

"Yes," came Fifteen's voice.

The door opened slowly and a man poked his head into the office. "I apologize for the interruption, sir, but your next appointment is here. In which conference room would you like them to await you?"

"We were just finishing up," Fifteen said, "let's use the Hylo Room."

"Thank you, sir."

The door closed without a sound.

"You were saying...?" Fifteen reminded.

"What's so special about this artifact?"

"We don't know if anything is special about it. It may turn out that this thing is truly a sealed technology, which would be a shame, but nonetheless, if we can't probe it, there's not much we can do but place it in

storage and wait until we have the technology to probe it.

"I noticed you had nothing in the file about RV analyses. I assume you'll do an RV."

"Yes, of course."

"I'd like to see the RePlay tapes when you have them."

"Of course."

McGavin looked around the spacious office as if he were stalling. Fifteen knew that he was annoyed by the fact that another appointment had been scheduled so close to his own. "I will fry your ass if I find anything that looks even remotely suspicious about this project. You might think that you're well beyond the reach of my powers, but let me remind you that your budget has my signature on it. Don't fuck with me."

With that, McGavin stood up and opened his briefcase. "I assume I can take this with me?" He held the file folder that Fifteen had given him to read.

"Of course."

"I'll call Shorter in thirty minutes," McGavin said. "I trust she'll have spoken with Jenkins by then."

McGavin closed his briefcase, returned his chair to its previous position, and walked to the door, escorted by Fifteen. McGavin put his hand on the doorknob, stopped

short of opening the door, and looked directly into Fifteen's eyes. "Octavio, I have doubts about your motives and your operation. And these doubts... they trouble me. And when I'm troubled, I get paranoid. And this paranoia... it makes me ruthless."

"What're you trying to say?" Fifteen asked innocently.

"I can make your life a living hell if I can't trust you."

"You now know as much as I do about the Ancient Arrow Project," Fifteen calmly replied. "We'll all do a better job of keeping you informed. We just didn't think we had anything worthy of distracting you. I see now that we miscalculated. It won't happen again. I assure you."

"Pray that it doesn't."

The two shook hands and bid each other a good day.

Fifteen closed his office door. He laid his cane on the table and sat down in the same chair that McGavin had sat in moments earlier. He closed his eyes. His face completely relaxed. His hands went underneath the table and pulled out a small, black object. Fifteen leaned closer to inspect the device, and slowly smiled. A knock on his door interrupted him.

"Yes."

“Sorry to interrupt, but I was curious to know how your meeting with McGavin went.” It was Li-Ching. She was wearing a red wool skirt that draped to her ankles, and a sleeveless white silk blouse. Her raven-black hair was tied back in an exotic ponytail that was held together by a silver lattice of thread.

Fifteen held the tiny black object up for her to see, and smiled broadly like the Cheshire cat.

She sat down on the edge of the table next to Fifteen; a narrow slit in her skirt parted to reveal her ivory legs, perfectly turned as if by a lathe. “Judging from your face, it went pretty well.”

“Yes,” Fifteen replied, “but it’s a pity he doesn’t trust us.”

Fifteen took his cane and delivered a fatal blow to the electronic listening device that McGavin left behind.

“Only one this time?”

“Only one,” Fifteen sighed. “You’d think he’d give up on this pointless effort to wire my office.”

“He just wants to remind you that he’s watching and listening,” Li-Ching said. “You know the strategy, the more paranoid you are, the more mistakes you’re bound to make.”

“He wants to get rid of me.”

“No, he wants to get rid of the ACIO and its separate cover and independence. He’s no dummy. He knows that the only way he’ll ever seize control of the SPL agenda is if the ACIO is integrated within his department. That’s where he’s headed. Everything he does is designed to move him closer to that goal.”

“Perhaps if he knew what we really did, his interests would wane.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“The damn idiot ordered an investigation—ostensibly to determine whether we went rogue on the Ancient Arrow Project, but I’m sure his real agenda is to snoop into our technologies. They found the Level Five Listening Fence in Steven’s home and office.”

“Shit!” Li-Ching stood up and started pacing.

“He suspects we’re keeping the pure-state technologies and sending them diluted versions. This investigation will center on that. He wants proof. With that in hand, he’ll try to remove me.”

“God, what a waste of time.” Li-Ching said.

“He doesn’t know that.”

“Well, then he *is* a dumb-ass after all.”

“Let’s let him have his investigation, shadow agent, and anything else he requires. Evans will take care of

the SPL agent and you'll take care of all the communication protocols."

"Did you give him the Ancient Arrow file I prepared?"

"Of course," Fifteen replied. "He seemed satisfied, at least partially."

"Most of it's true anyway. I didn't have to doctor much."

"He wants the RePlay tapes from our RV department related to the artifact." Fifteen sighed. "You'll need to get Branson working on that immediately. I'd like to approve the script before we make the tape."

"Understood." Li-Ching's voice seemed far away as if she were thinking about an entirely unrelated issue. "You implied earlier that you want him to know what we really do around here. What did you mean?"

"Let's give him evidence of what he already believes is true. He doesn't have any clue about Labyrinth or Corteum. He may have heard some disjointed rumors, but nothing more. He believes we're rogue and that we've not shared some of our best technologies."

"You want Ortmann to leak some of our more benign pure-state technologies... like our listening fences?"



“Yes, can you have him put a list together as to which technologies he thinks we can live without?”

“No problem.”

“I want McGavin to feel victory. He’ll relax then, and get off our collective back.”

“Anything else?”

“Stevens is unstable,” Fifteen said. “I think he needs a reminder visit and a Level Seven Listening Fence.”

“What about memory restructure?”

“The damage’s done. If he suddenly forgets, it might only worsen our situation by alarming his colleagues who already know, not to mention McGavin. No, let’s have Morrison pay him a reminder visit ASAP. Jenkins can reinstall the listening fence.”

“Okay.”

Li-Ching sat down again on the table’s edge. Her skirt parted as she crossed her legs. Fifteen’s hand wandered to the exposed leg and he smiled with his mischievous eyes.

“Damn McGavin!” Fifteen’s fist pounded the table. “I can’t have my way with you right now... I just remembered that I need to confer with Jenkins on an urgent matter.”

He stood up abruptly and Li-Ching understood her time with him was finished. She kissed his cheek and whispered something in his ear. Fifteen's eyes narrowed as he listened attentively. Li-Ching finished as Fifteen's face visibly flushed to a reddish hue.

"Just in case McGavin managed to plant more than one listening device," Li-Ching said. She disappeared before Fifteen could utter a sound of protest. As the door closed, he struggled a moment to remember Jenkins' extension.

* * * *

Evans saw an indentation in the canyon wall out of the corner of his eye. It was small, only about half a meter high, but it was clearly an opening into the cliff face. He resisted the urge to call his colleagues. Instead he kneeled down and peered into the darkness of the fissure, and in a loud voice called Neruda's name several times. He listened with all his power, and a faint voice returned, "I'm here. I'm in here." There was more, but Evans couldn't understand the rest of it.

There was urgency in the voice that was unsettling. Something was awry. The voice sounded like Neruda's,

but lacked his normal vitality. He was hurt. That was the only plausible explanation. Evans yelled with all his force. "We'll be there in just a few minutes. Hang on."

He immediately stood up and yelled to his team. "I found him! Everyone follow my voice and come here!" He continued to yell, "I found him!" every few seconds. In a matter of minutes the entire team was assembled except for Andrews.

"What happened to Andrews?" Evans asked.

"He's carrying the Little Monster as he refers to it," Samantha said. "He offered." She put her arms out, palms up, as if implying a small miracle occurred.

"I can only imagine how long we'll have to wait," Evans said in disgust. "We don't have time. Collin, you and I will go ahead and locate Neruda. He's probably trapped himself in a narrow tunnel. I can't believe he'd do that... at night no less.

"The rest of you wait here for Andrews. We'll be back as soon as possible—hopefully with Neruda."

"Can't I join you?" Emily asked. "We don't both have to wait for Andrews." She looked to Samantha and then Evans.

“Okay, but be extremely careful, and stay right behind us. Samantha, keep yelling every so often so Andrews has something to track.”

“Okay,” she replied.

“Everyone has their flashlights, I presume,” Evans stated like a commandment. “I have a rope, first-aid kit, and some food and water. Anything else you can think of?”

Emily and Collin looked at one another and shook their heads.

“Then let’s go.”

The three disappeared into the open fissure like travelers moving through a portal into a new world. Evans went first and had the most difficulty getting through because of his physical size. Only after contorting his shoulders and head like a magician trying to release from a straight jacket did he find success.

On the other side of the opening was a large chamber or cavern about 20 meters in diameter, with an opening into darkness on the far side of the chamber. Their flashlights sliced effortlessly through the interior darkness, crisscrossing randomly across the brown stone.

“Neruda, where are you?” Evans shouted.

“I’m here,” came the faint reply.

“Can you give us directions to where you are,” shouted Emily.

“Good to hear your voices...” answered Neruda. “I’m straight ahead. Go to the opening and stay straight for about another twenty meters or so. You’ll come to a fork in the tunnel, stay to the right. However, before you take another step, listen carefully.

“This is homebase. I don’t have any real evidence yet. But as you move deeper into the interior, you’ll notice it becomes increasingly sophisticated in its design. And part of this sophistication is in its security system.”

“Come again?” Evans shouted.

“There’s some form of a security system surrounding this system of tunnels. I fell into one of its traps because I wasn’t expecting any such sophistication, but believe me, the entire place could be filled with traps. In other words, be extremely careful.”

“Any advice?” Collin asked.

“Go slowly and retrace my steps until you come to a glyph carved in the wall of the tunnel—it’s on the right side of the tunnel wall. I’m okay. If it takes you an hour to get here that’s fine, just get here safely.”

“Are you trapped?” Collin asked.

“Most definitely.”

“What happened? Maybe we can learn from your experience.”

“The problem is I don’t know what I did. I may have touched a pressure-sensitive pad, or tripped a wire. I’m not sure. All I know is that it happened so quickly that I couldn’t react fast enough to save myself. I fell quite a distance, but nothing’s broken.”

“Okay, we’ll take your advice. Be patient.” Evans yelled in return.

“Don’t worry, I’m not planning to go anywhere,” Neruda replied faintly.

Evans, Collin, and Emily looked like statues anchored to the ground. Their flashlights were scanning the floor of dust, dirt, and rocks looking for any sign of potential danger, and Neruda’s tracks. The light beam of their flashlights would occasionally illuminate an animal skull or skeletal carcass of a wayward rabbit stashed against the wall of the chamber like windblown trash collects against a fence.

“I think we have a clear path to the tunnel entrance,” Evans remarked.

Evans carefully picked his way toward the tunnel opening at the far end of the chamber. Collin, then

Emily, followed close behind, each trying their best to trace the exact same footprints that Evans left behind. As they entered the tunnel, the air became noticeably cooler and they could feel a slight downward slope to the tunnel's path.

"Can you see our lights yet?" Evans asked.

"No, but you'll understand why in a few minutes. Just keep advancing per my instructions."

Emily was comforted by the fact that Neruda's voice was getting louder. He seemed relaxed and in no imminent danger. She could feel his own optimism rise with every footstep.

"I'm trying to trace your steps," Evans yelled.

"That's fine, but try and avoid my last one," Neruda laughed, "it's a real dilly."

"This is the last time I'll ever travel without local communicators," Evans said under his breath.

"This whole trip was planned too quickly. We should've waited," Emily lamented.

Evans cast the beam of his flashlight down the narrow tunnel hoping to see some evidence of Neruda, but the beam blended into darkness before anything distinct could be identified.

Evans turned around to face Collin and Emily. "If this tunnel stays at this rate of slope, it goes down deep. It's going to get cold."

"Can you see our lights yet?"

"No. But turn off your flashlights for a moment," Neruda suggested. "I'll turn mine on and see if you can see anything."

Instant blackness engulfed them as their flashlights were turned off.

"There, I think I saw something about fifteen meters ahead. Yes, I definitely saw a light." Evans flicked his light back on. The walls of the tunnel were only about three meters across and tools had shaped them. Not much precision, but definitely a designed structure.

"Okay, Jamisson, we saw your light. We'll be there as fast as we can. Your voice sounds like it's below us. You said you fell. How far, do you know?"

"I'm not sure. I lost consciousness for some period of time—maybe ten minutes or so. I still have a helluva headache to confirm my fall."

"Okay, just take it easy and we'll get there shortly." Evans turned to Emily and Collin. "Let's stay very tightly packed. I'll keep my flashlight trained on the path ahead of us. Collin, position your beam on the right side of the

tunnel, and Emily, you watch the left. Stay alert. If you see anything that looks unusual, say so immediately and freeze your position. Understood?"

Though he had a tendency to be obnoxious, both Collin and Emily were glad that Evans was leading them. He instilled confidence through his every mannerism and movement. He seemed to extract exhilaration from such circumstances where others could only find fear.

As they inched their way down the corridor, Collin's voice broke the silence. "Stop!"

They froze in their positions. "What is it?" Evans asked.

"It's the glyph that Neruda mentioned earlier."

All of the flashlight beams converged on a hieroglyph intricately carved upon the rock wall of the tunnel. The wall had been carefully prepped and was relatively smooth in order to accommodate the detailed lines and pattern of the glyph.



"What did you make of the glyph on the wall?" Evans called out to Neruda.

"I've never seen anything quite like it before," he replied. His voice was unmistakably closer, but also coming from some distance below their position. "It's

related to the glyphs on the artifact, but it's different in many respects. Keep an eye out for my final step, it wasn't much farther that I tripped something."

Evans' flashlight identified Neruda's final footprint about two minutes later. A skid mark veered off to the right of the tunnel, but there was no sign of a door or exit path.

"Let's position all of our light on this area." Evans used his flashlight beam like a laser pointer to define the area he wanted them to collectively illuminate. "Okay, do you see anything that looks like a seam?"

"Nothing so far," Collin replied.

Emily pointed to the top of the tunnel where her flashlight was positioned. "What's that?"

"It looks like a ventilation duct or small opening of some kind," Evans said. "Maybe that's how we can hear Neruda."

"Jamisson, say something," Evans suggested.

"Something."

"A little more of your usual verbosity would be helpful," Emily said playfully.

"Okay, but I'm warning you, my life story is pretty boring until I hit the age of five or six—"

“You’re right, it’s the source of his voice,” Collin said excitedly.

“Jamisson, this is Evans, we found a ventilation duct or something in the ceiling of the tunnel. It’s a small hole, maybe ten centimeters in diameter. We also found your last footprint, but there’s no sign as to where you fell. We can’t see any seams or edges indicating a door or exit path. Any recommendations?”

“Do you have any rope?”

“Yes, about ten meters in length I suppose.”

“Can you fit the rope through the opening?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Evans said.

“Try feeding the rope through the opening, as much as you can. With a little luck, I’ll see it.”

“What kind of a room are you in?” Emily asked.

“It has tall ceilings—maybe ten or twelve meters, it’s about three meters in diameter and the ceiling is arched like a dome. It’s definitely a construction... an elaborate construction. But I can’t see any openings, and like you, I can’t find any seams. I don’t exactly know how I even got in here.”

Evans was on his tiptoes trying to get the rope through the opening. He looked a little like a giant, awkward ballerina. The opening in the ceiling was about

half a meter beyond his reach, and the rope was too limp to thread the opening without Evans jumping.

“This may be stupid to jump around here, but it’s the only way I’m going to be able to feed this rope through. You two stand back. If I go down, Collin goes back for help. Emily, you stand watch. Here’s my base communicator.” He handed it to Collin.

“I could boost you into position,” Collin said.

“I doubt it. I weigh too much for you. And we can’t afford to lose two of us.”

Emily agreed. Collin resembled a walking stick.

