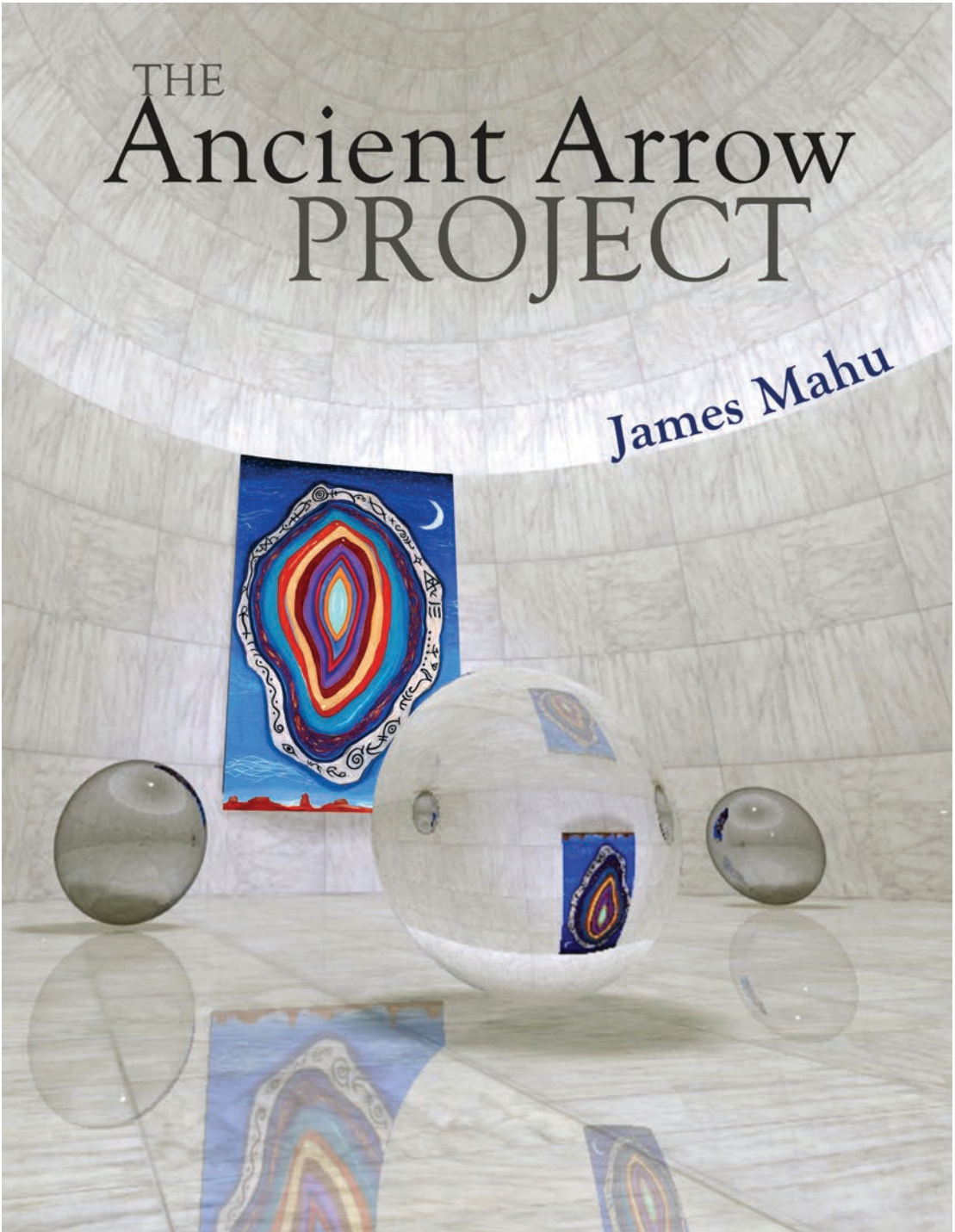




THE Ancient Arrow PROJECT

James Mahu



Wingmakers™

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, nonmilitary 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 1

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 Twelve

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 eight to ten centimeters into one of the twenty-three 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 misdirections," 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 thirty 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 fifteen 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 Fifteen 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 Corteum?”

“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 Fourteen 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 twelve 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 percent luminosity, 120 kilometer visibility, barometric pressure steady at 29.98, and humidity 16.4 percent.

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 forty-five meters, or twelve 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 forty-six, 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 cords 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 2

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 Twenty-three

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 twelve or higher were automatically inducted into this small but powerful organization.

With a membership of only sixty-six, 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 Ortmann, 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 twenty-three 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 naive about college students and their penchant for altered states and drug experimentation."

"I personally subjected these students to a full debrief," 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 thirty-six 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 percent 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 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 twenty-four 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 3

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 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-Twelves,” 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.”

“Lookit, 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 facade, 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 to 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 home base 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 de-activate 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.