“Why don’t you boost Collin up,” Emily suggested.

“He’d be like a feather to you.”

“I’m not willing to risk two of us, if it can be done with one. Let me try it first myself. If I fail and nothing happens, I’ll boost Collins. Get back at least five meters.”

Evans waited for them to retrace their steps backwards. He jumped perfectly to the hole like a basketball player dunking the ball. The rope sailed in cleanly. And then fell out. Evans came down hard, but safe.

Ten minutes later they had found an appropriately sized rock to tie to the end of the rope, and Evans once again dunked the rope into the hole. This time it stayed.

“Do you see anything?” Evans shouted as he began feeding the rope through the opening.

“Yes, but you’ll need a lot more rope to reach me.”

“Any chance you could climb the wall and grab it?”

“None.”

“If I could get you a rope, would you be able to make it to the top of the chamber?”

“I think so, but it’s not clear to me what we’d do next. Last time I checked, I couldn’t fit through a ten centimeter hole.”

“We can widen the hole,” Evans replied, a little irritated. “But can you make it to the top of the chamber?”

“Yeah, there’s something of a ledge that circles the top of the walls before they become the dome ceiling. It could be useful.”

Evans turned around to face Emily and Collin. “I need you to go back to the entrance. Contact Jenkins and inform him of our situation. I’ll get Jamisson out and we’ll meet you back at the entrance in two hours. If we’re not there in two hours, have Jenkins send a

security detail with search and rescue equipment immediately.”

“How are you going to get Neruda out by yourself?” Collin asked in a mystified voice.

“Before we do anything,” Emily said, “can I suggest we try to replicate Jamisson’s last footstep and see if we might be able to trigger the passage to open without falling into the chamber ourselves?”

“It’s too dangerous,” Evans interjected.

“It seems to me if it’s pressure sensitive, we should be able to touch the same spot and the doorway should open. Maybe we could keep it open.”

“I agree, it’s worth a try,” Collin said. “I don’t see how you’d have any chance of getting him out otherwise.”

“Neruda, are you listening to this?” Evans asked.

“Yes.”

“Opinions?”

“Yeah, Emily and Collin should do as you suggested. The sooner the better.”

Evans whispered. “Please, go now. And be careful to retrace our steps exactly as we came in. We’ll be out within two hours. Go.” His arm waved them on like a sea swell.

Emily and Collin walked away stunned. They could see no reason for Evans' confident posture. It was even more baffling that Neruda would agree with him. Something strange was going on. But they dutifully fulfilled their part of the plan and rejoined Andrews and Samantha, at the entrance. They made good time, requiring only 17 minutes.

The light hit their eyes hard as they stumbled from the narrow opening into the waiting arms of Andrews and Samantha who helped them ease through the crack.

"What the fuck took you so long?" Andrews asked.

"We found Neruda. He's okay," Emily began. "But he's trapped in some sort of a chamber, and we can't get him out without supplies. Evans stayed behind. They're going to try and get out on their own, but if they're not out in another... hour and a half, we're supposed to have Jenkins send a security team."

"We need to alert Jenkins now," Collin reminded her.

Collin pulled out the base communicator that Evans had given him and fired the RECORD button. He spoke into the microphone haltingly. "Subject found. Search and rescue likely. Update in ninety minutes. Please prepare for immediate dispatch of S&R in ninety

minutes. Will send exact coordinates in next communiqué. Please confirm.”

Collin played back the recording and then hit the SEND button satisfied with his message’s accuracy and brevity. Everyone knew that Jenkins and Evans hated long, detailed messages.



It was a little past ten in the morning, and the warmth of the desert sun was beginning to make itself known. Andrews had set-up a makeshift campsite, and they all settled in to wait out the next 90 minutes. Emily busied herself in the task of making coffee on the solar heating pad. Collin looked over the maps to get the exact coordinates for the search and rescue mission.

“It’s the homebase isn’t it?” Samantha asked Emily.

“Neruda seems to think so.”

“Did you see anything... anything unusual?”

“The tunnels are artificial. There’s a glyph on the wall of the tunnel similar to the glyphs on the artifact. Somehow Neruda ended up in the equivalent of a jail cell, but we couldn’t find any exit path or door in the tunnel. It was as if he was literally dematerialized and placed in holding—”

“For what?”

“We don’t know.”

“They’re protecting something,” Samantha said.

“What’re they protecting?” Andrews asked as he approached Samantha. “I mean, if it’s more artifacts like our little monster here, what’s to protect?”

“A genetic technology,” she said both as a statement and question.

“How do you know this?” Emily asked.

“I had another experience with the artifact during an RV session just before Evans discovered the opening in the wall. I saw images—”

“Like?”

“Like an image of what these ETs look like.”

“Woah...” Andrews started. “How do you know you can believe the image this thing put in your head?” He was pointing to the aluminum case that held the artifact.

“These same ETs built the equivalent of a Goddamn mousetrap, which now holds Neruda prisoner. Doesn’t exactly engender trust in my little ol’ heart.”

Samantha started to say something and then stopped.

“Jesus, Andrews,” Emily said, “Can we let her tell us what she saw without interruptions and your bloody opinions?”

Andrews kicked the loose rocks beneath him and watched them scatter. His lips danced silently with words that no one could hear.

“All I’m saying,” Samantha said slowly, “is that the images I saw were of something altogether different... more advanced... maybe human, maybe something else. It varied from a human-like presence to a geometric shape like... like a rectangle.” Samantha stopped for a moment as if she was trying to remember something.

Collin looked up from his maps and listened intently.

Samantha began again, “I can’t pretend that I know what or who they are, but this image is as clear to me as you are, and it’s not the image of a truant or warring species. My sense is that they’re benevolent—even helpful to our species. They’ve stored something here that was supposed to be discovered by us, and it has something to do with genetics. It’s all part of a masterful plan.”

“That of course includes Neruda being fucked over.” Andrews mumbled.

“I don’t know about Neruda,” Samantha explained, “but I’m sure of what I’ve told you. They probably designed a variety of protective mechanisms to ensure

that we discover this site instead of someone else. There's something here that they want us to have."

"So you think there's something inside this mountain... a gift from these unknown ETs, with our name on it?" Andrews couldn't contain himself. He was one of the few within the ACIO that didn't have a healthy respect for RVs and the job they did, or anything else that went bump in the night. To Andrews, RVs were simply glorified psychics.

"Yes." Samantha answered quietly.

"Collin, did you get any message back from base yet?" Emily asked.

"Yeah, we're confirmed," he glanced at his watch, "sixty-eight minutes and counting."

"So what are they?" Andrews asked. "Friendly ETs who came to earth twelve hundred years ago, played around with the Indians, and then stored something inside a mountain for us to find? I buy that."

"These are just feelings you have, aren't they, Samantha?" Collin asked quietly, trying to mitigate Andrews' sarcasm. "You don't actually have anything on RePlay, do you?"

Samantha shifted her position on a large rock, and brushed back her hair with both of her hands. "No.

When I went back to RePlay the images weren't recorded. Somehow they bypassed the capture sensitivity of RePlay. They're probably based on the imagery projected by the artifact, and I wasn't even in RV mode. But these images are powerful. I mean real powerful. I can't overstate that."

"Okay, I'm still confused," Andrews said. "You saw an image of a geometric shape—I believe you said rectangle—and from that you feel that there's something buried inside this mountain, perhaps a form of genetic technology. Is that about it?"

"I saw several images. The other image was of the earth floating in space and there was a grid surrounding it like filaments of light, and at certain cross-sections, I could see a pulsing glow—"

"How many?" Emily asked.

"Maybe three, no, maybe five. I'm not sure."

"Did you notice where they were located?" Collins asked.

"The only one I paid attention to looked like it was here... New Mexico." She squinted her eyes and then closed them completely for a few moments.

"I had an overwhelming impression that the technology was stored in this very place," she added. "It

was left here by this race for a very specific reason, but I'm not sure what it is..." Her voice trailed off into silence. Everyone had been listening so intently to her voice that they hadn't noticed Neruda's muffled pleadings, just inside the canyon wall, for coffee.

"My God, you made it!" Emily cried as she saw Neruda break through the crevice opening into the light. The angle of the sun had cleared the wall and was now shining—in all its glory—directly on Neruda. Blinded by the sudden light, he squatted to the ground and shielded his eyes.

"The warmth feels great, but I wish someone could dim the damn lights." Neruda's eyes were thin slits looking for a familiar face. He found Emily first. "I don't suppose you have any coffee made? I have a splitting headache."

Emily laughed with a mixture of relief, joy, and ample surprise.





Chapter Six

IN TRANCE

Your consciousness is faceted to express light into multiple systems of existence. There are many, many expressions that comprise your total Selfhood, and each expression is linked to the hub of consciousness that is your core identity. It is here that your ancient voice and eyes can multi-dimensionally observe, express, and experience. This is your food source for expansion and beautification. Place your attention upon your core identity and never release it. With every piece of information that passes your way, discern how it enables you to attune to this voice and perception. This is the only discipline you require. It is the remedy of limitation.

An Excerpt from *Memory Activation*, Decoded from Chamber Seven

WingMakers



Red rocks emphasized the sky's azure blue. The starkness of the high desert was lunar. Immaculately natural. The sun rendered jackets and vests superfluous, leaving the air temperature perfect for cotton T-shirts and shorts.

The excitement of seeing Neruda and Evans emerge from the canyon wall drew the team together as if an invisible web bound them. Emily embraced Neruda, momentarily forgetting her professional distance. Andrews and Collin each shook Neruda's hand and welcomed him back "among the living", while Samantha simply watched with a broad smile.

A flurry of questions erupted about how Neruda got free and the nature of his rescue, but Evans and Neruda fended them off for later, showing more concern about Neruda's physical needs: to get warm and feed his empty stomach.

Once they had all settled down, cross-legged around a small fire that Andrews had managed to craft from dead pinion branches, Neruda began his story. A cup of coffee warmed his hands.

"All I can tell you," he began, his tone becoming introspective, "is that I went on an innocent walk after our experience last night with the artifact. I only wanted to hike to the top of the ridge to see if I could see the rock structure that Samantha had told us about.

"When I got to the top and saw this thing," he pointed to the structure directly behind them, "I had an

irresistible urge to see it up close. I wasn't tired, in fact, I felt energized. So I hiked for about fifteen minutes... the whole time knowing I was doing something... something stupid—and yes, I knew it was against protocol. But in my defense," he turned to Evans, "I thought I was following orders."

Evans got up and asked Collin for his communicator. "I've already heard this, so forgive me, but I need to update Jenkins." Evans walked away and began pushing buttons on his communicator.

"Orders from whom?" asked Collin.

"As odd as it may sound, the artifact. I'm certain it planted something into my head," Neruda replied. "There's no other explanation."

No one, including Evans, would dispute, or even question, Neruda's conclusions. He was well known within the ACIO as being scrupulously accurate about his observations and motivations. But his statement drew blank stares from Emily, Andrews, and Collin. Only Samantha nodded knowingly.

"And the *something* you're referring to," Samantha suggested hesitantly, "was an irresistible motivation to find its homebase. Right?"

“Yeah, but I’m amazed that anything could compel me to do this. It seems completely implausible...”

Andrews leaned forward to poke the fire into rebirth. While there was no need for more heat, it gave his hands something to do. “How’d you find this hole in the wall in the middle of the fucking night? And more importantly, why’d you go inside alone? That’s what I’d like to know.”

“I just knew where to go,” Neruda said. “I knew exactly what to do once I got near the canyon wall. I had this image stored inside my brain, it... it was like seeing a split image—one inside your head, the other in external reality—and then seeing these two images morph into one image the closer I got.

“When I saw the opening, I looked inside with my flashlight before I entered. I saw on the far side of the cavern a dark hole that looked like a tunnel. It looked artificial... manmade. But of course I was thinking the whole time that it was the artifact’s homebase.

“I climbed inside,” he continued, “and all I could do was to walk toward that tunnel as if my life depended on it somehow.”

“Weren’t you afraid?” Emily asked.

“No. I was completely calm. I had a mission coded inside my head and everything else was shut out.”

“So you followed the tunnel and fell into the chamber?” Collin said.

“Remember the glyph on the tunnel wall?” Neruda asked.

“Yeah,” Collin and Emily chimed.

“The instant I saw it, I had verification. The glyph was clearly from the same lineage—though it bore a different design. In my excitement I picked up my pace. A few steps later I slipped on something and fell... must’ve been nearly seven meters, to a stone floor... into the very same chamber you discovered me in this morning.”

“Okay, so tell us how the hell you got out?” Collins inquired.

“I figured out how to climb the wall high enough to grab the rope. Evans pulled me to the top and together we enlarged the ventilation hole large enough that I could crawl through—”

“But that was solid rock, how’d you enlarge the hole... I mean what tools did you have?” Emily asked.

“Evans has a knife large enough to filet a whale. It wasn’t that hard to enlarge the hole. The rock is

sandstone, the wall wasn't very thick, it breaks apart pretty easy." Neruda replied casually.

Evans walked back to the group and sat down on a large rock opposite Neruda. He had his communicator out and was checking its small display screen and fidgeting with one of its buttons. His face looked expressionless.

Andrews looked puzzled. "Am I the only idiot who doesn't understand what the hell is going on here?"

"None of us know," Samantha said as if she were in a room with sleeping wolves. "We can be sure of one thing, though. The creators of this artifact have brought us to this place, and if they didn't want us here, we wouldn't be here."

"You may be right," Evans swallowed hard, "but we haven't really discovered anything yet. We have an empty chamber and a glyph on a tunnel wall. Seems like a waste if this is the extent of its homebase."

"Okay, okay, I'm just denser than the rest of you," Andrews said with a scowl. "But could somebody tell me, what's our working hypothesis? I mean, shit, we do have one... a working hypothesis. Right?"

Evans remained silent.

Neruda looked around at the faces of his team. He knew they were reaching out for leadership right now. And he knew they expected him to provide it. "The artifact's led us to this site for a specific reason that we've not yet determined. But it has something to do with what lies behind this canyon wall, and the sooner we start looking, the sooner we'll find out why we're here."

"But the place is booby-trapped," Andrews exclaimed. "How're we supposed to find anything if we're being trapped in chambers?"

Neruda looked down at his watch, ignoring Andrews' question. "We have exactly seven hours and thirteen minutes before we have to rendezvous with the choppers."

Neruda struggled to his feet, tipping slightly as the blood shifted in his body like pebbles within a rain stick. Emily came to his aid momentarily as he steadied himself.

"You didn't sleep much last night did you?" She asked.

"You know, the thing about a cold stone floor is that it makes for a very long night." He smiled wearily. "But

my body is coursing with coffee—It was regular, wasn't it?"

"Sorry, I only brought decaf."

"Shit."

"We have aspirin in the first-aid kit. Do you want me to get some for you?" Emily asked.

"Thanks... make it three." Neruda turned to Andrews who was getting his pack loaded. "The way we avoid getting trapped is to bring the artifact with us. It'll show us what to do."

"Oh, great, boss," Andrews said without looking up, "my arms are already dragging on the ground from carrying the little monster all morning, so if we're bringing it along, find another sherpa. Pahleease."

Neruda could only laugh. The image of Andrews carrying the artifact in the rock-strewn desert, cursing at everything along his way, struck him as funny.

"Maybe it's put something into your head, too." Neruda commented. "I mean carrying it around all morning, I'll bet your head is programmed with God knows what." He laughed again and grabbed the case.

"I'll take it Jamisson," Evans offered. "You didn't get any sleep, and that bruise on your hip can't feel too good either."

“You have an injury?” Emily asked instantly. “I thought you said you were fine after the fall.”

“I’m okay,” Neruda replied. “Evans is just being kind.”

“Let’s get going then,” Evans said firmly.

They all donned their packs and walked silently to the thin slit of darkness protruding from the canyon wall. Solemn faces wound their way to the opening and stopped short of entering. They gathered around Evans.

“Listen carefully.” Evans set the case down on the ground and tucked his sunglasses inside his shirt pocket. “Stay close and trace the footsteps we’ve already left behind. We’ll rest about every five minutes. Don’t touch anything. If you see anything that looks suspicious, holler, otherwise, stay quiet. We don’t know what we’re getting into, so let’s keep a low profile.”

“And what do we hope to accomplish in six hours?” Andrews asked.

“Stay alive.” Evans answered as he took his pack off and tossed it inside the opening as if he were feeding a large, hungry mouth.

Andrews laughed. Nervously.

* * * *

“Goddamn asshole,” McGavin spat, slamming the phone down. The metal and wood cabin echoed his words for a brief second. The Gulfstream V had a lively ambiance, even at 35,000 feet doing 1,000 KPH.

“Didn’t go well, I take it,” Donavin McAlester remarked sitting across the table from McGavin. He was McGavin’s newly assigned, shadow agent for the ACIO. Donavin specialized in espionage and security techniques, learned over the years as a field agent in Russia. Most recently, his job had been to direct the NSA’s initiatives to monitor and contain the Russian Mafia. In this capacity, he’d worked with virtually every branch of the government including the CIA, INS, Justice Department, and FBI.

“Maybe he’d kiss your butt if you’d yank his budget, sir.” Donavin said.

“You’re not exactly timid are you?” McGavin was still fuming at his recent phone conversation. The veins at his right temple looked like the Mississippi River on a satellite map. “You know that asshole only now called Shorter, three hours late! And it wasn’t Jenkins that called, no, it was a subordinate two levels down from Jenkins—a Henry something or other. Shit!”

McGavin stood up and hit the intercom button.

“What’s our ETA?”

“Local time 1935 hours, sir, or about another two hours and fifteen minutes,” came the voice.

McGavin flicked the intercom off, and walked over to the wet bar to get a scotch and water. Mostly scotch.

“What do you know about the ACIO?”

“Only what I read in the briefing you sent me last week,” Donavin confided. “I’ve been in intelligence for twenty-nine years. Not even a rumor about such an organization found its way to my ears.” Donavin shifted in his chair and took out a pack of cigarettes. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Not if you don’t mind if I drink.”

They both broke out in smiles, and the tension in the room diminished like smoke in a strong wind.

Donavin had close-cropped, light brown hair with just a tint of auburn. He was tall, but his frame bore about twenty extra pounds, mostly in his belly. He wore trendy glasses, which made him look studious despite his large, athletic build.

“I have to level with you, sir,” Donavin said, “extraterrestrials aren’t exactly my bag... nor the highfalutin technologies they might spawn. My

expertise is in strategic, enemy infiltration planning. And that's about it, but I thought—"

"So when you read the briefing," McGavin interrupted callously, "did you think I was interested in your expertise about ETs, technology or infiltration?"

"The latter, sir."

"Good, I'm glad we've established that." McGavin sat back down with his drink, poking at the ice cubes with a plastic straw. He had heard good things about Donavin, and he didn't want this to sound too much like a job interview. He was hired whether he wanted the assignment or not.

"What we want," McGavin asserted, "is to install you as our shadow agent on the Ancient Arrow Project."



"Sir?"

"I only found out the ACIO's official project name this morning. That's why it wasn't in your briefing. It's related to the rogue activities they're engaged in relative to this newly found artifact in New Mexico."

McGavin slid a file folder from his briefcase across the polished cherry wood table. "Make a copy." He pointed to a fax/copy machine in the corner. "This will tell you everything that the ACIO wants us to know. I'm sure

it's doctored, but at least you'll know more than you know now."

He took a long drink while Donavin got up from the table and started to make copies.

"This Fifteen character," Donavin asked with his back to McGavin, "does he have any real power outside the NSA?"

McGavin smiled at the naïve question. "His power is completely outside the NSA."

Donavin spun his head around with a look of surprise. "How's that possible?"

"You really don't know anything about the ACIO, do you?"

"I've had my head buried in the Russian Mafia for twenty-odd years, sir."

"Fifteen was a little-shit college drop-out, in fact, he was kicked out of college for smearing the reputation of his professors. He's completely anti-authoritarian, but he's so goddamn smart no one can control him."

"If he was so smart, why'd he get kicked out of college?"

"Like I said, he did a smear campaign. He wrote an article for the school paper—I think it was Princeton—where he defined, with clinical precision, the

weaknesses of the teaching faculty. It was a highly regarded article by the student body—not that most could understand it—but it infuriated the faculty. They kicked him out two weeks later after things had calmed down enough to keep his exit relatively low profile.”

Donavin continued to feed documents into the copy machine, puffing on the cigarette held tightly by his lips. “So how’d a shit-faced nerd end up the executive director of the ACIO?”

“I don’t know,” answered McGavin betraying his limits of knowledge. “No one really knows for sure, other than the retired director of the NSA, and he’s not the kind of man to blab about such things. All I know is that Bell Labs hired him when he was kicked out of school because of his work in heuristics and computer modeling. He was only eighteen at the time and was only months away from having a doctorate in quantum physics and mathematics.

“At Bell Labs, he worked in one of their think tank engineering groups that was developing black box technologies for the government. As the story goes, while he was there, he developed the homing system for satellite reconnaissance systems to eavesdrop on precise, targeted sites. The ultimate customer was the

NSA. That's how we found out about him. That was back in the late '50s."

"You're shittin' me."

"No, I'm not." McGavin tilted the glass of scotch all the way back. The ice cubes rattled in his empty glass as he returned it to the table. "Look, the man's incredibly bright, but he's also a royal prick. Somehow he wormed his way into control of the ACIO and he's creating technologies that he's selling to private industry and world governments... behind our back."

"But how could he get away with that? It doesn't make sense; we have the best intelligence network in the world."

"Reality check," McGavin said. "There're elements of a world government—and I'm not talking about the United Nations here—that are more secretive than any state government including North Korea. And our intelligence network has been designed to overlook these elements."

"So you're not talking about the Mafia?"

"No, no, no." McGavin shook his head for a few seconds and then got up to refill his glass. "The Mafia is organized and secretive, but it's run by relative

morons.” He poured straight scotch, no ice or water. His taste buds were properly de-sensitized.

“No, I’m talking about the elite plutocrats who run the world’s financial markets. They’re the ones Fifteen works with, and they’re the ones who have the power. It’s not the politicians, Mafia, or the goddamn military. They’re essentially pawns of this network—”

“And what’re they called... this group of elitists?” Donavin asked.

“They don’t have an official name. Some have called them the Illuminati, or the Bildeberg Group, but these are just pseudonyms. We refer to them as the Incunabula. We don’t really know how organized they are or what their M.O. is... but we believe they get a significant amount of their technology from the ACIO... specifically their encryption and security technologies. Fifteen’s in cahoots with them. I’m certain of it.”

“And you want me to infiltrate the ACIO to uncover this link with the Incu... Inculnab... whatever?”

“Incunabula,” McGavin corrected.

Finished with copying the file, Donavin returned to his chair to light another cigarette. He pushed the original file back to McGavin with a quick smile and thanks.

“It’s a damn shame,” McGavin sighed.

“What is, sir?”

“It’s a damn shame you can’t infiltrate them. But believe me, your experience with the Russian Mafia didn’t qualify you for this job. The ACIO is impregnable. We’ve tried so many times and failed that I’m done with that strategy.

“What I want is for you to turn their top security guy—a guy named James Evans. We need a defector to confirm our suspicions. Armed with the info this guy could supply us, I could topple Fifteen and his little fiefdom.”

“What’re his pressure points, this guy Evans?” Donavin asked, his voice suddenly cold and calculating.

“First of all, he’s an ex-Navy seal.”

“So that’s it. That’s why you want me.”

“Only part of the reason my dear boy. He’s also half-Irish.” McGavin twinkled his eyes and used his Irish accent like a child wearing his father’s shoes for the first time.

“Any signs that he’d cooperate or be motivated to turn?”

“About six months ago,” McGavin answered, “we recorded a conversation between Evans and his subordinate, Jenkins—what an asshole.” He paused

long enough to finish his second drink. “Anyway, Evans said some things that led us to conclude he might be convinced to turn if he could get protection—”

“—What kind of protection, sir?”

“We don’t know all the details, but the higher you advance within the ACIO the more importance they place on your loyalty. They use implants for retention compliance. We’re not sure what kind. But the real barrier to defection is their Remote Viewing technology. No one’ll defect because they’ve convinced their employees that they’ll be found through their RV technology.”

“You lost me there. RV technology, what the hell is that?”

“I’ll make it simple,” McGavin returned to the wet bar, his voice becoming a little more slurred. “They have trained psychics who can look into a crystal ball and see you—just like the wicked witch in the Wizard of Oz.”

“And they got the flying monkeys, too?” Donavin said laughing. “The more you tell me about this group, the more I think I just stepped into the Twilight Zone.”

“Are you sure you’re not ready to join me yet?”

McGavin held his glass up for Donavin to see, wiggling

it enticingly in the air. "Up here, it tastes so much better." He smiled, hoping for compliance.

"Sure, what the hell, if you don't mind, sir."

"Not at all. I'd appreciate the company."

McGavin busied himself with making drinks. He looked older than his 47 years. He was almost completely bald, and what hair was left was on the way out. He had a mustache that seemed to be his only hope of hair, like the last leaf on a November Oak. Years behind a desk gave him a rounded physique that seemed hell-bound for shuffleboard and bowling.

"I could tell you stories about RV technology that'd scare the shit out of you," McGavin said. "But I won't. The reason is that we've figured out how to block it. It's in operation right now on this airplane. We can install this technology in any size room—even an auditorium.

"We believe Evans might turn if you can convince him that he'd be taken care of financially, protected by our anti-RV technology, and given a completely new identity in a country of his choice."

He handed the drink to Donavin, their glasses meeting in an unspoken toast. "Trust me, you'll like this assignment." McGavin smiled, his eyes wandered to the monitor that flashed a message.

“Hold that thought...” he intoned, and sauntered over to the monitor with his drink in hand. He clicked the mouse and opened up an e-mail file. “Shit!”

“Could you wait for me outside for a few minutes, I need to make a phone call.”

Donavin stood up and instinctively hunched over to avoid hitting anything in the cabin, even though there were another two feet of clearance.

“Didn’t you forget something?” McGavin was looking down at Donavin’s scotch and the Ancient Arrow project file that lay on the table.

“Yes, thanks for the reminder, sir,” he scooped up his glass with his talon-like fingers. “You’re right, I’m going to like this assignment.”

“Good, I’m glad you agree. We’ll talk more in a few minutes.”

Donavin closed the door behind him. He swirled the scotch in the bottom of his glass and smiled. Then tossed his head back careful to catch every drop.

* * * *

The smell of damp chalk mixed with copper pervaded the cavern as they shimmied inside, one after another.

Evans walked cautiously toward the tunnel. The aluminum case looked like luggage, and Evans looked like a tourist in search of an airport.

“Did you want to take the artifact out now?” Samantha asked quietly to Neruda. Evans was already on his way toward the tunnel.



“I suppose we could,” he replied to Samantha. Then he turned to look at Evans’ back. “Hey, maybe we should unpack the artifact in the cavern and see what happens. Maybe the tunnel isn’t the right approach inside.”

Evans stopped in his tracks and turned around to face them. “There’s another way out of here?”

“I don’t know,” Neruda said, “perhaps. I just think we should check it out. Who knows what this thing might do once it’s inside the site.”

Evans walked back with childlike reluctance.

Neruda unsnapped the locks and opened the lid. All the flashlight beams converged on the metallic surface of the artifact. It looked completely alien, yet somehow at home in the cavern like a luminescent creature found in the black depths of the ocean.

The artifact was as silent as the cavern.

Samantha bent down with her flashlight locked on the object like her eyes. She touched the artifact tentatively. With barely a whisper, something activated inside the object—it began to vibrate. Its edges blurred. The artifact no longer appeared cylindrical. It was morphing into a spherical, transparent object and its mass seemed to be molting into vaporous light. Like a ghostly apparition, it rose from the case. An intense heat began to fill the chamber, and suddenly a pale green light flashed from the object as it hovered two meters above the aluminum case that had been its surrogate home.

Frozen in their footsteps, everyone watched the tableau spectacle like cavemen may have watched the first flames of domestic fire.

Neruda managed to find his tongue first. “It’s unbelievable... it could only mean one thing... it’s activating something.”

“Or communicating something,” offered Samantha.

Andrews stepped back a few paces. “Is it safe? That’s all I wanna know. Cause it’s scaring the shit out of me.”

“Relax,” Neruda said, “and observe.”

The heat became more intense as did the light. The cavern was completely shrouded in the presence of the

object—sound, light, even smells. There was a molecular change occurring within the cavern, brought on by the artifact, and it charged the air with an intense electromagnetic energy field. It was building. The intensity escalated until even Evans couldn't resist the urge to step back a safe distance.

Then the object burst into a kaleidoscope of whirling, spinning colors that washed the walls of the cavern and everything inside it.

"It's going to explode!" Emily yelled. "Can't you feel the surge?"

Neruda could see fear in her eyes as she turned to him.

"What's your hypothesis now?" Andrews asked.

"Maybe we should get out," Evans shouted. "Could be another trap."

"No. It's okay." Neruda shouted back. "Everyone, relax. Just keep an eye out for directional signals. It's trying to tell us where to go... I'm sure of it."

"Fuck, maybe it's telling us to go to hell and leave it alone," Andrews opined.

The energy field continued to build, shedding a static electricity that had everyone's hair standing on end as if gravity vanished. A thin layer of dust from the cavern

floor was drawn into the air, swirling to the pattern of the light. Everything in the cavern felt unified by the light and sound.

Samantha stepped toward the object, her arms out as if she were blind and feeling for obstructions in her path. Neruda caught her sleeve. "What are you doing?"

She looked toward the object with a blank stare.

"What are you doing?" Neruda asked again.

Samantha returned a blank stare and struggled to continue her advance to the object.

Neruda hesitated for an instant, unsure of whether to let her go. She was obviously mesmerized or being controlled by the object.

"Samantha!" Neruda shouted, his hands firmly holding her arms and blocking her path to the object, "tell me what you're trying to do."

Samantha turned her head to look at him, aware of his presence and hold of her. "I need to turn it off."

Her response was too faint for Neruda to understand.

"What?"

She struggled with him. Neruda yelled to Evans for help, but Samantha fell to the floor, unconscious, before Evans could respond.

“Did anyone hear what she said?” Neruda yelled over the sound of the object.

Everyone shook their heads, no.

“Let’s get out of here,” Neruda said. He knelt down and started to place his hands underneath her body to lift her. Suddenly the maelstrom ceased, and the darkness and silence returned with an almost welcome eeriness.

Neruda jumped to his feet and whirled around to face the object. His eyes couldn’t adjust quick enough to see if the artifact was still there. He squinted hard. Utter blackness mixed with the echo-lights flashing in his mind. He couldn’t see any distinctive shapes, including his colleagues.

“Can anyone see anything?” Evans demanded with alarm in his voice.

“I can’t even see my own hands right now,” Emily lamented. “What happened to our flashlights?” The sound of switches flicking on and off filled the cavern as they tried to re-activate their flashlights. Nothing worked. Gradually, the opening in the cavern wall became visible to Neruda as his eyes began to adjust to the dim light.

Neruda closed his eyes hard hoping to squeeze any remnant light distortions from his mind.

"The damn electromagnetic field must've neutralized our batteries." Andrews said.

"How's Samantha?" Evans asked.

Neruda went to his knees, hoping he'd orient his searching hands so he could take her pulse. He fumbled for her body and found her head. Placing his forefinger on her neck, he sighed in relief as he sensed her pulse, erratic, but clear.

"She's fainted is all," Neruda said. "Let's move her over to the opening where there's more light. She may have hurt herself in the fall."

Evans quickly found Neruda and together they carried Samantha to the narrow crack in the canyon wall, setting her down just underneath the rupture of light.

"Can anyone see the artifact?" Neruda called.

"It's just hovering in place," Emily said. "I can see it, but it's not very clear. It'd help if we could get our flashlights to work."

Andrews began to walk closer to the object. He cocked his head in a strangely submissive position, as if a 45-degree angle would give him better perspective. "It's barely visible... The thing's changed in to a... fuck, I

don't know. It's just different. Maybe half a meter in diameter, mostly round... like a large basketball. It's translucent. Maybe twenty lumens. I don't know what happened to the little monster I've come to love, but it's transmuted into something completely different. Maybe it's gone through the equivalent of puberty."

"Don't touch it," Evans commanded. "We don't know what the thing might do if we touch it again."

Neruda opened the first-aid kit that was stored in Evans' backpack and took out some ammonium carbonate. As he waved it underneath Samantha's nostrils, she coughed and sputtered like old farm machinery in the early spring.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Take it easy," Neruda replied. "We'll get to that in a minute or two. Just catch your breath and relax as much as you can. Everyone's okay. Including you." He gave her a big smile, even though he knew she couldn't see it.

Samantha squinted and blinked her eyes while her right hand grabbed her forehead. "God, I have a headache."

Neruda opened up the aspirin bottle and gave her two aspirins and a water bottle. "Other than that, how do you feel?"

"Okay," she said quietly.

She took both aspirins with a hard swallow. "Is it hot in here, or is it just me?"

"It's hot in here," Neruda said. "We're all feeling it." Emily, Collin, and Andrews had all joined them at the opening like moths huddling near light.

"So what happened?" Samantha asked, propping herself against the cavern wall just below the opening.

"Do you remember anything after you touched the artifact?"

Neruda asked.

"I touched the artifact?" Samantha asked slowly mouthing each word, her tone withdrawn.

"You don't remember anything?"

"I guess not."

She closed her eyes and took inventory of her thoughts. Samantha was still dazed by the incident. She knew something had happened to them, but everything in her mind was vague. She wondered if this was what amnesia felt like.

Suddenly a beam of green light shot out from the artifact, as though it were scanning the cavern. The beam was no larger than an inch in diameter, and the light was soft and diffuse, unlike a laser, but equally precise. It scanned the walls of the cavern in a circular, deliberate motion, like it was looking for something.

“Stay calm,” Evans ordered. “Do you see the scan pattern?”

“I think so.” Neruda answered as if he and Evans were the only ones in the room. “Let’s keep a low profile. I’m not sure we want this light to touch us.”

“I agree,” Evans said.

The beam of green light silently made its way along the cavern wall, kindling dust particles that hung in the air as if they were impertinent obstacles to its goal.

“I’m beginning to think the only way we can avoid contact with this light beam is to leave,” Evans said.

Samantha got shakily to her feet. “I think it wants to find us.”

“Why?” Neruda asked.

Evans stood up and positioned himself next to Samantha like a bodyguard. “Take it easy. We don’t know what it wants. Let’s just avoid the beam for now.”

With alien precision the beam continued to scan the room undisturbed. Suddenly, a second beam started as if the artifact's patience had come to an end. Together the two beams cut the dark interior of the cavern in a grid-like pattern resembling the lines of a globe.

"This just got a lot more complicated," Andrews said.

"If we're going to leave—" Emily started to say.

"—Now! Let's get out now!" Evans was already gathering everyone to the opening in the wall, his arms motioning like a windmill.

"Shit, the scan speed is increasing. There's no way to avoid this thing." Collin argued. "Let's just stay put."

Neruda glanced back at the artifact. Persistence filled its aura of green, ghostly light. "I agree with Collin. Let's see what it wants to show us. Evans, maybe you, Emily, and Andrews should leave in the event this is a trap. The rest of us'll stay."

While they were discussing options, no one noticed that Samantha had been walking toward the object—the source of the green light beams. The beams found her on her third step forward. They instantly stopped.



"They found Samantha," Andrews said. "Now what?"

Everyone turned to look and held their breath, as Samantha was transfixed—frozen as the two beams of light scanned up and down her body.

“How does it do that?” Andrews marveled.

“What?”

“How do the beams go right through her?” Andrews replied, his voice sounding completely mystified.

Neruda was equally amazed. The light was going through Samantha as if she were transparent. The beams were less distinct after passing through her body, but nonetheless they were clearly visible.

“Does everyone see it?” Neruda asked, questioning his own eyes.

His question was answered by silent nods, as though the others didn’t want to draw the thing’s attention to them.

“What should we do about Samantha?” Evans whispered.

“Wait.” Neruda whispered in return.

The beams of light converged on Samantha’s forehead. There was a strange sense of gentleness to the process.

As abruptly and as silently as they had come on, the beams suddenly disappeared and the artifact fell to the

floor of the cave with a metallic clatter. Samantha stood still for several seconds and then turned to the group behind her. "We won't have any more problems. They've de-activated all of the security devices."

Neruda rushed forward to Samantha. "Are you saying you were in communication with them?"

"I guess you could say that," Samantha answered. "They wanted to assure me that we're not perceived as intruders. Whatever they're guarding is for us to find."

"So they perceive you as our leader?" Evans asked, almost shouting.

"No, I don't think so," Samantha answered calmly. "They just chose me because their technology is tuned to my mind. It could have been Neruda. Either one of us can communicate with the artifact."

"So what the hell was the artifact doing these past few minutes?" Andrews demanded.

"It was assessing our intentions, orienting itself, and deactivating the security devices that were designed into this structure when they created it."

"When you say, *they*, who're you referring to exactly?" Neruda asked.

“The creators of this place,” she spun slowly around with her arms out and her head back. She seemed uncharacteristically relaxed and carefree.

“But this is a cave—”

“No, it’s something amazing that this culture left behind,” Samantha said with sudden intensity.

“What culture? Do you have a name?” Emily asked.

Samantha turned silent; her face was without features because of the dim light in the cavern.

“WingMakers,” she replied too softly for anyone else to hear. “For some reason, they feel like old friends of ours. As... as if we should know them as well as they know us.”

“What makes you think they know us?” Neruda asked.

“It’s just a feeling, but it’s a strong feeling.”

“So we can enter the tunnel without concern for deathtraps?” Evans asked, changing the subject.

“Yes.”

“You’re quite certain of our safety?” he tested one more time.

“Absolutely,” came Samantha’s confident reply.

“Let’s go,” Evans said.

The flashlight beam swept across the floor of the cavern and found the deep blackness of the tunnel on the far end. It reminded Neruda of when he was a boy and used to shine his dad's flashlight into the blackness of the Bolivian sky. It somehow made him uneasy when the light trail couldn't outlast the darkness.





Chapter Seven

ETC

There are, below the surface of your particle existence, energies that connect you to all formats of existence. You are a vast collection of these energies, but they cannot flow through your human instrument as an orchestrated energy until the particles of your existence are aligned and flowing in the direction of unity and wholeness.

An Excerpt from *Particle Alignment*, Decoded from Chamber 10
WingMakers



“You can come back in,” McGavin called from behind the cabin door.

The custom Gulfstream V was made exclusively for top directors of the NSA. It was immaculately designed with every creature comfort known to man. Even the paneling was cut from a single cherry tree to ensure an unwavering consistency in the grain, color, and pattern throughout the cabin interior.

Apart from the view out the small, oval windows, one wasn't even conscious of being on an airplane. It could have been any executive's high-tech office—assuming they liked to drink.

Donavin sat down at the same chair he had previously occupied some twenty minutes ago. McGavin looked solemn, he thought. Whatever he had been discussing on the phone must not have gone his way.

"I was just about ready to freshen up my drink. Would you like another?"

"That'd be great, sir."

Donavin started to light another cigarette. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Anything you like," McGavin shot back.

"You want Evans to believe that the ACIO's RV technology can't harm him, right?"

"Yep."

"How will I prove that the NSA's Special Projects Laboratory has the technology to shield him against RV probes?"

McGavin stopped his ice chopping for a moment, dropped the ice pick, and ran his hands over his near-hairless head. There was a mirror above the wet bar and he looked at Donavin like a taxicab driver talks

back to his fare through the rearview mirror. "There's only one way. You'll have to show him the technology at our offices."

"And how will I do that?"

"Invite him. Hell, you're both ex-Navy Seals, he'll trust you."

"What happened to him?"

"What'da mean?"

"Ex-Navy?"

"Oh," McGavin said, "he was discharged honorably."

"Yeah, so was I," Donavin replied. "But it wasn't all that honorable as I remember it."

"Exactly why you two will get along so well." McGavin smiled as he went back to his chopping.

Donavin took a long drag on his cigarette. He was feeling very relaxed, even a little tired. Maybe the scotch was working better than he thought. Altitude did have its advantages, he reminded himself.

"The thing that doesn't make sense to me is why would the ACIO—any of the ACIO personnel—trust me with anything? I'm a big fucking nobody. And an outsider."

"I don't care if anyone in the ACIO trusts you other than Evans. He's the only one that matters. Besides,

the other elements of your mission don't depend on trust.

"Believe me," McGavin said putting two drinks down carefully on the table, "they don't trust anyone from the NSA."

"So how am I supposed to infiltrate without their trust."

"You won't gain their trust. You're going to have to be devious." McGavin sat down with a cagey smile and slid one of the drinks across the table to Donavin. "We've sent two agents into the ACIO before with similar missions. Both came back with nothing. We think their memories were wiped. If they discovered anything, they never got a chance to share it with us."

"I'd like to review their files if I could," Donavin said. "Maybe I could learn something from their mistakes."

"I doubt it, but I'll have Francis arrange to get them to you. By the way, you're starting next Monday. I expect updates weekly. We're clear on communication protocols?"

"Yes."

"You get Evans to our Virginia offices. You watch the Ancient Arrow Project like a hawk. And you find out everything you can about any technologies that they're

hiding from us. And then you can retire very comfortably. Got it?"

"Got it.

"Just one more thing, sir. What did you mean by *devious*?"

"What do you think I meant?"

"Throw out the rule book," Donavin replied. "Don't worry about standard protocols. Use whatever means necessary to accomplish my mission. That sort of thing."

"I'll put only one restriction on your activities," McGavin said. "Don't kill anyone affiliated with the ACIO unless it's in self-defense. Understood?"

"Understood, sir. But if Fifteen is such a problem to the SPL, why not take him out? There're a hundred ways for him to have an accident."

McGavin took his last gulp and plunked the glass down hard on the table. He looked at Donavin with immediate alarm. "The other two agents thought the same thing. We'd have to take out his top twenty or so underlings as well. It's pretty hard to make that look like a mass suicide." He laughed as if the image had been slumbering in his unconscious. "Besides, the last enemy you ever want to make is the Incunabula."

“Geez,” Donavin exclaimed, “I was envisioning a bunch of buttoned-up pinstripes in Switzerland punching calculators—”

“Then your vision is fucked,” McGavin said definitively. “The Incunabula is the very definition of power because they have the gold and therefore make the rules.” His tone lightened. “They also have the platinum, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires. It’s no accident that Fifteen has allied the ACIO with them. They’re... they’re like his big brother.”

“So how did Fifteen endear himself to this group of financiers?” Donavin asked.

“First of all they’re not financiers, that’s just their hobby. They’re elitists who like to control world events. Everything from the weather to the stock markets. Of course, their specialty is manipulating the world’s governments and shifting borders and the powerbase therein.

“They’ve been around a long time, a helleva lot longer than the NSA, CIA or any government. They arose from the time of kings and royalty, when bloodlines meant something. They still operate in that world—only with high-tech toys instead of moats and guillotines.”



McGavin shifted in his chair searching for a more comfortable position. He hated airplanes and their confining spaces and uncomfortable chairs.

“To answer your question,” he continued, his voice slurring intermittently, “Fifteen created a variety of technologies—we don’t know how many—that the Incunabula use as their high-tech toys. We know for certain that the ACIO has supplied them with some weather-control technology that we call the Pabulum Seed. We have no proof that they’ve transferred anything more, but once you have an intimate relationship with the Incunabula... well, let’s just say it’s hard to say no to them.”

“Does the NSA have a relationship with this group?”

“The Incunabula?” McGavin asked with surprise in his voice.

Donavin nodded.

“None that I’m aware of,” McGavin said, “but it wouldn’t surprise me if we did.”

“Is there a file I could read about them?”

“No.”

McGavin pushed back in his chair with his near-empty glass in his hand. “I think we’re about finished then. Any other questions?”

Donavin shook his head.

“Good. Then take your drink with you and leave me alone so I can get some work done.” McGavin looked into his empty glass and swirled the ice as Donavin stood up and left the room. The phone rang twice and then stopped. Thank God for voice-mail. He was too tired to answer it. Besides, he hadn’t had a good phone conversation all day.

* * * *

“Well I’ll be damned. It’s another cavern,” Evans said.

The exploration team was 30 meters past the section of the tunnel that had trapped Neruda the night before. The tunnel had suddenly opened into a large, rounded cavern, slightly smaller than the first, about 15 meters in diameter.

“Hey, there’s something here.” Evans said as the rest of the team dispersed into the cavern.

“It’s pottery,” Emily stated, “and it’s beautiful.”

The flashlight illuminated a large vessel in the middle of the cavern. Around it were various bones, feathers

and a few traces of what looked like animal fur or maybe human hair.

“Shit, I wish we could’ve brought torches instead of a damn flashlight,” Andrews complained. “I need something to keep me warm. It’s freezing in here.”

Ignoring him, Neruda grabbed the flashlight from Evans’ hand and shined it inside the vessel, looking over its rim, which stood nearly to his chin.

“Anything?” Evans asked, as the vessel became momentarily translucent in the dark cavern.

“Nothing. It’s empty, except for something that looks like melted wax at the bottom.”

“Do that again,” Emily asked. “Put the flashlight inside.”

Neruda followed her suggestion, but this time he stepped away from the vessel as far as his arm would allow so he could see what interested her.

“It’s Anasazi,” Neruda said. “They were the only one’s who integrated turquoise into their pottery—probably Chacoans. Their homes were only about thirty kilometers from here.”

The vessel bore three sky blue spirals, surrounding its widest portion. Each was made up of hundreds of tiny turquoise beads like a mosaic.

The rest of the vessel was paper-thin, terra cotta colored clay. It looked incredibly fragile. Neruda couldn't even imagine how such a fragile vessel could have been carried from Chaco Canyon to this site without it breaking.

"So what is it?" Evans asked.

"This isn't it," Samantha said. "This isn't what they want us to find."

"Okay," Evans said. "But what is it?"

Neruda bent to inspect the spiral mosaic. "It's not an ordinary spiral. It's M51."

"How can you tell from a simple pictograph?" Emily asked. "Aren't there about twenty billion spiral galaxies?"



"M51 is distinctive because it has a conjoined galaxy—NGC5197—right here." Neruda pointed with his index finger to a smaller spiral that was attached to one of the rotating arms of the larger spiral.

"The Whirlpool galaxy," Andrews said in fascination. "That's cool. M51 wasn't discovered until the late 1700's. Did the Anasazi buy their telescopes from

Popular Mechanics or just make them from quartz crystals?”

Neruda shrugged. “You know, Andrews, sometimes you can really get irritating.”

“I’d like to second that,” Emily added.

“Third,” Collin offered.

Andrews feigned being offended, pouting his bottom lip and tilting his head down. “I’m just pointing out that you can’t reconcile Anasazi pottery—ostensibly created a thousand years ago, and M51 that requires perfect conditions and at least a fifteen centimeter lens to see.”

“I really don’t care about the origins of the spiral,” Evans reported, “I just want to know what this thing is. Obviously, we’ve gone to a lot of trouble to find it, so I’m interested in definitions—”

“Let’s look around a bit more before we adorn it with definitions,” Neruda suggested.

“What’s your instinct?” Evans queried, frustration showing in his tone. “What’s it saying?”

“Maybe it’s a sacrificial site,” Neruda answered reluctantly. “The Chacoans were very superstitious about the weather, particularly at the turn of the millennium. The serpent deity was in charge of the rain

and fertility, so maybe this was a site where they performed animal sacrifices to appease it.”

Evans was satisfied with his explanation.

“If it was a sacrificial site—why’s there no representation of a deity?” Emily asked. “The spiral, as you’ve already suggested, doesn’t represent a serpent deity. Right?”

“Yes, I agree,” Neruda replied, “but let’s stop speculating, I don’t know what this thing is.”

Neruda cast the saber of light to the ceiling and then the floor of the cavern in a pattern. He slowly spun around. The team tracked the beam of light as if it were a predator. Neruda was making a deliberate assessment of whether there were any other tunnels or passageways that might open out from the cavern.

“I don’t see any other tunnel out of here. This looks like the end of the road.” Neruda commented.

“It can’t be,” Samantha whispered to herself, but in the quiet of the cave, everyone heard her.

“I agree with Samantha,” Collin said, “It’d make no sense that all of this would be constructed by ETs just so the Anasazi could appease their serpent deity. I don’t buy that theory.”

“Does anyone see any habitation debris?” Neruda asked.

“Go back there,” Evans directed his arm to the location that the beam of light had just passed. “Yeah, there. What’s that?”

Neruda walked towards something that looked like a large, flat stone lying on the ground. “It’s a stone, but it looks like it’s been shaped. Whoa…” Neruda let out a long sigh. “There’re glyphs incised on top—and they look a lot like Mayan.” His voice raised in pitch, excited at the prospects of being able to read something.

“What’s it say?” Emily asked, well aware that Neruda could read virtually any language.

Blowing on the surface of the stone and brushing debris off with his fingers, Neruda shook his head. “I’m not sure. It’s a hybrid.”

The entire team had gathered around to see the stone’s inscription.

“Can you read it?” Evans asked.

Neruda was tracing one of the glyphs with his index finger and remained silent—deep in thought. He could feel a drilling of energy in his forehead as if something were trying to breakthrough to his awareness, but it remained elusive.

"Looks like the word *temple*," Andrews explained, pointing to a series of strange markings.

"Yes, I know," Neruda said. "Its meaning is something like... *Within this temple... remember light.*"

"Why do I get the feeling they didn't bring an electrician along?" Andrews quipped.

"Is it a cover of some kind?" Collins asked.

"Can we move it?" Evans asked, getting on his knees. He tried to get his fingers underneath it for leverage, but it was too tightly fitted to the ground.

"Time for the whale knife," Andrews said, turning to Evans.

"What?" Evans asked.

"The knife you used to get the bossman out of the hole he fell into. Remember?"

"Unfortunately, I dropped that knife into the chamber," Neruda lamented. "But I have a small pocket knife. Let's see if we can get under it with this. Anyone who has a knife, let's get to work. Emily, could you hold the flashlight?"

"Sure."

She took the flashlight from Neruda and knelt down. She banged the end of the flashlight against the rock several times in different places—starting at the center.

“It sounds like it may be hollow underneath.”

“I’m counting on it,” Neruda said with an unmistakable eagerness.

After ten minutes of chiseling with their knives, enough space was excavated so their fingers could get a hold on the flat, white flagstone.

“On three,” Neruda said, “let’s try to move it towards Emily.”

On cue, the men strained, but to no effect. The stone was about three feet in diameter and about five inches thick, and heavier than the four men could move.

“How much do you think she weighs?” Evans asked, turning to Neruda.

“Three hundred kilos... possibly more.”

“I brought something that could prove useful,” Evans said. “I’ll be right back.”

Evans walked away from the encircled stone into the dark shadows.

“Where the hell’s he going?” Andrews whispered to Neruda.

“He’s kind of secretive about his backpack.” Neruda winked in half seriousness.

Moments later Evans returned with another flashlight. “I forgot I had a spare flashlight in my backpack. I also

had these." He held up a pair of blasting caps. "They're small as explosives go, but they may be enough to fracture or break this thing up."

"Why'd you bring blasting caps on this mission?" Andrews asked. "Tell me you weren't expecting something like this?"

"I was a Boy Scout," Evans laughed. "What can I say?"

Using the same holes they had dug for their fingers, Evans affixed the blasting caps on opposite sides of the circle hoping they'd break the stone in half.

"We're set," Evans said. "Might be a good idea to retreat to the tunnel in case we get some flying debris."

"How much wire do you have?" Neruda asked.

"There's enough."

They walked back to the tunnel while Evans reeled out wire from a small spool. "That's as far as I can go."

"Is it okay?" Neruda asked.

"It's a small charge," Evans answered. "I'm sure I'll be okay. Ready?"

"We're set when you are." Neruda replied.

An explosion came moments later kicking up a cloud of dust. The sound made everyone's heart pound a little faster. It was deafening, but only for a few seconds. A

series of echoes faintly followed the tunnel's path, six—
Neruda mentally counted.

Evans was first to see the stone had cracked. "We should be able to handle half the weight, don't you think?"

"Only if you're really men." Emily's quick-witted response brought laughter to the entire group as they looked down upon their stone nemesis like conquerors.

"Shine your light right here," Neruda commanded pointing to the crack in the center of the stone.

"It's dark underneath. Something's here."

"What do you make of it?" Evans asked.

"It could be an ancient storage pit," Neruda said, "but I hope it's more than a bunch of maize or pinion nuts."

"If that's the case, I'll personally go back and shoot what's left of that horseshit artifact," Andrews said. "All this trouble for a bunch of nuts."

"Can you three help me here?" Neruda asked.

"Okay," Evans agreed. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Evans levied a massive kick with his right leg. The crack grew. His boot came down hard a second time, and the rock split horizontally.

"Let's move this out of the way," Neruda said. "Lift!"

Emily trained her flashlight beam as the bottom half of the stone was removed, revealing an inky void. "It's deeper than a storage pit, more like a shaft," she said excitedly.

Neruda took one of the flashlights and lay on his stomach, reaching his arm as far down the opening as possible. A rush of cool, dry air met his nostrils. "Yes, it's a shaft," Neruda said, "maybe straight down for three meters and then it turns horizontal."

"There's no way this could be active, is there?" Evans asked.

"I doubt it. This thing's been sealed up tight."

"Yeah, assuming this is the only entrance," Andrews added.

"We're not making any assumptions," Neruda replied. "I'll go down first and assess the situation. Once I determine the risks, I'll return and we can decide our course of action together. Agreed?"

The team members nodded.

"This is it," Samantha said. "This is the entrance. This is what I saw. It's like a birth canal. It's like being reborn into their world."

She paused, realizing her comments sounded peculiar. "I don't know how I know this, but I do."

Neruda prepared himself for the descent into the tunnel. He removed his backpack; the diameter of the tunnel would just accommodate his shoulders.

“Whoever these ETs were, they weren’t overweight,” Neruda said, easing himself into the hole. “I’ll see you topside in ten.”

“Be careful,” Evans said. “Give us voice checks every minute so we know you’re okay.”

“Will do.”

Neruda held the flashlight in his mouth so his arms were free to support his body weight as he descended into the black tube. The air was completely stale, as if there had been no circulation for centuries. It was arid and there was a hint of some chemical substance that he had never smelled before.

“There’s an odor—very subtle,” Neruda said halfway down the shaft. “Does anyone else smell it?” With the flashlight in his mouth, his speech was reduced to amateur ventriloquism.

“Yeah, I think so. I was wondering what that was,” Collin said.

“Any ideas what the smell is from?”

“It’s definitely a chemical compound,” Collin replied.

“But do you think it’s xenobiotic?”

“Smells a little like aromatic hydrocarbon, but it’s not that... it’s nothing I’m familiar with.”

Evans was nervous. “Jamisson, if you feel the slightest nausea, you get out of there immediately. Okay?”

“Understood,” Neruda answered, “but I feel fine. Don’t worry. It’s just an odd smell.”

“It’s a preservative,” Samantha said tentatively. “Just a preservative.”

“For what?” Evans asked.

“Something molecular that decays with time,” Andrews chuckled, “or am I being too specific?”

Samantha remained straight-lipped, ignoring Andrews’ remark. “It preserves something they’ve left behind. We’ll know soon enough.”

Neruda climbed down slowly, his legs searching for the bend in the tunnel when he could again use gravity to his advantage. The vertical walls were rough—perfect for handholds.

“Okay you can drop the rope down now,” Neruda said.



His feet finally had reached solid rock. He took the flashlight out of his mouth, glad to be rid of the taste of metal.

The height of the tunnel ceiling was just over a meter. Neruda sat with his back to the wall of the shaft, staring down the length of the tunnel before him. The flashlight illumined the ancient darkness, and Neruda was surprised to see no dust or dirt in the clear beam. "This place is clean... I mean spotless."

His hand stroked the smooth, pristine surface. "This entire section of the tunnel's been smoothed to a fine finish—not unlike polished marble. It's still the same reddish-brown color, but it's completely polished and smooth. It's amazing."

Evans dropped the rope down the tunnel's shaft and hit Neruda in the shoulder. "You're all set. Let me know if you need more."

"Can you see anything beyond the tunnel?" Collin asked.

"It looks like it opens up into something in about ten meters—maybe another chamber—but I can't tell for sure. The light's reflecting so intensely off the sides of the tunnel that it's hard to see that far ahead. But I'm pretty sure it opens up. Stay tuned."

“Neruda, this is Collin again. Can you tell if the tunnel is polished stone or is it coated with some form of a polymer? Maybe that’s where the smell is coming from.”

Neruda put his nose directly to the side of the tunnel and took a long, inward breath. “I think it’s both. It’s definitely polished stone, but I also think it’s been sealed with something—maybe a polymer, I can’t say for sure.”

His knees screamed bloody murder as he began to crawl the length of the tunnel. The rock was as hard as granite, and Neruda’s knees were his Achilles’ heel. “Okay, I’m coming up to a seam in the tunnel. It looks carved. It circles the complete diameter of the tunnel. There’re three sequential seams—maybe five centimeters apart. Very strange.”

“Any sign of the far opening yet?” Evans shouted.

Neruda’s eyes traveled the length of the light beam, and saw a perfect circle of darkness at the end of the tunnel. “I’m not positive, but it looks like it opens up; I’ll know for sure in a minute.”

He continued crawling towards the black void at the end of the tunnel, his knees aching against the unyielding stone. “I can see the opening,” Neruda

exclaimed; his breathing got faster and his heart began to pound louder in his chest.

The lip of the tunnel protruded into a large, oval-shaped chamber. It was about a two-meter drop to the floor from the tunnel. Neruda swept his flashlight across the room in amazement, as he hung his legs over the tunnel's lip.

His heart continued to beat louder. It was the only sound he could hear, a surreal soundtrack to the view into a chamber that was the most intricately designed stone structure that he'd ever seen.

The chamber was about 20 meters at its widest section and then narrowed at both ends in the shape of an oval. At one end of the oval the tunnel emptied into the chamber. On the opposite end of the chamber, a nine-foot-high archway revealed another tunnel leading away into darkness. Two columns framed the archway, each with intricate carvings in a rich assortment of hieroglyphs. The chamber was domed, reaching about 20 feet at its highest ambit. The walls, floor, and ceiling were perfectly smooth, polished to a rich, cream-colored luster.

“Jamisson, what’s up?” Evans’ voice carried down the tunnel’s shaft reminding him of his other world and responsibilities.

“Well,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “I found something at the end of the tunnel that substantiates the artifact’s existence.”

“What?” Evans shouted.

Neruda turned around to face his colleagues, realizing his voice had been lost inside the chamber. “Get down here, you’ve got to see this!”

Evans immediately sprang into action. “Okay, leave your backpacks here, but bring anything you think is valuable in your pockets. I’ll go first. The rest of you follow. Let’s go.”

The team almost lunged into the shaft with excitement, but they had to move slowly down the vertical tunnel, waiting patiently for the handholds.

“Holy shit!” Evans said as he looked down the tunnel to Neruda’s shadowy figure. He was still surveying the chamber from the tunnel’s mouth. “This thing’s amazing.”

Neruda looked back and shined his flashlight signaling his whereabouts. “Wait till you see what I’m looking at,” he said smugly.

Like a caterpillar inching its way across a branch, the team crawled obediently to Neruda's perch. The tunnel was too narrow to get a good view for the rest of the team, so Neruda swung his body around like a gymnast readying for a dismount from the high bar.

With the flashlight in his mouth he drawled, "See ya down there," he motioned with his head to the floor of the chamber below, and then jumped. He made a soft landing, but even so, his knees released a shudder of pain through his whole body.

"Damn," Neruda said as he hit the floor.

"You okay?" Evans questioned.

"Yeah, after last night's fall, my knees are feeling a little sore."

"Whoa, what is this place?" Evans blurted.

His flashlight beam was shimmering in the bleached stone interior. "Shit, this place has been carved out. This is no natural cavern."

"No kidding," Neruda answered.

Behind Evans, the rest of the team was struggling to get a view. "Let's go," Andrews said in the very back of the line. "Some of us would like to see, too."

Evans launched himself to the floor of the chamber as had Neruda.

“It’s carved out of solid rock,” Neruda said, turning to Evans as he landed.

“It’s unbelievable,” Evans returned in a whisper as his head pivoted like a compass needle in search of its bearings.

“Why the white stone?”

“I don’t know, maybe to brighten the interior. It reflects more light.”

“How’d they do it?” Evans asked rhetorically.

Neruda ignored the question. “There’s another tunnel, do you see it?”

“It must’ve taken years to create this room...” Evans said, still in awe, unable to respond to Neruda’s question.

The rest of the team began to drop out of the tunnel’s mouth like drops of water from a faucet, and the chamber filled with an excited buzz.

“Everyone stand perfectly still and stay silent for a few seconds,” Neruda commanded. “Just listen.”

“I can hear the blood flow in my body,” Samantha whispered. “It’s amazing.”

“There’s no ambient noise in here, and yet we’re in a perfectly ambient environment,” Collin said. “Maybe it’s an acoustic chamber of some kind.”

"Have you seen any artifacts yet?" Emily asked.

"No, this chamber's empty," replied Neruda. "Notice there's not a speck of dirt or debris. This place is—"

"—Antiseptic," Evans interjected.

"Antiseptic," Neruda echoed.

"So now we know they suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder," Andrews said, chuckling softly.

"Maybe they died of cleaning fumes."



Neruda had made his way slowly to the archway and columns, studying them with his flashlight. "Again the M51 spiral," Neruda said tracing his fingers over the incised glyph. "I think we know where they're from anyway."

"That doesn't exactly pinpoint it," Andrews remarked. "M51 is home to about one hundred billion solar systems."

Neruda ignored Andrews' comment and turned to the team members edging to his position. "This corridor's got a pretty steep incline. Be careful."

"Are these glyphs related to those on the artifact?" Evans asked as he was studying the column.

“Definitely,” Neruda answered, “but they’re not the same glyphs. I didn’t see any that were identical to those on the artifact.”

As he passed under the archway, Neruda could feel the incline begin, and his knees immediately alerted him to the added pressure of walking uphill. At least he could stand straight up. The ceilings in the corridor were three and half meters high and were domed in a similar manner as the chamber.

“I see another archway ahead,” Neruda said.

“Tell me something,” Andrews asked, “how does anyone carve this structure into solid rock and leave no debris or signs of their construction?”

“I don’t know,” Neruda replied. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and find out.”

“They’re certainly good magicians,” Andrews said. “The debris pile that this thing must’ve created would’ve been enormous. Where the hell do you hide something like that?”

The team filed under the archway, and one by one touched the marble-like columns as if they were sacred prayer wheels.

“It looks like a room juts off from the corridor,” Neruda said loudly over his shoulder. He was about

twenty feet ahead of Evans and the others who had stopped to examine the graceful glyphs on the archway's columns, which seemed almost alive with movement.

"What's inside?"

There was only silence.

"What do you see?" Evans asked again.

Silence.

Evans picked up his pace, almost running to Neruda's position, followed by the rest of the team. They found Neruda in the middle of a small chamber only twelve feet in diameter. It was perfectly round with a high domed ceiling. Its wall, opposite the entrance, bore an amazing wall painting that Neruda's flashlight beam was illuminating, its colors so bright that the team had to squint, as though it were transmitting light and not just reflecting it.

Below the painting, sitting on a raised platform that was carved from the same stone as the wall, was an object that was of a shape similar to a football, but nearly twice as large. It was completely black except for three silver lines that encircled it at its center. It was without seams, buttons, or any exterior opening.

Neruda was busy examining the wall painting, mesmerized by its brilliant colors and abstract form. "This is definitely not Anasazi," he managed to say, his voice cracking slightly. "They've left this behind purposely. These aren't rooms where someone lived. This feels more like a diorama at a natural history museum."

"So an extraterrestrial civilization came to earth a thousand years ago and left behind a museum for the Anasazi Indians to enjoy." Emily wondered aloud. "The Chacoan Anasazi are reputed to have mysteriously disappeared around 1,150 AD so they closed the museum, but left behind a homing device that somehow was recovered nearly 850 years later."

"By us," Andrews added with perfect timing. "Sure, I mean, how could you argue with that hypothesis?"

"I'm not saying I believe that theory," Emily defended. "I'm just thinking out loud."

"Let's keep investigating," Evans suggested, "we only have another three hours and ten minutes before our rendezvous."

"How much time do you think we should allow for travel time to the rendezvous site?" Neruda asked.

“Let’s allow forty minutes, we may not need that much time, but I’d just as soon have a few extra minutes in the event anything unforeseen occurs.”

“Okay, so that gives us another two and half hours,” Neruda said. “Let’s check out where this corridor leads.”

“It’s a helix,” Samantha stated matter-of-factly. “Like a spiral staircase. And there’ll be more of these small chambers. I saw all of this... I just didn’t know the scale of it.”

“If you’re so informed about what’s going on here,” Andrews challenged, “then kill the suspense and tell us what the hell it is.”

“Look,” Samantha said with sudden intensity, “I’ve seen images that were placed in my head by the artifact. If... if you don’t accept that reality, then fine, but at least be civil about it.”

“It’s okay, Samantha,” Neruda said. “Just ignore him, he’s actually being civil by his standards. Trust me. I’ve seen him when he’s a loose cannon, and it’s not pretty.”

“She’s been right about everything so far,” Emily said. “Let’s trust her, okay?” She turned to Andrews and smiled.

“Fine,” Andrews quipped.

“Have you looked at the artifact at all?” Emily asked.

“Haven’t touched it,” Neruda responded. “I’m not sure we should touch anything. Our mission is discovery, not investigation.”

“Let’s see what else there is,” Evans suggested.

“What is it about this painting?” Collin asked. “Why would they go to all this trouble for the Anasazi? Or for us for that matter? It just doesn’t make sense.”

Neruda walked out of the chamber letting Collin’s words hang in the air like dust particles. Speculation irritated him unless it was illuminated by at least a few facts. For now, his only motive was discovery.

“Did anyone bring the VC with them?” Neruda asked as they continued up the corridor.

“Of course,” Emily said. She took out a small, silver box, about the size of a cell phone, with several, round, recessed dials on one side and a small lens on the other. “Do you want me to film?”

“Yeah,” Neruda said, “but let’s wait until we’ve seen everything this museum has to offer first. Collin, you’re in charge of the précis, so start thinking about what you want to say.”

“Is this project video going to Fifteen?” Collin asked.

“Who else?” Neruda replied.

“Shit.”

“Don’t worry,” Neruda said, “Fifteen likes your style. It’s sagaciously scientific and colorfully eclectic.”

Everyone laughed, including Collin.

“You do a good imitation,” Evans smiled, turning to Neruda. “Don’t worry, I won’t say a thing.”

Neruda laughed, pleased with how civil Evans had been throughout the expedition. He actually enjoyed his company—something he hadn’t expected.

“There’s another archway,” Neruda pointed his light to the doorway. It was only about ten meters farther up the corridor from the first, but this time the chamber was on the interior side of the corridor. The corridor was indeed like a spiral staircase winding its way in a clockwise motion at a consistent grade.



Neruda walked to the archway and this time waited for everyone to catch up. The team was breathing a little heavier than before, but looked eager to view the second chamber as one collective body.

“Ready?” Neruda asked.

“Let the light show begin,” Andrews said.

Neruda and Evans unleashed their light beams into the chamber. An eerie similarity awaited them when their beams intersected on the far wall of the chamber, which bore another wall painting of similar style, size, and brilliance. Beneath it, glistening in the light, laid another artifact, black and silver with flat panels joined together in a hexagonal pattern. Each panel was about the same size of a playing card, but twice as thick. The exterior of the hexagon was black, and the interior brilliant silver. Again, no buttons, seams, or evidence of an activation switch.

The wall painting appeared to be stylistically similar to the first chamber's painting, but with different glyphs and objects. It was about four feet wide and about six feet high.

The chamber itself was identical in scale and shape. Every nuance was an exact replica. Only the painting and artifact were different.

"I'm open to any thoughts anyone has," Neruda said.

"It's not logical," Evans started. "Why would they leave behind these artifacts in this way?"

"Why not?" Samantha said.

"There're some references in this painting that at least look intelligible," Collin said. "Here, at the bottom,

these look a lot like the rock formations from around here.”

“We should at least consider the possibility that it’s a weapon of some kind,” Evans said.

“We will,” Neruda replied. “Any other thoughts before we move on?”

Andrews moved closer to inspect the painting. “The star patterns might be worth looking at—assuming they’re not arbitrary. Also, the sign of infinity is used. It wasn’t invented until the turn of the seventeenth century. And as far as I know, it wasn’t invented by an ET from M51.”

“Well, if there’re no other comments.” Neruda said, “let’s move on.”

The corridor continued upward. Every 30 feet a new chamber would lead off through an archway, alternating from the exterior and interior of the corridor. Each chamber was exactly like all the others, but with a unique wall painting and artifact inside.

Over the next hour, the team found twenty-two chambers, and was beginning to realize the scope of the discovery.

“We found it,” Neruda shouted back.

“Found what?” Evans asked, walking up from the twenty-second chamber.

“The last chamber.”

Evans poked his head in. “I left my flashlight behind with Collin and the rest. They seemed hypnotized by the wall painting in chamber twenty. I’m no artist, but these are amazing paintings... not exactly your typical cave art is it?”

“Not unless you consider Picasso a caveman.”

“This chamber’s different,” Evans said finally. “It’s like they ran out of time in their construction and left it in its natural state.”

While the twenty-third chamber was identical in shape and size, its walls, floor, and ceiling were rough and unfinished. The wall painting was the only surface of the chamber that was smoothed and polished like the other chambers. The floor was full of debris, mostly rock chips and what looked like fibers of some kind.

“Very strange,” Neruda said shaking his head slowly and rubbing his chin with his hand. “Notice the artifact?”

Evans followed Neruda’s light beam to a shiny disc, about three inches in diameter. “It’s an optical disc. Let’s hope it explains what the hell this thing is.”

“It’s a time capsule,” Neruda said. “It’s a set of forty-six artifacts—half art, half technology. It’s as if an extraterrestrial civilization planted these artifacts as someone might bury a time capsule for later retrieval.”

“For what purpose?” Evans asked.

“An extraterrestrial time capsule is the most logical theory I can conjure for now,” Neruda said methodically. “As for its purpose, that I can’t explain. Let’s hope this disc tells their story.”

Neruda picked the disc up and examined it closely. Like a CD, only smaller, both sides had a gold sheen, with a center hole about the width of a pencil. “This could be an alloy of gold... I’m not sure it’s an optical disc. It could be currency, or some sort of conductor.”

Evans leaned forward to inspect it, taking it from Neruda’s hand. “You’re right, it might be gold. It’s heavy.” He waved it in the air judging its weight. “But it sure looks like an optical disc.”

“What should we do with the artifacts?” Neruda asked.

“We’re not set up to take them back with us,” Evans answered. “ I brought a level ten security fence, so we can keep this thing under wraps indefinitely.”

“Why not bring this back with us?” Neruda asked holding up the disc. “I have a feeling it’s the key to this whole mystery. The sooner we can open it, the better.”

“It’s outside of mission parameters,” Evans began, “but I agree with you. I don’t think Fifteen would have a problem as long as we both agree.”

“Have you seen Samantha?” Emily asked, entering the chamber and looking around.

“No, we assumed she was with you,” Evans answered in alarm.

“She was,” Collin said, “but then she just walked off—we thought to find you.”

“Without a flashlight?” Neruda asked.

“—Holy shit,” Andrews exclaimed as he walked inside the twenty-third chamber. “The teenager must’ve lived in this room, I’d put money on it.”

“Yeah, this chamber was left in a mess,” Collin added.

Neruda pointed to the wall painting with his flashlight. “If they were in such a hurry, why’d they take the time to polish the wall where the painting is? I think they left the rest unfinished purposely.”

“And that purpose would be?” Collin asked.

“I don’t know,” Neruda said. “But at least we might find some answers in this.” He pointed to the gold disc.

“Cool, now we’re talking,” Andrews said. “They speak my language. Let me see it.”

Andrews took the disc, placing it flat in the palm of his left hand. “Shine the light right here at this angle,” his right hand was cocked at an odd angle mimicking how he wanted the flashlight to be positioned. Neruda complied.

“It has index lines,” Andrews said triumphantly, “But they’re as subtle as hell.”

He turned it over with great care. “You probably already guessed that this has gold in it.”

“Yeah, it looks like an alloy of some kind or possibly a coating,” Neruda shrugged, “but who knows without lab results.”

“We’re taking this with us, aren’t we?” Andrews asked, nodding his head.

“Yes,” Evans said, “but the rest we’ll leave here until we can assemble an excavation team.”

“Good,” Andrews whispered as he continued to look down on the disc. “It has index lines on both sides throughout the disc. There’s probably a shitload of data in this thing.” His finger started to move across the disc as though he were counting something. He flipped the

disc over again, his finger moving across the surface of the disc subtly.

“There’re twenty-four sections—twelve on each side.”

“That’s interesting,” Neruda said, “given that we found twenty-three chambers.”

“There’re twenty-four if you count the antechamber,” Emily reminded him. “Anyway, I’m gonna look for Samantha, anyone care to join me, preferably with a flashlight?”

“I’ll go find her,” Neruda said. “I’d prefer you and Collin work on the video report, oh, and by the way, the précis, at least as I see it, should include the term ETC, or Extraterrestrial Time Capsule.”

Neruda turned to leave amidst a flurry of questions from Emily, Collin, and Andrews. “We’re short on time, so I can’t explain my theory. Evans will tell you as much as I know. Just do your best, and don’t worry.”

Neruda walked down the corridor aware of the discussion he’d just stirred up. The acoustics of the structure made eavesdropping effortless.

He made some mental calculations and judged the entire structure—from the antechamber to the twenty-third chamber—to be about 150 feet high and about 100 feet wide. It was surreal walking down the winding

corridor with chambers protruding outward like pods bearing gifts from an ancient, extraterrestrial civilization.

The structure was completely baffling to him. His mind was turning scenarios and theories over and over like a threshing machine, hoping to make some sense out of it.

“Samantha,” he called loudly. “Where are you?”

“In chamber five,” Samantha’s voice filtered up the corridor like a ghost.

“Everything okay?” Neruda kept walking, not sure which chamber he was at.

“I’m fine,” Samantha said, her voice quieter even though Neruda was closing in on her position.

Neruda’s knees were still stiff and in pain, and he noticed how much they ached when he picked up his speed. He slowed down to a modest pace. She was okay, he reminded himself.

“Samantha?” Neruda called. “I’m not sure which is the fifth chamber, so talk to me, I must be close.”

“Did you find the top?” She asked.

“Yeah, we found it, but it’s not what you’d expect.”

“It’s unfinished isn’t it?”

Neruda stopped in his tracks. "Yeah, but how'd you know that?"

"Have you noticed how similar this structure is to a single strand of DNA? There're twenty-three chambers extending from a helix-shaped corridor. Twenty-three pairs of chromosomes in each cell of our body—"

"Yes, but that doesn't answer my question," Neruda said. "How'd you know?"

He resumed his walk down the inclined corridor, following Samantha's voice. The thought of walking down a strand of DNA amused him. He might as well be inside a cell wandering within a chromosome—he was that far removed from the outside world.

"I think they're trying to tell us that our DNA is flawed or unfinished."

Neruda tracked her voice and entered the chamber. She was sitting cross-legged, facing the wall painting in the center of the chamber. In her hand she held a cigarette lighter and the flame flickered as Neruda entered.

"It's an amazing painting," Samantha said quietly. "I couldn't leave it. Sorry."

"It's okay," Neruda sat next to her. "I've been on my feet more than usual today, it feels good to sit."

He bent his knees up and wrapped his arms tightly around his legs. He was a little cold and tired. "What is it about the painting you find so fascinating?" Neruda asked.

"It moves," she replied.

Neruda looked intently at the wall and turned his flashlight off. He wanted to see it in the same light as Samantha had with just the flame of her lighter. "It moves? I'm not sure what you mean," he said. "What moves?"

The painting consisted of a series of interlocking ovals of various colors. In the outermost oval, glyphs were imbedded. The object looked a little like a cross-section of an onion, and it was floating against a starlit sky with a sickle moon.

"I'm not sure," she replied hesitantly, "maybe I'm the one who's moving. All I know is that I find myself being pulled into this painting."

Neruda scrutinized the painting, but sensed no movement. Nonetheless, he had come to respect her intuitions and insights so he continued to watch carefully for any change of perspective or sense of motion.



“So what do you think it is?” Samantha asked.

“This?” Neruda put his arms in the air signifying the total structure.

“Yeah, this.” Samantha’s eyes looked upwards like a weak echo of Neruda’s arms.

“My current hypothesis is that an explorer race, originating somewhere from within the M51 galaxy, came to earth approximately a thousand years ago and interacted with the Chacoan Anasazi Indians. They built this... this structure to house a collection of artifacts that represent their artistic and technical nature. They wanted it to be found at some later time, so they left behind a homing device, which somehow magically appeared and led us to this amazing site.” He paused to catch his breath. “I think it’s a time capsule left behind by this race.”

Samantha let the words dissolve in the air before she spoke. “Does your theory include any speculation as to their motive—this explorer race?”

“No, but we did find an interesting artifact in chamber twenty-three that might shed some light on that.”

“What?”

“It’s an optical disc—or at least it looks like one. If it is, it might have answers to all of our questions.”

“It’s a good sign,” Samantha said. “Everything’s been encoded and cryptic up till now, as if they didn’t want us to be able to communicate with them immediately. For example, in your theory, you said that they came to earth and interacted with the Anasazi Indians. If so, wouldn’t they be able to communicate in the Anasazi language?”

“Probably.”

“And yet, their glyphs, paintings, artifacts, are anything but easy to understand... even for you. If some other organization found the homing device, say the CIA or NSA, for example, do you think they’d have even gotten past it?”

“Who knows? Maybe...” Neruda said. “But what’s your point?”

“I think this race has cleverly disguised its intentions. This may be a time capsule, I don’t know, but it’s more than a collection of artifacts that they wanted us to discover. There’s a process they want us to go through. I feel we’re being led. It’s as if this discovery is only a small step on a very long and twisting journey.”

Samantha’s lighter ran out of fuel and plunged them into total darkness. “That’s my point, I guess.”

“I understand your reasoning,” Neruda said, flicking on his flashlight and standing it on the floor with its beam straight up like a torch. “It’s true that any race that had achieved intergalactic travel—especially an explorer race—would have sophisticated language translation technology. It’s also true that they’d have multiple points of contact—with more than the Anasazi, unless they were only here for a very short visit, which is unlikely—”

“—So they purposely set barriers and obstacles to ensure their message would require significant time and effort to understand,” Samantha said. “I’ll bet the optical disc is no cakewalk to access, and when it is, it won’t be in English, or any other language known to man.”

Neruda stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned back with his arms behind him. “So you think they’re very particular about who uncovers their time capsule?”

“That’s my sense of it,” Samantha replied. “You’ve seen how we’ve been tested and probed at each step along the way.”

“And the only logical reason for being so particular is that the message is profound, or of significant

importance to a large number of people. And they want it to fall into the right hands. Ours.”

“That’s what I believe,” Samantha said, getting to her feet. “I don’t pretend to know what’s here, but it’s part of something massive... more sophisticated...” She paused. “I think there’re more of these structures elsewhere on the planet.”

She closed her eyes as if remembering her vision. “If there are, they could be inter-connected in some way.”

Neruda got up and gave her a quick look as he brushed off his pants out of habit. The floor was perfectly spotless. “I can’t help but think you’re withholding some information, as if you’re afraid to share it. Are you?”

“They call themselves the WingMakers,” Samantha said with sudden relief. “They’re somehow involved with our genetics. It’s as though they live inside us at some level and also live a great distance away. They also said something about our need to defend ourselves against another race of beings. An extraterrestrial race with technology more advanced than we can imagine. These... these WingMakers are wrapped up in this because, according to them, they’re the creators of our genetics.”

Neruda rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced.
"Anything else?"

"No."

The sound of laughter stirred the silent air of the chamber. The team was on its way down the corridor, and Andrews was telling some amusing anecdote.

"Keep this to yourself for now," Neruda directed. "I'll tell you why later. Okay?"

"Sure." Samantha shrugged her shoulders in nervousness.

Neruda motioned to the corridor with his hand. "Let's see how they're doing with their little film project." He took one last glance at the painting in chamber five, feeling a new respect for the intellect of this alien explorer race. Somehow they had already managed to touch him across space and time. He could feel something inside changing, or crumbling. He wasn't sure which.





Chapter Eight

ZEMI

If the entity is fragmented into its component parts, its comprehension of free will was limited to that which was circumscribed by the Hierarchy. If the entity is a conscious collective, realizing its sovereign wholeness, the principle of free will was a form of structure that was unnecessary like scaffolding on a finished building. When entities are unknowing of their wholeness, structure will occur as a form of self-imposed security. Through this ongoing development of a structured and ordered universe, entities defined their borders – their limits – through the expression of their insecurity. They gradually became pieces of their wholeness, and like shards of glass from a beautiful vase they bear little resemblance to their aggregate beauty.

An Excerpt from *The Shifting Models of Existence*, Chamber Two
WingMakers



Fifteen shifted in his chair a bit uncomfortably. His assembled directors did the same, but without a grimace. “Jamisson, that was one of the best reports I’ve seen in years.”

"I agree," Branson nodded.

Neruda smiled back appreciatively and remained silent. His presentation *had* gone exceptionally well. The directors were attentive and completely reasonable in their line of questions. Neruda was careful not to induce or sway, but to simply report the team's findings. He was well aware that the directors were unforgiving when they smelled persuasive tactics.

"So what're our next steps?" Ortmann asked.

"We need to do a complete restoration and excavation of the site, which'll probably take about seven to ten days," Neruda answered. "So we'll need to set up a perimeter security system and an excavation campsite."

"And what's the status of McGavin's shadow agent?" Ortmann asked, turning to Evans.

Fifteen stirred to action at the sound of McGavin's name. "His name is Donavin McAlester," he interjected. "He'll be joining us Monday. Interestingly, McGavin suggested that he report to Evans, but I thought to comply with any suggestion made by McGavin would be foolhardy. So I'd like him to report to Li-Ching since McGavin complains about our communication."

“Who’s heading the Ancient Arrow project then?”
Ortmann asked.

“I’m sorry,” Fifteen said apologetically, “I thought I had made that clear. Jamisson will lead the project. Given his fine work to date, I thought it was only fitting that he be permitted to lead the project to its conclusion.” He paused for a moment and looked around the table. “Is everyone okay with that?”

Heads nodded silently in affirmation of Fifteen’s rhetorical question. Neruda kept his head still, but his dark eyes darted furtively to read the response from the directors. It was unanimous.

“Back to McAlester,” Fifteen continued, “I’d like all of us to treat him with utmost care. There’s no doubt as to his agenda, which is to find out why we secured this artifact without alerting the SPL. In other words, what are we trying to hide.”

“How long will he be here?” Evans asked.

“That depends,” Fifteen replied. He looked up briefly and rubbed the back of his neck. “If we can convince him that the information we leak to him is legitimate, he’ll be gone within a month. If not, probably two, maybe three, months.”

“Let’s make it one,” Evans remarked to a roomful of nods.

“Agreed,” Fifteen said. “Are there any other questions before we break?”

Neruda’s heart began to pound, and he could feel his mouth turn cotton dry in a matter of seconds. He caught Fifteen’s eye.

“Did you have something else, Jamisson?” Fifteen asked politely.

“I guess... I think it would be a good idea...” Neruda paused and gathered himself as best he could.

“Samantha has some interesting observations that I think the Labyrinth Group should at least be aware of. I’m not saying these are factual observations—clearly they’re not. But they’re interesting—”

“Just tell us,” Fifteen interrupted, “and stop worrying about how any of us may react. We’ll assume whatever you tell us is speculation and we’ll leave it at that. So, what is it?”

“Samantha had several encounters with the homing device,” he began. “In one of these, she had a vision of the planet covered in gridlines and there were at least three, maybe four additional areas that were possible ETC sites.”

"You're saying that Samantha saw an image of multiple sites?" Fifteen asked. "And that these images were transmitted to her from the artifact?"



Neruda thought Fifteen's eyes brightened and looked more intense. "That's what she's told me."

"But the homing device is destroyed," Whitman remarked. "How would we get verification of multiple sites?"

Fifteen went to his desk and paged his assistant.

"Yes, sir," came the smooth, pleasant voice.

"Please find Samantha Folten and have her come to my office at her earliest possible convenience."

"Certainly, sir."

Neruda's stomach struggled to remain calm.

"Well, let's see what we can learn from Samantha," Fifteen said as he shuffled back to his chair. "No disrespect to you, Jamisson, but the vision is Samantha's and we should talk with her directly. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Of course," Neruda said hesitantly. "It's just that I haven't requested her permission to speak about these matters—"

"I'm sure Samantha will understand," Fifteen replied casually. He turned his head to Branson. "She's SL-Five, correct?"

"Yes."

"Poor girl," Fifteen said smiling, his head downcast to his empty cup of tea. "Let's be on our best behavior and make her feel completely comfortable."

"Are we leaving her on this project?" Evans asked.

"What would you recommend?" Fifteen replied.

"Her contributions were significant. I'd leave her on the project. She's got something I haven't seen before in our other RVs."

"And what's that?" Ortmann asked.

"I'm not sure I can put it into words," Evans said thinking hard. "She just seems to surrender to the situation and somehow wrests more information from it than anyone else."

"I'd agree," Neruda said. "Her ability to develop a psychic rapport with the homing device may allow her to more easily communicate with the other technology artifacts found at the site."

Fifteen leaned back in his chair. His eyes were closed for a few moments while silence overtook the room. "It looks like this meeting will go another twenty minutes

or so, if anyone needs a break, this would be a good time to take it." No one made a move to leave.

After a timid knock on the door, Samantha poked her head in hesitantly. "You asked for me, sir?"

"Yes," said Fifteen, getting awkwardly to his feet. "Please come in and join us." He motioned to an empty chair next to Neruda.

"Jamisson was just providing us with an excellent overview of your recent trip to the Ancient Arrow site..." He paused, deep in thought. "Do you want anything to drink before we get started? Some tea perhaps?"

Samantha looked quickly at the table and nodded.

Fifteen poured the teapot and handed an intricate, ivory-colored china cup to Samantha, steam billowing from its surface.

"Thank you," she said, the tremble in her hand betraying her nervousness at being in the same room with the directors.

"A remarkable trip, Samantha. The entire team deserves our highest recognition for its ingenuity and resourcefulness." The directors all nodded in agreement.

"Thank you, sir."

“Jamisson was kind enough to comment on some of the experiences you had with the artifact. He felt we should know about them because of his respect for your insights and abilities. Anyway, I was hoping you’d do us the honor of explaining, in whatever way you’re most comfortable, what you saw and what you think it means. We’d be very grateful to you if you wouldn’t mind.”

Fifteen paused, looking around the table signifying that he spoke for everyone in the room. Then he returned his gaze to Samantha. “Okay?”

Samantha stole a quick glance at Neruda, who smiled in support. “I’m not sure what you already know, and I don’t want to be redundant and waste your time—”

“Jamisson mentioned that you’d seen an image of earth encircled with gridlines that seemed to indicate that there may be multiple ETC sites. Why don’t you start there,” Fifteen suggested.

Samantha closed her eyes and took a breath. “I can see it clearly,” she said, her eyes opening in slow motion. “I’d been getting RePlay ready... everyone had left to look for Neruda, and I was trying to communicate with the artifact. RePlay was cycling through to Alpha... and the next thing I remember

was... was seeing three geometric shapes like doors floating in space. Moments later the middle shape displayed an image of earth, which was surrounded in gridlines like filaments of light, and at the intersection of these lines—in certain areas—there were glowing dots.”

She paused, closing her eyes again. “I sensed three of these glowing dots... they were like markers. Somehow I just knew they signified areas where there were additional time capsules or artifacts. I remember only seeing one clearly... the one in New Mexico. The others weren’t distinct, but I’d say there were three, perhaps four in total.”

“Can you specify the general location of the other sites?” Branson asked.

“I think South America, Africa, maybe Eastern Europe,” Samantha said slowly. “I’m not sure. For some reason, my focus was on New Mexico.”

“Did you see the entire globe, Samantha?” Fifteen asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” she replied. “It seemed that only four continents were visible... North and South America, Africa, and Europe,” she closed her eyes again.

“Did you get a sense that each of the markings on the grid signified another time capsule?” Fifteen asked.

“That was my sense.”

“And did you get a feeling that there were more on the other side of the globe?”

“Perhaps... but I don’t remember thinking anything about it,” she said softly, almost in a whisper.

“Was RePlay on during this session?” Ortmann asked.

“Yes, but it didn’t capture anything,” Samantha replied. “I had forgotten to adjust the capture sensitivity because I had an image almost instantly and assumed that RePlay was adjusted properly.”

“So nothing was recorded?” Fifteen asked.

“No.”

“Why don’t you tell us about some of the other images you saw?” Fifteen suggested.

Samantha cleared her throat and took another sip of tea. “During this same episode, I saw an image of what looked like a tall, bearded, human-like man. His eyes were certainly unique, but in all other respects, he could have passed on the street as human.”

“What was so strange about his eyes?” Fifteen asked.

“They were a mixture of strange colors, and they were very large. Very piercing.”

“Did you communicate with this being?”

“Yes.”

“Tell us about it,” Fifteen said.

“This being told me that they were the geneticists who developed our DNA. They were trying to trigger something within our DNA that would enable us to withstand a shift of some kind—a genetic shift. And that this was all necessary because we needed to defend our planet—”

“From what?” Fifteen almost shouted, sitting up in his chair.

Samantha became tentative. “From an alien race.”

The room became chillingly quiet. Samantha wanted to take a sip of tea, but was afraid she might spill it if she did. Her hands were visibly shaking.

“You might want to mention why you think the discovery of the time capsule was an orchestrated event,” Neruda ventured, hoping to steer her comments to a new subject.

Samantha turned to Neruda, aware that he was under some pressure to justify her presence in the meeting. “As you’ve probably already considered,” she began, “the artifact was very selective. It probed both

of us,” she turned to Neruda again, “down to our molecular structure... or at least it felt like it.

“It was like this artifact had been programmed to assess our motives and establish our suitability for the discovery. Fortunately, it decided in our favor... though I’m not sure why.” She flashed a quick smile that betrayed her nervousness.

“I kept feeling, and still do, even now, that this time capsule isn’t exactly the right description of what we’ve discovered. It’s much larger than that, and its creators have encoded its true purpose behind the glyphs, the art, the artifacts... behind everything. These are gestures, not the real substance of what they’re trying to communicate.”

“Gestures?” Fifteen repeated.



“I mean they’re like facades,” Samantha quickly returned, realizing the cryptic nature of her statement. “I don’t think we’ll be successful in decoding anything here, I think they have a whole different meaning.”

“And what do you feel that is?” Fifteen asked.

“My sense is that the artifacts, including the optical disc—if that’s what it is—will prove impossible to probe,

just like the first artifact. The paintings won't reveal anything significant. And the glyphs will be impossible to decode."

"And the reason you think they did this is?" Fifteen asked.

"Because there's something in the process of trying to understand these artifacts that's more important than what they are or what they do. That's the only thing that makes sense to me."

"Well, you're right about one thing," Fifteen said, "they've chosen to be cryptic for reasons that aren't obvious." He stood to his feet and poured more tea for Samantha before she could refuse.

"Samantha, you've been very helpful, and we appreciate your candor. Is there any reason why you believe the artifact chose you in the way that it did?"

"How do you mean, sir?"

"It seems to me that you were its primary contact. And yet there're no RePlay tapes or seeming effort on your part to make contact with it. In other words, it seems to have selected you. Why do you think?"

"I assume because of my psychic abilities—"

"That's all?" he asked in a friendly tone.

"I think so."

“But how do you *feel*?”

Samantha paused, editing her words before they were spoken. Her eyes searched the ceiling as if she were looking for help. “I never had a chance to really use RePlay. It contacted me before I had an opportunity... it... maybe it didn’t want anyone else to see these images.”

“What do you feel *is* the purpose of the ETC?” Fifteen asked, watching her intensely as if he were reading her body and mind simultaneously.

“It’s something to do with genetics,” Samantha said with sudden conviction. “It’s something important and it’s something that impacts a large number of people.”

“Why a large number of people?” Branson asked.

Samantha looked directly at her supervisor, her green eyes intense and alive. “Why else would they be so careful about who they selected to discover the site?”

Silence filled the room. No one said anything for several seconds, as if reviewing his or her thoughts in light of what Samantha had just said.

Fifteen stared at Samantha. “Is there anything else that you can think of that might be valuable for us to know?”

Samantha shook her head. “No, I don’t think so.”

Neruda cleared his throat. "Their name?"

"Oh, yes," Samantha said, "They referred to themselves as the WingMakers."

Again, silence filled the room.

Fifteen tapped his fingers on the table. "The WingMakers..." He let the words dangle in the air, and then looked at Samantha. "What do you think it means?"

"I don't know, sir," Samantha replied, looking a bit surprised that he'd ask her opinion.

"Jamisson?"

"It actually sounds familiar to me, but I don't know why."

"Have we done a search?" Fifteen asked.

Neruda shook his head slowly and looked down at his hands. "My thoughts have been on the optical disc and excavation team. Sorry."

Fifteen pulled out his console from underneath the table and hit a few keys. He typed in the word WINGMAKERS with blazing speed and clicked search. Moments later he shook his head and pushed the console back to its position beneath the table. "Nothing in our database or the net."

Fifteen resumed his tapping on the table. "Jamisson, you have a memory as perfect as anyone I know, how could you have a familiarity with this name and not be able to place it?"

"Maybe it was stored in his subconscious by the artifact," Samantha said, answering on his behalf.

"Hmmm" Fifteen said, nodding slowly. "Nothing else?"

Samantha looked to Neruda quickly and then shook her head. "No, sir."

"Well, we're very appreciative for your time and information, Samantha. You may return to your work. Thank you."

Fifteen motioned to the door as he finished his sentence and watched as she left the room hurriedly.

Fifteen stood and removed his cardigan sweater and carefully secured it to the back of his chair, and then sat down with cautious grace.

"Do you believe her?" Li-Ching asked.

"I believe she's being honest," Fifteen replied, dodging the question slightly. "We're talking about an encounter with what could possibly be an authentic representative of the Central Race."

“You mean because of the reference that they’re allegedly the creators of our DNA that they’re from the Central Race?” Whitman asked.

“That and the fact that they’ve deposited a structure within our planet that looks more sophisticated than anything we’ve ever seen before—by a considerable margin I might add.

“I’d like to have our Corteum counterparts made aware of this discovery,” Fifteen said, turning to Whitman.

“Full disclosure?”

“Yes, they’re more knowledgeable about the mythology of the Central Race than we are, maybe they can detect something in all of this that corroborates or debunks what we’ve heard and seen here today.”

Fifteen turned to Branson. “I’d like her to have a promotion. Okay?”

“SL-Six?”

“SL-Seven,” Fifteen said. “We need her loyalty strengthened. She’s very good. I like her... but she has a weakness in her loyalties. She’s loyal to her heart, more than to our ideals and mission. What I find interesting is that she’s also afraid of her potential disloyalty, and

this'll make her more prone to compensate in unsavory ways. Make it retroactive to the first of the month."

"Done."

"Now," Fifteen said, turning to the full group with his teacup in hand, "I'd like to hear your thoughts, theories, and opinions."



The sound of shifting bodies in leather chairs filled the room.

Neruda spoke first. "Whoever they are, they seem to know about the 2011 prophecy. That alone gives some credibility to Samantha's story."

"If Samantha's facts are straight, saying that we need to defend earth from aliens doesn't necessarily mean they're talking about the 2011 invasion prophecy," Ortman said.

Li-Ching stirred in her chair. "Perhaps an RV session would be in order."

"On the WingMakers?" Evans asked.

"Why not?" she replied.

"I'll leave it to Neruda to decide RV protocols for the project," Fifteen announced. "But let's not jump to any conclusions about the identity of the WingMakers, and let's be certain to keep all RV sessions at levels one or

two. I don't want any more contact with this race than is absolutely necessary. Agreed?"

Heads nodded obediently to his question.

"What else?" Fifteen queried.

"If she's right about the wide-ranging importance of this discovery," Li-Ching offered, "then we'll have internal pressure to release this finding to the outside. The implication is that security will need to be tightened and personnel more carefully screened. I'd suggest we limit access to the Ancient Arrow file to LG members."

"Done. Except I want Samantha to continue on this project," Fifteen said. "She'll be allowed into the surrogate file, but not the LG version."

Fifteen took a long sip of tea and swallowed with exuberance. "Whitman, I know you'd like this project under your supervision, but we just don't have a dynamic understanding of this species and its intentions right now to justify TTP leadership. However, I'd like you to supervise all surrogate database management and file creation, including all LAN/WAN knowledge links. Okay?"

"Yes, I understand completely," Whitman replied with no surprise in his voice.

“What else?” Fifteen summoned. “You must have more to offer than security issues.”

Ortmann cleared his throat. “Now that we’re in a mode to recover an additional twenty-two artifacts of unknown origin, value, and function, wouldn’t it make sense to re-evaluate our security measures with Professor Stevens and the students?”

“What are you suggesting?” Evans asked.

“The value of this project, at least in my mind, has gone up by a factor of ten with the discovery of this ETC site. For all we know, this is the technological equivalent of BST... hell, it could be BST. Who knows? All I’m saying is that we should ensure its secrecy, and we have three loose ends in New Mexico that could create problems for us.”

“What are you suggesting?” Evans asked again, hoping to force Ortmann to be specific.

“I know we’ve placed our best security fence around these people, but there’re variables that even our best technologies can’t control.”

“So what do you want us to do?” Evans asked, his frustration starting to show.

“I think an accident cover should be executed for each of the three—I’d leave the specifics to you.”

Fifteen had been listening intently. "Leonard, it sounds like you want to be rid of these risks, but by doing away with them wouldn't we also create more risks? Remember McGavin's recent allegations?"

"If I may add," Evans said, "I think the students represent more risk than Stevens. In the case of Stevens, the worst that he can do is already done, and we'll manage the fallout. I'm not worried. The students are another issue altogether."

"How so?" Fifteen asked.

"So far they've cooperated," Evans answered. "But only because of Stevens' influence. And that seems to be increasingly shaky because of his recent interaction with McGavin's goons. I'd say they could blow if they get any reinforcement from Stevens."

"So why not take the students out?" asked Li-Ching. "I can handle all of the communication issues with a two-day window."

"The advantage of an accident cover with the students," Evans continued, "is that it would send a good message to Stevens. It also provides us with leverage downstream if we plant subtle evidence of his involvement in their deaths."

Fifteen set his teacup down and closed his eyes; bored or tired, no one could tell. "Can you two have some specific recommendations on my desk by eighteen hundred hours?" he paused only for a quick breath, emphasizing the rhetorical nature of his question. "I'd like a minimum of three scenarios, priority ordered, and I'd like the most probable implications defined. Oh, one more thing. We're not in the business of killing people just for the sake of security—for this project or any other. Am I clear?"

Li-Ching and Evans confirmed their understanding with a silent nod. Everyone else just stared.

"I'll authorize exceptions only as a last resort, and only if it clearly compromises our broader agenda. I'm quite certain of one thing; security on this project won't be our problem. Our problem will be loyalty."

He turned to Neruda as he finished his words. "Please have the excavation team list assembled tomorrow by twelve hundred hours in my office. And I'd like Evans included. Work with Whitaker and Ortmann to choose the rest. Okay?"

"Yes, that'd be fine, sir."

"Very well," Fifteen said standing up. "I assume there're no other questions or comments for now."

Thanks once again to Jamisson for a brilliant report, and pass our comments on to the team. They all deserve our praise for an outstanding job.”

Neruda fumbled with his presentation materials while everyone filed out of Fifteen’s office, including Li-Ching. The sound of the door closing startled Neruda as he snapped the buckles on his briefcase. “I talked with Jeremy this morning,” Fifteen said, walking to his desk with an occasional grimace. “He was pleasantly surprised to hear about your discoveries in New Mexico. I told him I wanted you to lead this project to conclusion. I also told him I wanted you to be promoted to SL-Thirteen.”

He paused with a warm smile. “If that’s okay with you, of course?”

Neruda could only manage to nod, flustered by the sudden honor.

“We’ll wait for the official status change until Jeremy returns from holiday, but I’ll inform the other directors this afternoon of your acceptance. Evans will have a new password to you later this morning. Okay?”

“Yes... whatever you think is best,” Neruda managed to blurt out.

“One last thing, Jamisson. What I said earlier about loyalty... I’d like you to keep Samantha involved with this project, but watch her carefully. We have too much at stake with this project to let her, or anyone else, lose sight of our mission objectives.”

“I agree, and I will, sir,” Neruda said. “I mean I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Good. I know you’ll do your best,” Fifteen said.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Neruda said, “what did Jeremy say?”

“About your promotion?”

“Yes.”

“Something about you being too young to be an SL-Thirteen. I think he said something about him being fifty-two when he attained that lofty height,” Fifteen said with a wink. “But he was all too happy to agree with my suggestion, and you know Jeremy, if he hadn’t, he would’ve said so.”

Neruda smiled and nodded in agreement. His supervisor was definitely as independent as he was brilliant. He was the one director that could and would stand up to Fifteen if he genuinely disagreed with him.

“Thank you for your confidence in me,” Neruda said as he started for the door. “I truly appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Neruda left Fifteen’s office with a strange sense that the warning about Samantha had also been meant for him. But despite that intuitive sense, he was buoyant about his promotion. He only wished he had someone other than his staff whom he could tell.

* * * *

The ACIO laboratory was washed in halogen light from an array of floodlights that hung from the ceiling. Inside each fixture was a miniature, closed circuit video camera. The lights were strategically positioned so that every square centimeter of the laboratory was observable, a reality that always irked Neruda.

Pattern Grid Detection Systems were established in each camera’s electronic eye, that were able to distinguish an anomalous activity and alert security. It was why Neruda had to contact Security to enter the lab after 8pm.



The lab was sequestered under the tightest security fence that the ACIO had. Under the best of circumstances it took too long to get in, but tonight,

Neruda was losing his patience because Security wasn't answering its phone.

After the third try, he decided to give up. He took the laboratory elevator, which was the only way to enter the lab. The security fence could detect Body Prints and determine the associated security clearance. There were no retina scans or security cards.

As the doors of the elevator opened onto the sixteenth floor, which housed the mammoth lab, Neruda was beginning to question whether he should try to make one more phone call. He decided against it. He was SL-13. Screw it, he concluded.

The outer perimeter door opened without hesitation so he walked through with similar confidence. Fifteen was a patron of the arts, and had virtually demanded that paintings and sculpture grace every wall and unused nook of the lab. It was a stimulating contrast to see originals by Gauguin, Kandinsky, and Miro as companions to the world's most advanced technologies.

At eleven at night the hallways on the periphery of the lab were quiet. Neruda walked to the main door and it opened with the hushed sound of air-compressed hydraulics. The door itself was fireproof, bulletproof,

bombproof, and impervious to lock-picking of even the most sophisticated kind.

Neruda walked briskly through a brightly lit anteroom. He was restless to talk with Andrews and see the results from the initial probes of the artifact found in the 23rd chamber. Another door awaited him down a short hallway that held the bathrooms and access to the lunchroom.

“Dr. Neruda,” a voice sounded in the hallway directly overhead via the PA system, “we have no record of a permission request to visit the lab after hours. Please verify.”

Neruda stopped in frustration and gestured impolitely to the speaker in the ceiling. “I tried calling you guys three times only fifteen minutes ago. No one answered the phone. Is there a problem?”

“No problem, sir,” the voice replied. “Just verifying entries for the record. Have a good night, sir.”

“You, too,” Neruda said with a sigh of frustration. He hated the meddlesome nature of security.

Again Neruda was greeted by the sound of an automatic door opening at his approach. A camera scanned the entrance to the lab, but wasn't visible. Neruda couldn't tell where it was hidden, but he knew

he was on tape, though he suspected no one was watching.

He entered the Computer Analysis Laboratory (CAL), which was the largest of the rooms off the main lab. CAL was known as home to the ACIO's most powerful computer system ZEMI, which had been developed collaboratively between the ACIO scientific core and the Corteum, an extraterrestrial race that had a secretive technology transfer program with the ACIO for the past 27 years.

The ZEMI processors were approximately 400 times more powerful than the best supercomputers on earth. Its operating system was custom-fitted to four individuals, each with security clearances of ten or more. These four operators were the exclusive users of ZEMI, and even Fifteen had to rely upon one of these individuals to interface with ZEMI if he chose to use it.

"Hey," Andrews said.

"How're things?"

"Could be better," Andrews replied, fumbling with some papers. "I could be sitting at home watching Golden Eyes, drowning in margaritas, and eating some exotic pizza with red peppers flown in from Chile."

"Sounds boring in comparison," Neruda commented.

“Shit, I can’t get anything from this report,” Andrews complained. He turned to a monitor panel in front of him. On the screen was the image of a man in his late fifties sitting in a high-back leather chair. The monitor was the only means of communicating with the ZEMI operators, who were isolated in special control rooms that shielded them from electromagnetic frequencies and psychic disruptions.

“David, could you try something a little unconventional?”

“What do you have in mind?” the face on the monitor asked.

“Try varying the angle of the read laser in a random sequence and simultaneously varying the spin rates.”

“What’re you looking for?”

“A fucking access point! We need to find the angle and speed correlation. It’s out of our standard range. So we need to expand our range. Can you do it?”

“Just give me the parameters,” the face said.

“Every conceivable angle and spin rate outside of our standard range,” Andrews said. “Is that specific enough?”

“No.”

“Can you calculate the parameters then?”

"Yes."

"How long will it take?"

"They're on the monitor now," the face said glibly.

"I mean how long will it take for the random tests?"

"Do you want angle and spin rate correlations to be exhaustively or randomly tested?"

"Exhaustively. Is there any other way?"

"Test cycle requirements?"

"This first round, let's try two seconds."

"It'll take at least two hours," the face said.

"Okay, let's get going," Andrews commanded. "I'm tired."

The man on the monitor panel closed his eyes. Seven, thin, glass filaments ran to a black colored headband that went from the back, center part of his neck, to the center of his forehead just above the bridge of his nose. He was completely bald, one of the sacrifices the operators of ZEMI had to make. The headband was called a Neural Bolometer, and it translated the radiant energy of the operator's brain activity to the command structure of ZEMI's operating



system—effectively hard-wiring him to ZEMI's computing power through thought and visualization.

"So nothing to report?" Neruda asked, hoping to stir something out of Andrews.

"Zippo."

"I like the approach you're taking," Neruda said. "It's completely logical, oddly enough." He stopped and smiled. "I'm sure something will turn up in the test data."

"I'm not," Andrews shrugged.

"Why the doom and gloom?"

"If it's an optical disc, and they wanted us to read it, you'd think they'd have made it more similar to our standards."

"Remember this thing was left behind a thousand years ago, a bit before—"

"Shit, I know that," Andrews whined. "But I'm tired of these damn artifacts being so impregnable to our probes. I can't help but think they're wasting our time simply because they can."

"We've only had one day in the lab with this thing. Remember it took you three days to make the breakthrough on the homing device. Give yourself another day or two. It'll sing. You'll see."

Andrews hit the com button again. "David, can you do me a favor?"

"Yeah?"

"When you get the results on round one, if they turn up negative, try cycle times of ten seconds. When that's completed, let's add a third variable, laser diameter. Vary it at the smallest possible increments and the widest possible range. Okay?"

"Got it."

Andrews switched the button to its *off* position, and turned to face Neruda. "I'm going home. Sorry I'm in such a foul mood, boss. I'm just frustrated that this thing is so fucking closemouthed."

"Go home and relax," Neruda encouraged. "It'll open its mouth soon enough, and when it does, you'll be among the first to hear it sing."

"I hope you're right, but I have this nagging feeling that this fucker isn't gonna sing anytime soon."

"We'll see," Neruda said. "I'll walk out with you."





Additional materials can be found at the WingMakers' website that may enhance your immersion into the culture of the Central Race and the enigma of the ACIO. You can find them at www.wingmakers.com

Among the other resources you will discover are:

- The Neruda Interviews (post-defection from ACIO)
- Chamber Philosophy Papers & Glossary
- Chamber Poetry
- Complete gallery of Chamber Paintings
- Information about the anonymous source of these materials
- Chamber Music decoded from the Ancient Arrow site
- Discussion forums
- Links to related websites
- New content from First Source
- A product store for purchasing WingMakers CDs, CD-ROM, and reproduction art